

Legislative  
Assembly  
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**Official Report  
of Debates  
(Hansard)**

E-19

**Journal  
des débats  
(Hansard)**

E-19

**Standing Committee on  
Estimates**

Ministry of Long-Term Care

Ministry of Education

1<sup>st</sup> Session  
42<sup>nd</sup> Parliament

Tuesday 27 October 2020

**Comité permanent des  
budgets des dépenses**

Ministère des Soins  
de longue durée

Ministère de l'Éducation

1<sup>re</sup> session  
42<sup>e</sup> législature

Mardi 27 octobre 2020

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Chair: Peter Tabuns  
Clerk: Thushitha Kobikrishna

Président : Peter Tabuns  
Greffière : Thushitha Kobikrishna

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111, rue Wellesley ouest, Queen's Park  
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## CONTENTS

Tuesday 27 October 2020

Ministry of Long-Term Care .....	E-339
Hon. Merrilee Fullerton	
Mr. Richard Steele	
Ms. Janet Hope	
Ministry of Education.....	E-344
Hon. Stephen Lecce	
Ms. Nancy Naylor	
Mr. Andrew Davis	



LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF ONTARIO

ASSEMBLÉE LÉGISLATIVE DE L'ONTARIO

## STANDING COMMITTEE ON ESTIMATES

## COMITÉ PERMANENT DES BUDGETS DES DÉPENSES

Tuesday 27 October 2020

Mardi 27 octobre 2020

*The committee met at 0900 in room 151 and by video conference.*

### MINISTRY OF LONG-TERM CARE

**The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns):** Good morning, everyone. We're going to resume consideration of vote 4501 of the estimates of the Ministry of Long-Term Care. There is now a total of 32 minutes remaining for the review of these estimates.

When the committee last adjourned, the government had seven minutes and 43 seconds remaining for their round of questions. Standing order 69(a)(i) allots 15 minutes to the independent member of the committee. They will have the opportunity to use this time today, if they wish.

To ensure that the remaining time is apportioned equally, after the questions by the government, the remaining time will be split as such: five minutes to the official opposition and five minutes to the government.

With that, I turn it back to the government. MPP Parsa.

**Mr. Michael Parsa:** Good morning, Chair. Good morning, Minister and Deputy Minister. Thanks very much again for being here.

Minister, with all of us knowing that this pandemic has been hard on everyone across the province and across the country, for that matter, I believe that now, truly, is the time that we need to come together as a community. What's critical and essential during these challenging times is the true love and support of our family and friends.

You had spoken at length many times about resident-centred care as a key approach to long-term care.

My question to you is, how do you balance protecting residents in long-term care from community spread while allowing essential caregivers, often being family or close friends, to have access to care for their loved ones?

**Hon. Merrilee Fullerton:** It's good to see you this morning. Thanks for all the good work that you do for your constituents.

I know this has been a challenging time for everyone, and particularly for residents, family and staff in long-term care. Looking at the way that we approached the safety of residents in long-term care—that has to be measured and balanced with their well-being and their health. All of those need to go together. When we looked at the visitor policy initially—it was a very, very hard decision, but it was a new virus, and our public health experts were giving

us the advice that we really needed to prevent COVID-19 from coming into the homes, by restricting access to visitors. I know this was extremely difficult for many, many people—not only the residents, but also the staff and families. So, first of all, I want to acknowledge that challenge. But again, unprecedented times—and taking the advice of our experts.

Looking at how we look after the emotional well-being of residents, it is really a critical piece to overall health. That's why, over time, we've been able to consult with many, many different groups—resident councils, family councils, our long-term-care homes, health experts—to understand how we can improve, especially over the duration of this.

As you can see, when we have an outbreak, a home goes into a situation where visitors are restricted. But the new approach with essential caregivers allows each resident to designate two people who can come into the home and help them with their daily activities, whether it's feeding, whether it's assisting them with physical movement or overarching emotional support. I think that this is a step in the right direction. We've been working with the Chief Medical Officer of Health and the Associate Chief Medical Officer of Health to be able to do this—really evaluating this whole time and monitoring the situation in our homes to understand what we can do better, and understanding that this is unprecedented in terms of the duration of this pandemic and the effect that it has had in long-term care.

The essential caregivers are also allowed in during an outbreak. An outbreak is defined as a minimum of one staff or one resident. So you can have a home with no resident cases but that's still permitted to have an essential caregiver in to that home to assist the resident, with this new policy.

The essential caregivers must be trained in terms of appropriate infection and prevention control measures within the home, and that includes the use of proper PPE—how to put it on, how to take it off, or what we refer to as donning and doffing. This is a really critical piece because, from an ethical standpoint, we have to be cautious about potential seeding into the community as well. There are many different aspects to understand, with people coming and going from the long-term-care homes. These essential caregivers are also covered in terms of testing, just as the staff are tested, every 14 days. This is a critical piece to be able to identify cases before they get into the home.

We will continue to evaluate what needs to be done better. There are many lessons learned, and we're taking the advice of our medical and health experts—and to be compassionate for our residents in long-term care, particularly hearing their very poignant and emotional stories about what they've experienced. Unfortunately, COVID-19 has created some very upsetting circumstances. We are doing our very best, working in consultation with our sector experts and our residents' councils and our family councils, to understand how to do better.

I'm pleased to say that we have got the essential caregivers piece—

**The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns):** You have two minutes left.

**Hon. Merrilee Fullerton:** I'll ask if the deputy would like to add anything further to that.

**Mr. Richard Steele:** Thank you, Minister.

I'll just add—certainly, to reinforce that it has very much been a balance. We've been trying to strike the balance between controlling infection and recognizing the really essential support that visitors provide to residents. From the beginning, from March onward, we've continued to review and continued to make a series of adjustments to the policies to try to get that balance as close to optimal as we can, recognizing that there is no perfect answer.

In terms of the caregivers and support for caregivers, just to note a couple of additional things to what the minister mentioned—I think at a previous session of this committee, we mentioned the training that has been made available through Public Health Ontario for family caregivers, which is certainly something we recommend. We do continue to look at whether there are additional supports that could be put in place for caregivers to support the work they're doing, again, particularly in a COVID-19 context. That continues to be an area that we're looking at and will continue to explore, given the important role.

I do know that ADM Sheila Bristo had some additional comments around visitor policy and caregivers, but we probably only have about 30 seconds left at this point.

**The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns):** Yes, I don't think she's heard.

**Mr. Richard Steele:** Is she still on mute?

**The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns):** I apologize. You're now out of time.

With that, I go to the official opposition. You have five minutes. Ms. Armstrong.

**Ms. Teresa J. Armstrong:** I just want to go over my request for information that we previously asked about—if we have received it, if the Clerk received it. During our last estimates, we had asked for several pieces of information, emails, and several inquiries went unanswered. It's hugely concerning, of course. We're looking for information; we would like that follow-up to happen. Especially during this time with long-term care, when we're supposed to be making sure we're transparent and accountable to the public, we would appreciate having those things come forward.

**The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns):** Clerk, did you have any response?

**0910**

**The Clerk of the Committee (Ms. Thushitha Kobikrishna):** As of right now, we do have a link that was provided, as was requested by MPP Gélinas, regarding the Public Health Ontario website that provides infection prevention and control training for essential caregivers at LTC homes. That is the only information we have right now, the only answer.

**Ms. Teresa J. Armstrong:** Thank you.

**The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns):** Ms. Armstrong, before we proceed, I have to hold for one more minute.

I understand MPP Andrea Khanjin has joined us.

MPP Khanjin, can you identify yourself and confirm that you're in Ontario?

*Interjection.*

**The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns):** She's on a phone.

Okay, you will be confirmed later.

My apologies to all.

Ms. Armstrong, you have the floor.

**Ms. Teresa J. Armstrong:** Thank you, Chair.

Good morning, everyone. As we know, long-term care is under very huge, huge pressure and stress, and the outcomes that have recently happened are very concerning. Most recently, the government, their commission, has released their interim report and has clearly indicated that they're hearing the calls on staffing shortages and changes to long-term care. They've noted that further study of the study is not necessary.

One of their recommendations specifically asks that there are four hours of direct care per resident. Even this morning, there was support for Bill 13, Time to Care Act, from many academics and professional doctors, calling on the government to implement this. The studies have been done.

The government has put in a process to expedite bills to get into the House to effect change during the pandemic, especially ones that are relevant. So I want to ask the minister if they would support and pass my bill and expedite it through the process so it can become law, so we can have changes to long-term care that directly affect workers and residents and make a huge impact on how they're being cared for, for now and into the future. Minister?

**Hon. Merrilee Fullerton:** First of all, I want to acknowledge the significance of the staffing. We understood, as soon as we became a Ministry of Long-Term Care, that the issues and the crises in staffing were a major, major problem. We've taken steps throughout the past year.

The Ministry of Health, as the lead on health human resources, including PSWs, has been working non-stop to address this issue. Our Ministry of Long-Term Care has had input into that, as well. We've been working aggressively to address this issue, not only because of the long-standing issues surrounding the staffing shortage, particularly for PSWs, but also for RNs—and understanding the situation with COVID-19. It created an uncertainty for PSWs. Looking at the level of care—our most complex

people in society are often in long-term care. So the level of complexity is there.

I assure you that the issue surrounding hours of care has been on our radar, has been actively worked on and informed by the Justice Gillese recommendation that came out shortly after we became a ministry. That's indeed why we had the staffing study, the expert panel, which provided a report. We acted immediately, and we have been all along, to work with the Ministry of Health to address the shortage of providers in long-term care.

This is something that's across ministries—it's the Ministry of Labour, the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Long-Term Care having input. It takes many ministries and a cross-government approach to address this, and it is something that will require ongoing effort. The commissioner's interim report is very well received. It certainly aligns with the work that we've been doing, and we're very pleased that it largely aligns with our concerns.

**The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns):** You have one minute left.

**Hon. Merrilee Fullerton:** Anyone trying to portray this as an issue that has not been taken seriously or not been taken actively—I would dismiss that—

**Ms. Teresa J. Armstrong:** I'm going to have to just cut you off, because I think France has something she wants to get in before the time is up.

**M<sup>me</sup> France Gélinas:** Last week, you mentioned that the last report you had—we were at 3.75 hours of paid care in long-term care. Do we know how much more it would cost to bring us to four hours of paid care in long-term care?

**Hon. Merrilee Fullerton:** We've been looking at that for quite some time.

I'll ask the deputy to respond to that question.

**Mr. Richard Steele:** As the minister says, that's something in response to the staffing study that we received in July; that obviously was one of the recommendations. So that work to understand a few different scenarios, in terms of what achieving four hours or working for four hours could look like—

**The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns):** Deputy, I'm sorry to say that we're out of time. I also need you to confirm your name for Hansard.

**Mr. Richard Steele:** Apologies; Richard Steele, deputy minister, Ministry of Long-Term Care.

**The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns):** Thank you so much.

We now go to the government. MPP Skelly.

**Ms. Donna Skelly:** Good morning. Minister, throughout the committee, you have referenced many times the government's aggressive agenda to modernize long-term care, as well as your own vision for this sector. Can you please expand on that?

**Hon. Merrilee Fullerton:** This is something that I'm very passionate about. I've seen the shortcomings of long-term care for decades, as a medical provider and also personally, with my own family members and my own father, so this is something that means a great deal to me.

The vision we started talking about as soon as we became a new ministry in the summer of 2019—and you

might be tired of hearing me say that, but it is absolutely a pivotal point. It is a point in time when our government created a stand-alone ministry to deal with the long-standing shortcomings in long-term care. We immediately began talking about a vision of a 21st-century long-term-care system that puts the resident at the centre, that respects the residents, their families and the staff within our long-term-care homes in our sector, that treats people with dignity and creates a culture and an environment where people want to work.

I think there has been so much stigma attached to the long-term-care sector for so many years that really needs to be repaired, and we have seen the effects of COVID-19. So not only do we need to repair what has been neglected for so many years under previous governments; we also need to rebuild and advance long-term care.

We have an aging population, and governments for decades have known that. This was no surprise. I knew when I was 10 years old about the aging population, and as a physician, I was actively encouraging governments to address this. So when we finally have a government now that takes this issue seriously, and as the Minister of Long-Term Care—how we treat our residents, how we transition them from, perhaps, a situation where they can stay in their homes longer with innovative programs like community paramedics, where they have 24-hour, seven-day-a-week support in the community. So much more can be done for people in the community before they need long-term care—a long-term-care-at-home plan, where we can connect people to medical care, acute care, pharmacy care and supports within the community through this community paramedic program that is an exciting innovation. And for our long-term-care homes—to support the needs of staff and to be responsive to their concerns and families.

**The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns):** Two minutes left.

**Hon. Merrilee Fullerton:** We've worked well with the personal support workers to make sure that their concerns are heard. They are the heart and the backbone of long-term care and how we transition people through, really, the end of life.

Many of our residents getting into long-term care are there for a year or a year and a half, so not necessarily a long time. That care that we provide them in the long-term-care homes needs to be respectful of their needs at their time of life and how we support them. It is a place where people go to live, and it must not be a place where people go to stay. The integration with the acute-care hospitals so our complex and vulnerable populations in long-term care can get that support that they need, and how we integrate long-term care, not only to the community, but to acute care and to the resources and to bring the community in—it's an incredibly important time for long-term care, and it has been so badly neglected. It's a shame. But I am tremendously hopeful that we can make a difference, and it will require everyone to work together.

**0920**

I said—I think it was the first day that the pandemic was declared—that we need compassion and we need to care and we need less vitriol to find solutions. We all need to

be looking at the residents, their families, the culture, the leadership in long-term care. We really need a collective, societal approach where society values our most vulnerable people who need care at their most vulnerable time. This is a societal approach. Our government recognizes—

**The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns):** Minister, I'm sorry to say that you're out of time.

Mr. Fraser, I've been advised that you haven't been subbed in, so you won't have access to the 15 minutes.

**Mr. John Fraser:** It's okay.

**The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns):** I'm splitting the remaining 15 minutes, therefore, between the government and the opposition. The government has just finished. I will go to the opposition.

Madame Gélinas.

**M<sup>me</sup> France Gélinas:** I want to talk about money for a little while. How much does one hour of care cost in our long-term-care system? One hour of paid—when you said that we're at 3.75, how much does it cost? Any idea?

**Hon. Merrilee Fullerton:** I'll pass that to the deputy.

**Mr. Richard Steele:** Off the top of my head, I don't. It's a question of math. I think we know how many residents there are, we know how many hours of care they're receiving, we know what the total budget is, so that is a number that could be arrived at. I don't have that number off the top of my head in terms of what the current cost per hour of care is. It would be an average, for one thing, because clearly the needs of individual residents vary, and it would be a blended rate that would take into account PSWs, RPNs, RNs, allied health professionals and other supports. A number could be arrived at; I don't have it off the top of my head.

**M<sup>me</sup> France Gélinas:** Would you know anybody within the ministry who could share that with the committee?

**Mr. Richard Steele:** Again, not off the top of my head. In response to the previous question—we are doing the analysis and assessment of a range of options around staffing, in response to the staffing study and as part of our development of the staffing strategy that the minister has referenced. That kind of analysis is under way right now. Whether that number exists as of now, I am not aware.

**M<sup>me</sup> France Gélinas:** Could you also share with the committee, when you ask the homes to report on their—what are the calculations that led you to tell me that we are at 3.75 hours right now? What is the math that is involved? What are the numbers that are shared with you? Do you know?

**Mr. Richard Steele:** I will see if ADM Janet Hope is on the call. Those numbers, I believe, came from the latest staffing survey, which, I think ADM Hope mentioned, is from 2018. If ADM Hope is there, perhaps she can comment further on that.

**Ms. Janet Hope:** Good morning. My name is Janet Hope. I'm the assistant deputy minister for the policy division with the Ministry of Long-Term Care.

As Deputy Steele mentioned, the source of information that we have on this type of data is the staffing survey, and the most recent version of that is from 2018. I don't have the technical detail top of mind in terms of exactly how the

calculation is made. But again, I think it's a mathematical calculation from the data that's received that is then translated into how many hours of care are provided to residents as of that point in time with that data. We have that data from over a number of years from the staffing survey data as it has been collected.

**M<sup>me</sup> France Gélinas:** But the data that you're dealing with are the paid hours, not necessarily the hours of care—as in you would have to pay staff for statutory holidays. Am I correct?

**Ms. Janet Hope:** Yes, the data that was reported in the staffing study from the survey, I believe, was reported as paid hours of care.

**M<sup>me</sup> France Gélinas:** From your dealings with those data, what would be the percentage of paid hours that actually go to care? Few PSWs have sick days or bereavement leaves or anything like this. So what would be your best estimate as to the relationship between the paid hours and the care hours?

**Ms. Janet Hope:** I'm sorry; I don't have a sense of that estimate in my head. I think there are various parties that have done estimates. I would have to go back and—my understanding from the data we have is that we don't have a definitive source of that data, but various parties have done their own estimates based on their own estimates of what portion of paid hours would represent worked hours.

**M<sup>me</sup> France Gélinas:** To me, when something matters, you count it. How could it be that your ministry never looked at hours of care? How can it be that here we are at estimates—in the report you've done on staffing, the report that came out, everybody talks about hours of care, but the ministry never looked at it, doesn't have any sense, any data, anything to share with this committee. Where's the disconnect?

**Ms. Janet Hope:** I think I mentioned that there are a variety of estimates. I believe what I said is that it's my understanding that we don't have a definitive source of that data, but we have been working with the various estimates.

**M<sup>me</sup> France Gélinas:** So what other source of data do you have, except for the staffing study survey that you have done every year, stopping in 2018?

**Ms. Janet Hope:** There are a variety of organizations in the sector that I understand have done their own estimates—

**M<sup>me</sup> France Gélinas:** But not the ministry.

**Ms. Janet Hope:** To my understanding, no.

**M<sup>me</sup> France Gélinas:** Okay. Moving on to long-term-care homes—

**The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns):** Just to note, you have two minutes left.

**M<sup>me</sup> France Gélinas:** Okay.

When we talked about the new homes that you were going to announce—could you share with the committee how many new beds were applied for between the extensions that you gave from January to September 25? Did a lot of areas submit during that period of time? When do you expect to have, basically, development agreements

ready? And how many beds would be part of those agreements?

**Hon. Merrilee Fullerton:** I'll touch briefly on that, and then I'll hand the details over to the deputy.

Really, there are 129 projects, 8,000 new beds—almost 9,000—and almost 12,000 redeveloped beds that are in the queue. We've streamlined the processes to make sure that these applications can reach the shovel-in-the-ground point faster—

**M<sup>me</sup> France Gélinas:** And how many of them are shovel-in-the-ground-ready?

**Hon. Merrilee Fullerton:** I will now pass it to the deputy.

**Mr. Richard Steele:** If I could come back to your question to start—and then I can follow up on the minister's comments.

We certainly have received a significant number of applications since the extension that was announced in March and the closing of the current round of applications at the end of September. I don't have the number precisely for that period, but it was a significant number.

**M<sup>me</sup> France Gélinas:** Could you share it with the committee?

**Mr. Richard Steele:** I believe we can share the number of applications we've received from the latest call for applications, yes.

**M<sup>me</sup> France Gélinas:** Thank you.

**Mr. Richard Steele:** Those applications are now being reviewed. The next step, essentially, will be for the government to make decisions—

**The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns):** I'm sorry to say that we're out of time for the opposition.

Before we proceed—MPP Khanjin, you've joined us on video. Could you confirm your identity and that you're in Ontario?

**Ms. Andrea Khanjin:** Andrea Khanjin, in Ontario.

**The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns):** Thank you very much, MPP.

Our next round of questions goes to MPP McKenna.

MPP McKenna, you have the floor.

**Ms. Jane McKenna:** I appreciate the opportunity to ask the question.

I first want to say to the minister that as I was walking into my office today, one of my constituents came up and, coincidentally enough, she wanted me to thank you so much for all you've done at this ministry, for your compassion and passion. I wanted to say that first because, ironically enough, she just said that to me.

**0930**

When this committee last recessed, the deputy minister was talking about the high wage transition fund and the structural compliance premium, and the SCP being replaced by the minor capital fund. Can we finish the answer on how this program better addresses needs in this sector?

**Hon. Merrilee Fullerton:** Thank you so much to your constituent. I certainly appreciate those thoughts, and thank you for sharing them and for your good work on behalf of your constituents.

The confusion surrounding the high wage transition fund and the structural compliance premium somehow seems to persist. These were temporary programs, and our government—when we became the Ministry of Long-Term Care—understood the need for these to continue, until we could create a stabilized funding plan. So these were never cut. They were continued and extended, and then transitioned. The structural compliance premium was transitioned to a minor capital fund.

I'll pass it to the deputy to give the details on that.

**Mr. Richard Steele:** Thank you, Minister.

I think, at the end of the last session, ADM Sheila Bristo had just started to provide a little more detail on the minor capital program.

**Ms. Jane McKenna:** Can you tell me, Chair, the time that we have left, please?

**The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns):** Yes, you have about five minutes left.

**Ms. Jane McKenna:** To the minister: You've spoken quite eloquently about all the hard work that we've been doing in long-term care. I just wondered, since this ministry has taken over—when you got into the ministry—what was the most important thought that you wanted to move forward with, your vision, with long-term care?

**Hon. Merrilee Fullerton:** It really is a two-pronged priority: looking at the capacity—38,000 people on a wait-list because of, really, the neglect over many, many years—and the lack of building.

We know that when people are very complex and frail, at some point, they cannot stay home. As much as the previous government had an Aging at Home strategy, there comes a point when families can no longer manage and the resident in their home can no longer manage—so the capacity, the wait-list to build that, and the staffing that needed to go with that, were two major areas. You can't build the capacity without including staffing. It is still those two areas that are of great concern; of course, COVID-19 obviously is as well now. But when we began, the capacity and the staffing—understanding how we really remove the obstacles to creating more capacity for residents in need, and give relief to their families, but also the staffing piece.

Looking at the homes that we met with and collaborated with at the Association of Municipalities of Ontario very early on, and that consultation that we did, was extremely helpful to understand why things were not moving, and the issues surrounding the complexity of residents in their homes. So looking at the PSWs, looking at the registered staff—the Justice Gillese inquiry helped inform that, as well—and really understanding how, again, absolutely neglected for years—and here we are now, with so many people on a wait-list. Looking at innovative programs for the training of PSWs, whether it's return of service, whether it's the fast-tracking of PSWs, and also for RNs, and RPNs as well; looking at career laddering and the different ways that we can create the interest in the sector and really create an environment where people want to work and where they are valued; looking at the research

that needs to be done for our seniors' care and some of the great work being done at some of the homes and at Waterloo and some other agencies that are tasked with doing this—all this needs to be brought together so our staff can feel that they're very much part of a team, that they are valued in their work, and that the research will inform how we care for our seniors and our most elderly in our society as we move forward with an aging population.

**The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns):** You have two minutes remaining.

**Hon. Merrilee Fullerton:** Again, people want to stay in their homes, but how do we integrate that with the acute-care sector, the expertise in primary care? I've often thought that we need to have training for our medical students in long-term care—how we introduce them and how we create an understanding of the meaning of what it is to care for society's most vulnerable. I think we need to inspire societal interest and create a really innovative way forward with the campuses of care, how we blend the stages of life.

Whether it's a retirement home and couples—my parents were together for 60 years and then separated. We need to do better for an aging population. We are taking active steps to do that across the government. Whether it's specific to long-term care or the Ministry of Health, the lead on health human resources, including PSWs—it really is taking an across-the-ministry approach. It is such an enormous, daunting problem, but all of us need to be part of the solution. I strongly believe in our ability to listen and acknowledge the issues and move forward with solutions.

That's where the action and the energy and the focus need to be—advancing long-term care, repairing and rebuilding it; respecting the residents, the staff and the families; and understanding that when people are waiting in the community, the families need relief as well—

**The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns):** I'm sorry to say, with that, we're out of time.

This concludes the committee's consideration of the estimates of the Ministry of Long-Term Care.

Standing order 69(b) requires that the Chair put, without further amendment or debate, every question necessary to dispose of the estimates.

Are members ready to vote? All right.

Shall vote 4501, ministry administration programs, carry? All those in favour, raise your hands and the Clerk will count the raised hands. That motion carries.

Shall vote 4502, long-term-care-homes program with supplementaries, carry? All those in favour, please raise your hands. Carried.

Shall the 2020-21 estimates of the Ministry of Long-Term Care with supplementaries carry? All those in favour, please raise your hands. Carried.

Shall the Chair report the 2020-21 estimates of the Ministry of Long-Term Care with supplementaries to the House? All those in favour, please raise your hands. I'm going to say, "All those opposed?"—but I think it's been pretty clear. All right, that carries.

I want to thank the minister and her staff. I want to thank all the members of the committee for participating and being focused, I would say. For all of the staff up here, I really appreciate the support that they've given all of us. For those who finished this marathon, congratulations.

We will now recess until 3:30 p.m., following the afternoon routine of the House.

*The committee recessed from 0939 to 1537.*

**The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns):** Good afternoon, everyone. The committee is about to begin consideration of the estimates of the Ministry of Education for a total of five hours.

Before we begin, we have the following members in the room: MPP Donna Skelly, Minister Stephen Lecce, and MPP Marit Stiles.

I have a number of people who have joined us by Zoom, and they're familiar with the procedure. I'll ask them to identify themselves and note whether or not they are in Ontario. I will start with MPP Pettapiece.

**Mr. Randy Pettapiece:** Yes, it's Randy Pettapiece. I'm in Ontario.

**The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns):** Thank you so much. MPP McKenna?

**Ms. Jane McKenna:** It's Jane McKenna, and I'm in Ontario.

**The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns):** Thank you so much. MPP Cuzzetto?

**Mr. Rudy Cuzzetto:** It's MPP Rudy Cuzzetto, and I'm here in Toronto.

**The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns):** Thank you. MPP Parsa?

**Mr. Michael Parsa:** MPP Michael Parsa. I am in Ontario, Chair.

**The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns):** Thank you so much. MPP Oosterhoff?

**Mr. Sam Oosterhoff:** I am in Ontario.

**The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns):** Thank you. MPP Wai?

**Mrs. Daisy Wai:** This is Daisy Wai. I am in Toronto.

**The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns):** Excellent.

We're also joined by staff from legislative research, Hansard, interpretation, and broadcast and recording.

To make sure that everyone can understand what is going on, it's important that all participants speak slowly and clearly. Please wait until I recognize you before starting to speak.

Are there any questions from members before we start? There are none.

One request I have: If you're not speaking, I'd appreciate it if you'd leave your mask on, just given the circumstances.

## MINISTRY OF EDUCATION

**The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns):** I'm now required to call vote 1001, which sets the review process in motion. We will begin with a statement of not more than 30 minutes from the Minister of Education, followed by a statement of up to 30 minutes by the official opposition.

Then, the minister will have a further 30 minutes for a reply. The remaining time will be apportioned equally among the two parties, with 15 minutes allotted to the independent member of the committee.

Minister, the floor is yours.

**Hon. Stephen Lecce:** Thank you very much, Chair. I do appreciate it. To my caucus colleagues and to the opposition: I appreciate being back here at estimates.

I want to introduce, before we begin, my senior staff who are with me. As noted, Deputy Minister Nancy Naylor is with us, as well as the assistant deputy minister for strategic policy and planning, Shannon Fuller. And the entire leadership team of ADMs is on the line, virtually, should they be required.

It's a privilege to work with these talented individuals and with all of our ministry staff, who are so dedicated to public education. I want to thank them and all the public servants at the ministry for their hard work and professionalism, especially as we get through COVID-19.

I also want to express my support and gratitude to all the teachers and education workers, the child care sector, educators, for their commitment to helping students achieve success throughout this educational journey and throughout these very difficult past few months.

It goes without saying that this year has been like no other. COVID-19 has had an impact across all sectors, and our publicly funded school system and child care have not been an exception. Our government understood immediately that we had to act decisively and make some fast and important decisions about how to keep Ontario's two million students and their families safe and healthy and how to make sure that high-quality learning and child care could continue.

Since we first started planning for the reopening of schools and child care across the province, our goal has been to be responsive to the evolving risk and guidance of medical and pediatric experts.

While the COVID-19 outbreak presented monumental challenges to education, it also provided opportunity. I've made clear time and again my commitment to modernizing our education system to better serve students and parents. My goal, and indeed that of our government, is to provide students across this province with access to high-quality public education and to position Ontario as a global leader of modern and digital education. So when we made the difficult decision to close schools last March on the advice of our leading medical experts, we acted swiftly to launch the Learn at Home website. It was the first of its kind in our province's history. This website was designed to provide valuable resources so students could continue their education while schools were closed. The site also provided direct resources for students and families in both English and French, to support their well-being and positive mental health while learning at home. I'm proud to say that within the first few weeks of launching the Learn at Home site, it had received approximately 3.5 million unique visits.

Of course, when our government took decisive action to protect students and staff by closing schools across

Ontario—we were the first province to do so in Canada—our top priority was obviously to mitigate learning lost for students and likewise to keep kids safe. To that end, we instituted an expanded seven-point summer learning plan to ensure Ontario students had every opportunity to continue their learning through the summer months. In fact, summer learning programs were expanded to reach more students than in previous years, to ensure students could start their 2020-21 school year with the confidence and the knowledge required to succeed.

To support at-home learning, the government leveraged tools, resources, technologies and services to assist school boards in delivering equitable and effective learning through access to technology and Internet connectivity, especially for students in rural and remote parts of our province. Elementary students participated in literacy and numeracy programs, and students with special education needs and mental health challenges participated in new, targeted transition programs in preparation for the upcoming school year.

I'm happy to report that over 150,000 students enrolled in credit-bearing secondary summer school programs, including more than 21,000 grade 8 students who took courses through Reach Ahead secondary school credits.

Finally, in June, we officially unveiled our robust provincial school reopening plan. It was supported by \$1.3 billion in critical investment to ensure the safe reopening of Ontario schools. This plan is the most comprehensive in this country. It is supported by the highest level of funding nationwide and is fully informed by leading medical experts to ensure we have reduced risk and we are supporting positive mental health within our schools. It prioritizes health and safety above all else and provides school boards with the resources and flexibility, while accommodating regional differences in trends of key public health indicators.

As the summer progressed and the start of school drew nearer, the plan evolved and became more and more responsive to the current needs, such as the look and feel of the school day, responding to cases of COVID-19 in schools, and cleaning and hygiene protocols—all strengthened over time. Our government also released a COVID-19 management plan for schools, developed by some of the brightest medical minds in this country, with one aim: to help schools identify and isolate COVID-19, to reduce the spread in our schools, and to prevent and minimize outbreaks.

Robust outbreak protocols have ensured that both the education system and the public health system have effective plans in place to respond quickly and effectively when outbreaks may happen in a school. Our outbreak management plan was developed with the Ministry of the Solicitor General, the Ministry of Health and Public Health Ontario, and it outlines clear and strict protocols and authorities of the multiple agencies or organizations involved in the public health landscape. These protocols, which school boards, local public health agencies and the government have begun to use in the event of positive cases of COVID-19 among our students, teachers or any other staff

members, have allowed for immediate action by health and education sector officials to identify, to track and to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 in the education system.

The province recognizes that access to technology is more important than ever before, as schools across Ontario have prepared for a new reality, which includes both learning at home and in-person learning. It's why the government provided \$15 million, through the Grants for Student Needs, in June to secure approximately 30,000 technological devices for students. This investment will help ensure that students who face difficulty accessing technology are able to leverage these tools to succeed in the 2020-21 school year.

The bottom line is, we are investing more in devices, technology and Internet for students than any other government in Ontario history, and we're doing that to close the digital divide and ensure that all students have the best opportunities to learn and to participate in digital learning. I am proud of the work our government has done to equip parents and educators with these tools that they need to help keep students on track with their learning during these unprecedented times.

Additionally, as part of our government's commitment to providing modernized education for Ontario's students, the ministry's virtual learning environment supports remote learning. The VLE is a secure online environment where teachers can connect with their students, provide lessons at home, collect assignments, give student feedback and grades—as well as creating opportunities for students to connect with their peers and teachers. Between March and June, over 700,000 students and 70,000 teachers accessed the VLE, where almost four million quizzes were completed and over five million assignments were submitted, all from home.

The transition to a completely virtual classroom model of learning has not been perfect, but we have literally built a system from the ground up. Teachers across the province rose to the challenge and began engaging with students in real time through the VLE as well as other systems, such as Google Classroom, virtually. I'd like to commend them for their ingenuity and for pivoting quickly to support remote learning and virtual learning.

We're also ensuring that our teachers are supported by providing more training and resources to help them teach remotely, and we have already hosted a number of live webinars and education training models, with more to come. Since the spring, approximately 44,000 educators have participated in over 120 ministry webinars on remote learning, teaching and the new elementary math curriculum. The ministry will be hosting approximately 60 new French- and English-language webinars in the current school year on remote learning and teaching; on anti-racism and anti-discrimination; on mental health and well-being; and, yes, on the new math curriculum.

Our ministry is continuing to leverage the VLE platform and tools to enhance support for educators in remote learning delivery. For example, we're enhancing the e-community space for professional learning with an archive

of ministry-developed webinars, training and other resources for teachers and school board professionals.

To succeed in an environment that is increasingly technologically focused, students need foundational digital skills, knowledge and competency so that they can succeed in work, post-secondary education and life beyond. That is why last November, our government boldly announced that secondary school students would be required to earn two online credits to graduate, with the ability for parents to opt out for their child on an individualized basis.

#### 1550

By expanding and modernizing online learning, students will have greater flexibility and more choice, and they'll graduate with the skills needed to enter the workforce and succeed in a competitive, globally connected economy.

The Ministry of Education is also working with our partners at TVO and TFO so that they can support the centralization, administration, course development and co-ordination of online learning in English- and French-language publicly funded education systems. This new vision is the next step in the development of a robust online learning approach in this province, and it will build upon the strong foundation we've already built for students to have increased access to high-quality learning opportunities.

Further to this, in order to help improve access to remote learning, the government launched the Ontario Together portal to solicit offers and encourage private enterprise in the non-profit sectors to step forward and to propose solutions that historically have impeded learning from home. As a result of those submissions, Ontario was able to move forward with 34 partnerships with organizations and businesses, along with school boards and other partners, to address key needs among educators, students and their families during this pandemic, including access to digital learning resources, supports for special education needs and mental health, as well as Internet connectivity and access to devices.

However, for online learning to be successful for all students across the province, we need to make sure that everyone is connected. Access to reliable, fast, secure and affordable Internet service at school is foundational for supporting modernized digital learning within the classroom to help reduce costs and drive efficiencies.

Making sure that all students have the needed connectivity at school, no matter where they live in Ontario, is critical to their success. We made a commitment that by the end of September 2020, all Ontario students and educators in all publicly funded secondary schools will have access to reliable, fast, secure and affordable Internet services at school and in all regions of this province. Chair, I'm proud to say that we have met that commitment.

Furthermore, Ontario's Broadband Modernization Program puts students' safety first by ensuring that the modernized network can better contain the impact of cyber threats that are impacting students, educators and our schools.

Fast and reliable Internet access is central to Ontario's ongoing commitment to modernization, as well as recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic and the growth of our economy as a whole. By ensuring that this necessary service is available to Ontario's students in schools all across our province—even in the Far North and in rural communities, where Internet connectivity is a challenge—we can help bring equity to students across our province by supporting regions with the greatest need.

I'm happy to report, in terms of progress, that as of September 30, 2020, broadband modernization has been completed at 2,611 schools, including 845 rural schools and 475 northern schools. Work is currently in progress in 2,326 schools, including 248 rural schools and 26 northern schools.

Nonetheless, we know that there is more work to do, and more work is needed to ensure that students are all connected at home. We are currently in the process of launching an exciting pilot project we will be announcing soon that will help students in some of the most remote parts of Ontario even further.

The Ministry of Education has made unprecedented investments this year. As I mentioned earlier, our government has made available a total of \$1.3 billion in critical support to ensure the safe reopening of our schools. This support is in addition to the landmark annual investment of \$25.5 billion in education, which represents an increase of \$736 million for the 2020-21 school year compared to the 2019-20 year. This funding will help to implement physical distancing measures and adopt enhanced cleaning protocols in schools and on school buses. It will hire more teachers to help reduce class sizes. Significant custodians have been hired to date, and more are expected to be hired over the coming weeks.

It will help public health units hire up to 625 school-focused nurses to provide rapid response support to schools and boards and facilitate public health measures, including screening, surveillance testing, tracing, and mitigation strategies and training. To date, we have more than 600 nurses hired in this province, supporting our schools in all regions of Ontario; in fact, we more than doubled the capacity to do just that.

While we firmly believe that students should be together in a dynamic, live and safe learning environment led by their teacher, we are also providing students and families with clear and transparent standards for those who choose fully remote learning, which is teacher-led, time-tabled and includes live synchronized sessions with a regular daily schedule. We are making investments to ensure that every school board offering virtual learning has a dedicated principal and administrative support to ensure it is comprehensive, engaging, challenging and as close to the in-class experience as one can make it.

Funding has been allocated to support school boards to hire additional staff to keep those class sizes low; to provide resources and supplies to clean and sanitize school buses; to provide resources and supports for students with special education needs and mental health challenges; to hire dedicated principals and administrative supports for

both its secondary and elementary virtual schools; and to optimize air quality in schools.

My ministry has been working with the Minister of Government and Consumer Services to ship more than 40 million pieces of personal protective equipment to all 72 district school boards and 10 school authorities. The partnership provides school boards, school authorities and school bus operators the supplies they need to operate and safely bus their students to school each day. This includes more than 19.5 million masks, 17 million gloves, 820,000 face shields, 450,000 bottles of hand sanitizer, 230,000 containers of disinfectant, among many other critical supplies.

We also supported First Nation education partners, ensuring that they had timely access to the PPE and the cleaning supplies they required to open their schools and safely bus students to provincial schools in the province of Ontario. As of October 26, 2020, we have supplied Indigenous education partners with more than 307,000 masks, 122,000 gloves, 5,800 face shields, 3,300 litres of hand sanitizer, 3,400 litres of disinfectant spray, 2,300 isolation gowns, among many other supplies.

While COVID-19 has certainly been the primary focus of much of our efforts this year so far, we have not forgotten about other areas of our education system. Our drive to create transformational change is stronger than ever during the pandemic, and we've proposed changes to strengthen our education system further.

For one thing, Ontario is proposing to modernize large-scale provincial student testing to better prepare youth for the future and to rebuild parent confidence within our system. The Education Quality and Accountability Office, which creates and administers assessment, will procure a firm with the expertise to develop an online adaptive testing platform. This change will allow the agency to modernize its approach to assessment and data collection, to be more nimble, effective and focused on student achievement. And by being available online, it will be more responsive to individual student learning needs and will support student mental health and well-being by helping to make tests less stressful.

EQAO is the leading authority for measuring the school system performance, and it's critical that their insights are maximized. EQAO can provide vital data in research to reinvigorate education in Ontario. It could help improve student learning at the provincial, board and school levels, and it could help identify student achievement gaps to better promote equity in the publicly funded education system.

Assessment and evaluation are a natural and necessary part of learning. In fact, teachers, students and parents need feedback on how well the student is doing. This change will also make testing more accessible to students with special education needs; increase equity for different student populations, including francophone, Black and Indigenous students, to better ensure cultural relevancy; and will provide faster results that teachers can discuss with parents more promptly.

We continue to invest more money into our education system every single year, but we must ensure that every dollar helps it deliver the results that parents and students expect in this province. We're investing more in education than any government in this province's history, with targeted funding that prioritizes STEM, financial literacy, mental health and supports for racialized and vulnerable students. Our focus is on what matters: student success and their well-being in the classroom and beyond.

Investments in Ontario's publicly funded education system are made by the government primarily through the Grants for Student Needs. This year's funding includes new investments to support school boards in responding to the COVID-19 outbreak and to address the unique learning needs of students, including a new Support for Students Fund.

#### 1600

I'm happy to say that as of 2020-21, education funding through the Grants for Student Needs is projected to be \$25.52 billion—as noted, an increase of \$737 million over 2019-20. On a per pupil basis, funding is projected to be \$12,525. This represents an increase of \$250 over 2019-20. That represents funding for approximately two million students, from kindergarten to grade 12, in approximately 4,800 publicly funded schools. That includes the English- and French-language public school system and the English and French Catholic school system.

We know that the COVID-19 outbreak has impacted student mental health and their well-being. That's why school boards are being provided with an additional \$10 million in the GSN funding to help ensure critical supports are available to students who need them most—including hiring additional mental health staff to support higher anticipated caseloads and providing additional professional learning. The Priorities and Partnerships Fund supports the ministry's vision with time-limited investments focusing on high-impact initiatives that directly support students in the classroom based on their local needs. The PPF allocation for the 2020-21 school year is \$302.3 million. This year, we're working with some really great organizations that are truly going to change the lives of our students. Groups like School Mental Health Ontario, Kids Help Phone, Big Brothers Big Sisters of Canada, Roots of Empathy, White Ribbon and the Ontario Federation of Indigenous Friendship Centres are all receiving dollars through this fund. I know many families rely on school buses to bring their child safely to and from these schools with this exciting programming, and so our government has established a student transportation review that is led by the parliamentary assistant, to gather input on student transportation funding and to ensure a more efficient and accountable student transportation system within this province. While the review is under way, the overall Student Transportation Grant is projected to be more than \$1 billion.

We're also providing \$110 million in funding to the sector to address challenges related to COVID-19. This includes funding to reduce the number of students on buses; for enhanced health and safety measures, including

cleaning and PPE for the bus drivers, for example; and to support the renewal, the extension, of the School Bus Driver Retention Program.

Another significant investment we have made is in infrastructure through our Capital Priorities Program. Since the beginning of the COVID-19 outbreak, the government has approved over \$1 billion in capital projects in education, which will be applied to new schools, additions to existing facilities, and to build new licensed child care spaces for working parents in this province. In fact, we have just announced a second phase of capital investment of \$550 million in new funding to build 20 new schools and eight new permanent additions right across the province. These new projects will create nearly 16,000 student seats and 870 licensed child care spaces, and that is going to make a big difference.

In July 2020, the Ministry of Education announced our first phase of capital investments with the Premier, with more than \$500 million to build another 30 new schools and 15 permanent additions to existing facilities, along with nearly 900 new licensed child care spaces. The construction of additional modern school facilities will strengthen student learning and increase access to licensed child care for future generations. This also builds upon our government's commitment to build up to 100,000 new child care spaces in our province.

I'm happy to say that the ministry is investing \$1.4 billion in renewal funding, which continues to meet the recommended funding level by the Auditor General of Ontario, to preserve the condition of our schools and make sure they remain improved and at a standard that is in keeping with what parents expect.

These are just some, Chair, of the many initiatives, programs and investments we've implemented as we plan for a successful 2020 school year.

Through our discussion at this committee, I will continue to highlight more of the great work that everyone within the education system is doing, including our staff here in the ministry, to ensure that the school year is safe, and the success of Ontario's students and the health and safety of our teachers remain the most pressing priorities.

I am confident that with the leadership strength and experience of the people working in our publicly funded education system, and the resources we put in place and the guidance we have provided, informed by the chief medical officer of this province, we can continue to provide our students with quality learning during this historic time.

I just wanted to conclude, Chair, with a notation of thanks to all the front-line workers within our province. I have spoken to the trustees' association, principals' association, Ontario Student Trustees' Association—public and Catholic, English and French—and the message, I think, is one of unity as we overcome the great difficulty.

We are the largest province in this country to have opened schools, to keep schools open, to create an online option. I know that there's more work to do, but if we do it together, collaboratively, focusing on our students, I know we will do so meeting the needs of our kids and

meeting the standards of the taxpayers and the parents of this province.

Thank you very much. I appreciate the opportunity.

**The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns):** Thank you, Minister.

Before we go to the opposition, I just want to note that we've been joined by MPP Doly Begum.

MPP Begum, will you identify yourself and note where you are?

**Ms. Doly Begum:** This is MPP Doly Begum, sitting in my office in the Legislature.

**The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns):** Thank you so much.

With that, we go to the official opposition. MPP Stiles, you have the floor for 30 minutes.

**Ms. Marit Stiles:** First, I want to start by thanking the ministry staff for all they've been doing. I know this has been a very difficult time for many of you, both personally and professionally, and I wanted to share my appreciation on behalf of the official opposition—and to your families, as well.

I also want to thank Minister Lecce for being here for this important part of the budget process.

Last year, when we were in this place reviewing the Ministry of Education estimated expenditures, it was a very different time. We were facing massive cuts to classrooms, increased class sizes, the loss of 10,000 teachers, potentially, and a push to force our students into mandatory online courses. Our students, children, educators, families were united in pushing against the government's agenda, and we saw historic work actions and historic unity. Certainly, we know that it didn't need to be that way. I like to think that if the government could do this over again, they would see the error of their ways.

Following that upheaval, our students and education workers, our families and communities have faced the extraordinary and unprecedented challenge of COVID-19. It has, I think, never been more clear why we must support our schools and our publicly funded education system, why we must invest and stop the decades of mismanagement and chronic underfunding by both Conservative and Liberal governments.

Mr. Chair, the closure of our schools in March was appropriate, but I think many Ontarians are concerned that the government may have squandered their opportunity and their lead time. Over the period of the pandemic, boards needed certainty and support. Communication has been late coming; it has been unclear. Funding has come in dribs and drabs.

Federal money finally came through, but we have yet to see where those dollars are. We know that the Financial Accountability Office has criticized the government for squirreling away \$9.3 billion in COVID-19 relief. We don't know why this government would hold back the money; it makes no sense. As I've suggested previously to the minister many times, the time is now, the need is now. What are they holding the money back for?

I want to remind the minister that we in the NDP put forward a motion months ago suggesting an emergency action plan. The government did not move to support that. I want to remind the minister that parents have called for

smaller, safer classrooms. The government members voted against our motion on that issue.

Where has the government been throughout all of this? I can tell you that when people ask me what was happening between March and September, I throw my hands in the air. We know that this system is extraordinarily complex, that the challenge is extraordinary. But the failure to work hand in hand and meaningfully consult with front-line educators and experts, the failure to provide the support to our students and education workers to make this terrible situation work better, to give teachers what they need, to provide bus drivers and all of our other education workers what they need—Mr. Chair, I have never been more concerned, as a parent and an MPP and somebody who cares about our publicly funded education system, about the future of our system and about the stress and the mental health of our students and workers. I'm also very concerned about the inequities that have surfaced and the long-term damage to our system. So I have a number of questions.

**1610**

Obviously, we're very focused on some of the immediate issues around this chaos and this pandemic response, but I also hope we can look a little bit at what lessons are being learned.

I did want to mention, with the greatest respect to the minister and other staff who are here, that in these hearings I'm going to be looking for short answers rather than long ones, for bullet points rather than paragraphs and pages. It would help us all if you could take that approach in responding, because we do have limited time.

My first question is around what we're all here to understand, which is the actual planned spending of this government. We have volume 1 of the estimates, but the ministry, I know, has made several spending announcements since then, and I don't believe these changes are fully reflected in the spending plan shown in the published estimates. Before we begin, I'm wondering if we could be provided, please, with an updated breakdown of the current planned spending for the Ministry of Education by program, by sub-program, and itemized.

**Hon. Stephen Lecce:** We can certainly take that back.

**Ms. Marit Stiles:** This information is really critical. The government's spending plans are constantly outdated by new announcements; we understand that. I understand that staff may not have that right now, but we are going to be having a break at some point, and I would hope that they would be able to return at that point with that information.

Again, we have the official estimates based on the March budget plan. We have the supplementary estimates that show, really, no change for education. What we need to see are the updated spending plans; otherwise, it is not clear where the money to pay for that safe return to schools is coming from. Frankly, it's why we're here. The ministry's authority to spend comes from these estimates, and right now they are not included in this spending. We need that information before we can vote as a committee. I'm asking if we can have this information during the break.

**The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns):** There is no break that's scheduled; I'm sorry to say.

**Ms. Marit Stiles:** Can we have it before the end of the day today, Mr. Chair?

**The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns):** You have to ask the minister for that. I can't speak to that.

**Hon. Stephen Lecce:** Chair, we'll endeavour to provide as much information as we can. Obviously, we appreciate that there have been numerous announcements made over the past few months by the government, boards and the federal government. We'll do our very best to provide as much information as we can to the member and to all members.

**Ms. Marit Stiles:** I appreciate that this is a rather unusual situation. We've had a lot of changes in plans since March; I absolutely get that. But it does make it very difficult for this committee to do the work that it needs to do, if we don't have those numbers. I have the appendix, Treasury Board, Management Board of Cabinet financial decisions etc. on the summary of COVID-19 response decisions, but what I don't see is where that's all coming from, what is not being spent to cover some of this. It's just very unclear to us, so I would ask—we have about two days, five and a half hours; is that right? I'm hoping that somebody in the ministry has this information and that it could be provided to us, please.

In the meantime, I'm going to go with what we have, which are the estimates, the supplementary estimates and then the announcements that you've made.

The March 2020 budget showed an increase of \$372 million from the 2019 budget, but the Financial Accountability Office's 2020-21 spending plan analysis from May 28 showed that the March 2020 spending plan was \$332 million more than what the government had originally planned to spend this year. So putting that aside for now—the fact that the government had originally planned what is basically a spending freeze, because it was essentially a one tenth of a per cent increase, which wouldn't cover inflation. This now becomes, from what I can figure, about a 1.2% increase, which again is not even paying for inflation so is essentially a cut.

When we last talked, the minister was trying to negotiate some agreements with all of the unions. How much of those new dollars were spent as a result of those agreements and the money that came out of bargaining those agreements?

**Hon. Stephen Lecce:** First off, I appreciate the opportunity to answer the question.

I will note that the total budget, including consolidations and other adjustments, was \$31.9 billion in the context of the expenditure estimates at a glance that you're pointing to. That's a \$309.4-million increase, specifically, which represented a 1% increase at that time. You did note, member, rightfully, that there have been increases thereafter.

I will turn it to Andrew Davis, if he'd be so kind, just because he'll be able to provide some of the specifics on where those monies came from and their allocation.

**Ms. Nancy Naylor:** Andrew Davis is the assistant deputy minister of the elementary, secondary, business and labour division. He should be online. If we could ask Andrew to turn his—there he is.

**The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns):** Thank you. I appreciate you introducing him, but I also need you to introduce yourself for Hansard purposes.

**Ms. Nancy Naylor:** I'm Nancy Naylor. I'm the Deputy Minister of Education.

**The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns):** Thank you very much.

Sir, if you would introduce yourself for the purposes of Hansard, I would appreciate it, and then you could proceed.

**Mr. Andrew Davis:** My name is Andrew Davis. I am the assistant deputy minister of the education, labour and finance division in the Ministry of Education. I also led the bargaining for the Ministry of Education. Thank you for the opportunity to be able to speak to it.

In the GSN for the current year, 2020-21, as the minister highlighted, that was an increase of \$736 million year over year. Within that funding announcement, we have reflected the costs associated for that school year in relation to those agreements. Part of that, just about \$220 million, is reflecting the compensation increases that were negotiated at the table. That includes the 1% for salary, and it also includes a 1% increase for benefits as well as potential inflationary impacts associated with benefits that teachers and education workers receive through the benefits trusts. That increase year over year also reflects the new program that was mentioned, the Support for Students Fund. That is approximately \$213 million. That fund supports additional teachers and additional education workers for all of the bargaining units. The remainder of the \$736 million year over year in the GSN predominantly reflects other elements that are important to support our sector, such as the \$25 million that the minister noted that was our first instalment on the COVID-19 outbreak at the time.

1620

**Ms. Marit Stiles:** This is not what's reflected in here, so your point, I think, is that the \$220 million that is maybe a part of or some of the negotiated spending—and then there's the Support for Students Fund. How much of that was hiring back laid-off workers?

The other piece of this is, between the \$736 million and the \$220 million—some of that is pandemic spending, which isn't, again, reflected in the estimates information we have here. Is that correct?

**Mr. Andrew Davis:** For teachers, we had a teacher protection fund which actually allowed for there—to protect the total complement of teachers, so that there would only be adjustments through attrition, such as retirements and other measures. So there were no actual layoffs of those staff as a result of those protections that were put in place. Then, the Support for Students Fund kicks in in the current school year.

I do apologize; perhaps some of the confusion is that when I'm talking about the labour agreements and I'm

talking about the Grants for Student Needs, I'm speaking from a school-year basis, as those agreements do work on a school year, and our funding announcements to the school boards operate off of a school-year basis. So when I talk about the Grants for Student Needs and the \$736 million and the costs associated with those labour agreements, I'm speaking from a school-year basis.

**Ms. Marit Stiles:** Okay. I'm going to move on. I may come back to some of that, though, a little later. Thank you.

In March—March 25, I believe it was—there was a mini-budget that was released about a week after the government declared an emergency due to the pandemic.

How much of the \$372-million increase in the budget from the previous budget, which is what the estimates show, had been planned before the pandemic, and how much of that increase was planned in response to the pandemic, if any?

**Ms. Nancy Naylor:** When the Minister of Finance presented his budget, most of that, obviously, was planned and approved prior to the full realization of the circumstances brought about by the pandemic, so they did reflect our plans for the GSN for the coming school year, which is the \$736-million announcement that Andrew Davis had referred to. I would say that was an announcement that reflected on a school-year basis the government's obligations with respect to the labour agreements, the number of other investments—increases, for example, in special education, mental health and technology—but it didn't fully encompass the kinds of investment decisions that the government made subsequent to that as we came to terms with what school boards would need given the pandemic conditions.

**Ms. Marit Stiles:** The supplementary estimates were published on September 17, and they don't reflect any of the school funding announcements that were made since the March 25 mini-budget. So we don't really know what has been approved. We don't know, really, what changes were made to the spending plan. Again, I'm just wondering why there was nothing updated in the supplementary estimates.

**Ms. Nancy Naylor:** What I would say is, we're a very large ministry. We have a very large allocation. Although these additional investments are substantial—I think finance and we have worked together to proceed with making those investments. We are flowing them according to our long-established cash flow conventions with school boards. But at the moment we have enough of an allocation to meet all these obligations, including the increased obligations that reflect the government's additional investments. I would note that Minister Phillips has indicated to the Legislature that he will be delivering his next financial update in the form of the budget on November 5. For the moment, the estimates that are before the committee do reflect the official spending plans for the Ministry of Education.

**Ms. Marit Stiles:** I don't want to belabour the point, but we know that the whole government had to shift to react to the pandemic, and the point of this committee is to

review the actual spending plans for the ministry. The March budget showed a 2020-21 spending plan of \$31.8 billion for the Ministry of Education. The FAO's most recent Expenditure Monitor reported that this spending plan had not been increased as of June 30, with the start of the school year just two months away. And no increases to the spending plan are shown, again, in the supplementary estimates, which were published after the school year had started.

I appreciate that it may seem like a minor matter, but we are talking about the role of this committee—to be able to see the actual spending and dig into it and understand it. We don't really know whether the ministry's overall spending plan actually increased since March, and as of today, we don't know what the total amount of 2020-21 spending planned for the Ministry of Education is. Maybe there's no answer to that question.

Okay. I'm happy to move on.

**Hon. Stephen Lecce:** I would simply say that the March 4—the Minister of Finance will present a budget with updated assumptions and updated modelling, as well as numbers of investment and expenditure. That will provide a better snapshot of what we're doing in the context of announcements made since March, pretty much systematically through the summer. Obviously, the GSN was a critical announcement, but there have been many thereafter, which are in the public discourse and will be reflected in our submission, certainly for the March 4 period. I do recognize that in the midst of the summer, we also announced a \$309-million investment, above and beyond what was announced in March, of new provincial-only funds, which will augment that and further increase the province's expenditure for COVID-19. There was a federal allocation thereafter, and we are planning to unlock those federal dollars in the second tranche for January 2020—and additional actions by the province to support in this respect.

**Ms. Marit Stiles:** Obviously, a part of the reason I'm asking this question is that we did have the FAO, as I mentioned earlier—the Financial Accountability Office has criticized the government for squirrelling away \$9.3 billion in COVID-19 relief, so these are important questions to ask.

I'm going to move on. I'm wondering if the minister could share with us the first time that he was briefed on the COVID-19 pandemic—the date.

**Hon. Stephen Lecce:** I believe we would have had dialogue in late February, early March; I don't recall with specificity, member. I do know that the government had been—at a more macro level, including in education—following the global events, looking at the comparable jurisdictions to understand the challenges. Obviously, from February—really, January, February—when this issue became more, continentally, a challenge for Canada, we relied very heavily on the Chief Medical Officer of Health, where we established a direct point of contact. I won't speak for the deputy, but I know that she had one—as did we, with him earlier on, to the point that on the 13th of March, if I'm not mistaken, he advised cabinet and I

that we needed to close schools on the basis of risk. We did so that day. I believe it would have been, certainly, substantively some weeks before we did that, well before we closed schools.

**Ms. Marit Stiles:** You said late February or early March. I do want to mention that the first presumptive case, I think, was January 25.

**Hon. Stephen Lecce:** Sorry, late January, not February.

**Ms. Marit Stiles:** Late January?

**Hon. Stephen Lecce:** Yes. It was indeed, I believe, the 21st of—do you recall?

**Ms. Nancy Naylor:** I recall that the date was around January 25 when Ontario announced that we had seen the first case of COVID-19. I will say the minister and I have been discussing preparations for that. We spoke that week-end. We initiated planning on that.

1630

We had been initiating planning for this with our colleagues in the Ministry of Health. We met with David Williams that first crucial weekend, and we began planning for the school system then.

**Ms. Marit Stiles:** When was the first time that you then met with—let's start with the education workers and their representatives.

**Ms. Nancy Naylor:** We began formal meetings with our colleagues immediately after the school closure. We are obviously in touch with them on a regular basis through labour agreements and other fora, but we did begin formal meetings with many aspects of the school community immediately after the school closures during March break. What I do recall is that we began meetings with our labour partners in probably the second week, not the first week of March break, immediately after the closures were announced on March 13. It was, I believe, the second week, possibly the third—somewhere in there.

**Ms. Marit Stiles:** That's consistent with what I was hearing—which was a lot of concern among workers, among their representatives, among parents, but particularly among those folks who are on the front line, who were living in an enormous amount of uncertainty at the time.

What would be the first meeting that you had with boards—board chairs and directors of education?

**Ms. Nancy Naylor:** We speak with various combinations of boards on a regular basis, almost a daily basis. But with respect to the closure period, we started those meetings during March break. We broadened that circle within a week to include a broad representation of stakeholders, including our labour partners.

**Hon. Stephen Lecce:** If I may, member, just to build on it—I facilitated weekly calls with chairs. The deputy does the same with CODE, with directors of education. We've had the Premier, Dr. Pepper, Dr. Williams, Dr. Yaffe join systematically throughout the pandemic, starting back in the spring, and obviously, constant dialogue with all the partners involved, especially specifically related to the closing of the schools in March, and immediately pivoted—actually, in concurrence to the closure was

an effort to try to mitigate learning loss over that period, so quickly working in the context of building up capacity, expanding access for mental health supports, technology, Web capacity as well as the Learn at Home website, which was launched during that time. That was done all at the same time.

**Ms. Marit Stiles:** But just to be clear: The deputy minister just said that formal meetings didn't start happening until March break had already hit, so schools were already closed and those meetings weren't happening, really, until then—which is definitely reflective of what was being said among education stakeholders at the time.

The first new funding that we received notice of, that the public was aware of, was when the ministry made an announcement on June 18—so March, April—well, actually, January; let's say January, February, March, April, May, June, six months—of \$15 million to purchase technology and \$10 million to hire, as I recall, additional mental health workers. Let's just start there. How many devices were purchased with that money? My understanding was, what had happened was a lot of boards had moved devices out of schools; we all know that happened. What was purchased with that additional \$15 million that came about pretty much near the end of the school year?

**Hon. Stephen Lecce:** I'll defer to you in a moment, Deputy, but just so we're clear on the GSN: The school closure was in March. In June, the Grants for Student Needs was announced, with the per pupil funding up \$250 more per child. It represents a \$25.52-billion investment, which is a 3% increase year over year—\$736 million, just so we're clear, in the context of what the increase would be.

In the context of technology, in addition to the increase noted, we put in surge funding for mental health and technology, recognizing the needs for while children were at home. We estimate that investment of roughly \$15 million could procure in and around 30,000 devices. And that funding did flow to school boards rather promptly thereafter to enable that hiring.

Deputy?

**Ms. Nancy Naylor:** What I have is the estimate of how much technology is being purchased for this school year. It does encompass subsequent investments. I'm not sure that we can say exactly what was planned with the first \$15 million. But what we have learned from a recent Pulse survey is that school boards, for the 2020-21 school year, anticipate procuring 148,000 new devices, as well as close to 13,000 remote connectivity solutions in the form of Rocket sticks or hot phones or something like that.

**Ms. Marit Stiles:** Would any of those dollars that the boards are going to have to use to replace—because a lot of this, as I understand it, is replacing devices.

**The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns):** You have one minute left.

**Ms. Marit Stiles:** So devices have been moved into the hands of students who need them, in the community, in this emergency. But the issue now is, how do we replace those devices in schools? Would boards be using any of their reserve funds, for example, to cover any of that?

**Ms. Nancy Naylor:** There have been explicit investments from the government in technology, and so our expectation is that they are mostly using the dedicated technology funds. I think it's a mix. In some cases, they are purchasing additional devices to support learners in virtual or remote modes. They may be replacing some devices that didn't come back to them that we loaned out in the spring. But for the most part, boards reported good stewardship of those devices by students and their families, and they either kept them intentionally and with the board's agreement or they returned them as they were graduating or perhaps leaving the board.

**The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns):** I'm sorry to say you're out of time.

The minister now has 30 minutes for a reply.

Minister, the floor is yours.

**Hon. Stephen Lecce:** I am pleased to be here before the Standing Committee on Estimates with my colleagues from the Ministry of Education, as I said a bit earlier. It is a privilege to work with all of you.

A short while ago, I spoke about how education in Ontario has had to adapt safely and quickly to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic, and I explained the steps we've undertaken to ensure that school board staff and students are in school safely. Everything we are doing is to protect the health and safety of our students, our school board staff and our child care staff in all communities in the province. This is about helping to ensure a bright future and an excellent quality of life for all Ontarians.

There is nothing more important than the safety of our kids, and only together can we reduce the risk of COVID-19 in our communities and schools. A lot of planning and work has gone into ensuring that Ontario's school board staff and students headed back to school safely, because students will benefit from being in class. Our federal partners, working together to support safe and healthy schools in Ontario, have been a part of that solution.

So far, our government is making \$1.3 billion available in critical supports to ensure the safe reopening of our schools. Ontario's investment leads the nation in supporting priorities like more cleaning, physical distancing, testing and hiring of staff to ensure the safe reopening of our schools.

The investment by the federal government complements the already landmark investments made by our government to support safe and healthy schools in the province. The federal government investment provided \$381 million to Ontario, which will support several provincial priorities, which include:

- \$200 million dedicated to support our reopening plan implementation, including complementing our already robust plan by hiring additional custodians, supporting HVAC in schools, Internet connectivity for students, additional PPE and temporary hiring of educators as required;

- \$70 million dedicated to support student transportation, including the retention of the driver retention program, as well as funding to add additional routes, reduce the number of students on buses, as well as for enhanced health and safety measures within student transportation;

#### 1640

- \$12.5 million was dedicated to special education and mental health supports that will allow boards to hire and train additional staff and provide more supports for those students in need;

- \$12.5 million was also dedicated to create an additional 125 nursing positions within public health units across the province to help schools manage potential COVID-19 cases;

- \$36 million in remote learning supports to help school boards hire principals and administrative support to oversee remote learning in secondary and elementary virtual schools; and

- \$50 million was also dedicated in federal funding and was initially set aside for any future pandemic needs.

On October 5 of this year, we announced the allocation of \$35 million of this funding to provide additional immediate school board support in the communities of Peel, Toronto, York region and Ottawa, to enhance public health measures and protection strategies. The funding will be used to provide increased distancing through additional hiring and providing increased remote-learning supports for those boards.

Our front-line workers have been making a real difference in our lives since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, and they deserve our support and our recognition. We have always pledged to do whatever it takes to keep families safe, cared for and healthy. It's why our government funded emergency child care for front-line workers, at no cost to them, starting in March. And then in April, we expanded the list of essential workers eligible to receive emergency child care to help additional front-line staff during the COVID-19 pandemic. Our government issued an emergency order to offer support to those providing a variety of critical services, including people who assist vulnerable communities, emergency response and law enforcement sector staff or health safety workers and certain federal employees as well.

In the interim, as centres remained closed, the Ontario government protected the pocketbooks of parents by temporarily preventing child care centres from collecting payments from those parents. We ensured those child care spaces were also protected. Recognizing that child care is critical to supporting Ontario families, during the temporary closure and the reopening periods, provincial funding was available to all child care operators to ensure they remained financially sustainable and were able to reopen.

COVID-19 has imposed significant financial pressure on working parents, which is why we needed to support our parents facing reduced income or layoffs during the COVID-19 pandemic. We're also investing more in the child care and early years programs to ensure they're safe and they're accessible for working moms and dads.

We recently announced the continuation of a \$147-million investment through the renewed Canada-Ontario Early Learning and Child Care Agreement for the 2020-21 year. This funding will help licensed child care providers and EarlyON Child and Family Centres in Ontario. It will also continue to support initiatives outlined

in the initial three-year agreement, including increased access for families and professional development for our staff. Funding provided through the ELCC is in addition to the \$234.6 million being provided through the Safe Restart Agreement. This funding is helping with the cost of PPE, enhanced cleaning and additional staff to keep children and our child care staff safe, always. The agreement will ensure funding continues to flow so that child care remains available to parents as they return to work today and into the future.

We also recognize that parents deserve to know what we know, and in September, we launched a web page to report COVID-19 cases in schools and child care centres. The page is updated every weekday with the most up-to-date COVID-19 information available, including a summary of cases in schools and licensed child care centres and agencies, if a COVID-19 case is confirmed at school and where the numbers come from. All that is now, and has been, available to the public.

As Ontario's Minister of Education, I have also committed myself to modernizing Ontario's publicly funded education system to better serve students and parents. My goal, and indeed that of this government, is to ensure that students across the province have access to high-quality public education, and that we position this province as a global leader of modern and digital education. That's why our government's reopening plan for school boards includes recommendations on how remote learning options can be applied for the 2020-21 school year.

Over the course of the last several months, we have seen the world change rapidly, and our students need the ability to learn and thrive in a world increasingly disrupted by technology. Students need foundational skills, knowledge and competencies in digital literacy, for example, so that they can succeed in an increasingly competitive global landscape.

One of our long-term priorities is updating and modernizing the curriculum—what students are taught—to make sure it aligns with the latest research, the best practices and the industry standards.

In June, I issued a new math curriculum for grades 1 to 8—which was last revised in 2005. As you can imagine, a lot has changed in 15 years. Technology now plays a bigger role in our day-to-day lives, and there have never been more changes in our economy and the job market than there have been today. Jobs like app developers, 3-D designers, and drone operators just didn't exist in 2005, but now they are viable career options for today's students to consider. We know that these jobs, and others in engineering, health care, computer sciences, require proficiency with mathematical ideas and skills.

For over a decade, under the previous government, too many students have not been meeting Ontario's math standards, lacking everyday math, financial literacy and numeracy skills. We made a promise to parents that we would update the math curriculum so students can improve their grades and develop the skills they need for their future, in every field of pursuit. The analytical, problem-solving, critical-thinking, creative-thinking skills that students develop through their study of math are evidenced today.

This will help students develop their transferable skills to meet the demands of the changing economy around us. That's why our new elementary math curriculum is designed to help students meet those challenges and succeed beyond the classroom.

We are focusing on getting back to basics with our four-year math strategy, to ensure our students can succeed.

The new curriculum is helping students solve everyday math problems, enshrine financial literacy within the early grades, and better prepare students for today's marketplace and the jobs of tomorrow by ensuring every student in this province, Chair, knows how to code.

We will continue to champion numeracy, financial literacy and everyday problem-solving to equip the next generation of this province with the skills that they will need to succeed.

The way in which we access and consume information has also changed. To keep pace with this, my ministry launched the new curriculum and resource website where, for the first time, the curriculum and resources are available in an interactive and digital format for parents, educators and the public. This is the initial phase of the website, and it will become increasingly interactive over time with more context and features based on user feedback. The new site has drawn attention from around the world. On the day of launch, there were nearly 55,000 unique visitors from 65 countries. I encourage you to take a look at the new site; it is something I am proud of. It shows how our government is making strides towards modernizing access to Ontario's curriculum.

We have also helped broaden students' horizons and let them explore their career options by launching a revised career studies course last fall. Learning in this updated course supports students whether they choose an apprenticeship, a college, university or workplace pathway. It also includes a greater emphasis on growth industries, and is one step in our plan for Ontario to become a leading jurisdiction in STEM education. STEM fields are continuing to evolve and opportunities are expanding in areas such as manufacturing, energy, construction, transportation, agriculture and medicine. They're resulting in transformations in our society.

To ensure our students are ready for opportunities in STEM and the skilled trade fields, the ministry has begun looking at the elementary science and technology curriculum to modernize its learning. The ministry is pleased to be working with a number of researchers and educators in institutions related to STEM within the curriculum that will provide us with academic expertise and help inform our revisions.

We're also speaking directly with job creators to make sure their message and their perspective is reflected within the curriculum.

As we continue to contend with the challenges of COVID-19, I know Ontarians have been doing their best to adjust to our changing reality. That's why I am proud of the work that has been done to pass the COVID-19 Economic Recovery Act, to help rebuild the province and get people back to work. In Bill 197, my ministry included a

number of legislative amendments, such as changes to the Education Act, the Ontario Educational Communications Authority Act and the Ontario French-language Educational Communications Authority Act. Changes to these acts are helping Ontario emerge stronger and even more prosperous by providing equitable access to education and reducing red tape and administrative burden.

#### 1650

Related to these changes, in November, our ministry announced a plan to expand and to modernize online learning for students across this province. To support implementation, the ministry expanded the mandates of both TVO and TFO through Bill 197 by amending the Ontario Educational Communications Authority Act and the Ontario French-language Educational Communications Authority Act. We're providing both TVO and TFO with an expanded mandate to support centralized coordination for online learning in both publicly funded systems. This may include TVO and TFO developing new course content and establishing a centralized course catalogue to make it easier for students to find the courses they need. Together with TVO and TFO, our government will consult with our education partners to develop a plan that will ensure that the expanded mandate can support Ontario's transformation towards an education system that is more resilient and future-ready.

To support students having increased choice in high-quality online learning opportunities no matter where they live or go to school, we will work with education sector partners to ensure additional course content is available in the coming school year. Our goal was simple: We wanted students and parents to access the high-quality teacher-led online courses they need or wish to take, no matter where they live or go to school. These changes will help accomplish that. Through these new roles, TVO and TFO will be able to reduce barriers for students to obtain the courses that they need and they will want, and support Ontario's transformation towards an education system with online learning as a core strategy.

Our shared goal with our valued partners is an education system that is safer and more inclusive, and promotes success for every student. This means the ministry is committed to developing equitable educational programs for all students, including improving access to education for First Nation students.

The Reciprocal Education Approach was designed to prioritize First Nation student needs by supporting their choice to attend the school that best suits their learning requirements and helping them reach their educational goals. We heard from our First Nation partners that some changes were needed. For example, First Nation partners have expressed that the need for an enrolment notice—which can only be signed by a parent or a guardian—created an obstacle for students seeking to attend a school under the Reciprocal Education Approach, preventing access to a school for some First Nation students. As I've always said, no student should experience barriers to access to education. It's why we made amendments to the Education Act which will allow for a non-parent guardian

adult to provide that written notice. Our government has taken action with the amendments to the Education Act to reduce red tape and improve access to education for First Nation students in the province.

With respect to our provincial demonstration schools, we've taken additional action. My ministry recognizes that all students, including those with severe learning disabilities who were attending demonstration schools the previous year, were impacted by the ordered school closures stemming from COVID-19. That's why we also made changes to support students with severe learning disabilities who were impacted by school closures. I think of a new friend, Vikki Pike, a student at Trillium Demonstration School, who I've gotten to know throughout my time as Minister of Education, including the early days, soon after I was appointed. These real-life stories of their impact and of the incredible opportunities these schools provide have really motivated us to act.

We heard from parents and students and community members like Vikki, who were concerned about students in provincial schools, requesting the accommodation of additional returning students for the next year, given the impacts of COVID-19 in that year. The ministry held meetings with concerned stakeholders on this matter and listened to the community on how we can assure the safety, success and well-being of all those students with special needs. In Bill 197, the government amended the Education Act to permit ministry-operated demonstration school programs to be provided in both a residential setting and, for the first time, in a non-residential setting for the 2020-21 school year. This change allows demonstration schools to be able to serve both cohorts of students who are returning for a second year after a shortened 2019-20 school year and a new cohort of incoming first-year students.

Since I became Minister of Education, I've also been committed to promoting equity and driving real, transformational, systemic change in our school system so that students have opportunities to succeed, so that all students have an opportunity to reach their full potential. That's why, with respect to combatting systemic racism in our schools and school boards, many of these proposed amendments echo system-wide action to break down barriers facing Black, Indigenous and racialized children. This is necessary so that these students are better supported to succeed.

We know that because of systemic racism, discrimination and inequity in the education system, certain students, including Black, Indigenous and racialized students and students living in low-income households, are disproportionately enrolled in applied or locally developed compulsory courses. With that in mind, the ministry will phase out early streaming. We will begin with the development of a new grade 9 math course that will be aligned with the recently released grades 1 to 8 math curriculum. This course will be released for next September to support school boards to begin transitioning students to a destreamed grade 9 math curriculum.

The destreaming of the grade 9 math curriculum is the first step towards a potential further destreaming in other curriculum areas, which will better support all students in having every opportunity to pursue the pathway of their choice after their K-to-12 education. This is a significant move, because we know that students in applied and locally developed compulsory courses are over four times more likely not to graduate.

We also know that 33% of students who took grade 9 applied courses transitioned directly into college or university, compared to 73% of students who took the academic courses. Students benefit when they learn together with students of all abilities and all interests. That's why eliminating early streaming will give all students a better chance to be future-ready and prepared for any pathway that they choose. It's also why the ministry will engage with school boards to establish readiness to transition to a destreamed grade 9 math curriculum and to establish the supports needed to ensure that all students can be successful in the new grade 9 math course.

In addition to these changes, we're also doing more for Ontario's system to combat racism. Evidence shows that suspension and expulsion practices are vulnerable to racist and/or biased decision-making, which may contribute to an over-representation of students who are Black, Indigenous, male, LGBTQ2S, children in care, those with special education needs and those with disability. The ministry has taken steps to remove the discretionary power of principals to suspend children in kindergarten to grade 3. A new regulation came into effect in September, and principals can no longer suspend students for the activities set out in section 306 of the Education Act. This ensures that the youngest learners are not unnecessarily suspended for more minor behavioural incidents, while still maintaining the safety of our kids. Principals can continue to suspend students for serious incidents that are listed in section 310 of the Education Act.

Make no mistake: We will help educators and school boards with the training and the supports they need to transition from the use of suspensions in primary grades. For example, the ministry will support human rights, anti-racism and anti-discrimination training for principals, educators and trustees. We're developing a policy framework to guide boards to prevent and proactively address instances where the default position would have been for a principal to suspend a student. By replacing policies and practices that allow for systemic racism, discrimination and inequality to take place, our education system can better support Black, Indigenous and racialized students to succeed, and that is our aim.

The ministry is also exploring strategies to help ensure that directors of education, teachers and board staff reflect the diversity of their schools and have the training and resources to promote more equitable school environments. We will develop new training, resources and supports for educators, principals, senior staff and school-based mental health professionals early in 2021.

## 1700

Lastly, to ensure that students can feel accepted in discrimination-free classrooms, the government will provide clear expectations and processes for responding to remarks or behaviour of a racist nature within the education system. We are working with the Ontario College of Teachers to provide professional advice to teachers and school boards on compliance. To support educators, the ministry has also proposed additional anti-racism and anti-discrimination training before the end of the calendar year. Without question, all of these initiatives are bold and transformative steps towards a more inclusive education system.

Our government is fully committed to standing up for the students and parents who deserve the best, most qualified educators who reflect the community that they teach. Instead of seniority, teacher hiring in this province will be based on merit, diversity and the unique needs of schools and communities in the province. For too long, our newer, younger educators have been left behind, and they deserve opportunity for progression. Now, more than ever, this regulation is undermining the ability of principals to quickly hire qualified educators.

We will not defend the status quo in this province. We are taking action to restore hiring as a meritocracy that serves the students of Ontario. Our government is abolishing this unfair hiring practice, and by doing so, it will support school boards in hiring the best teacher to meet their local needs.

Our government is giving school boards more flexibility so that they can hire the best and most-qualified candidates, while ensuring that students can better see themselves reflected in the educator at the front of their class. Parents, trustees' associations, principals' councils and many voices have long called for this reform, and under our Premier and his leadership, we are delivering it.

We also know that Indigenous, Black and racialized communities demand accountability from our government on the implementation of equity-building strategies, which is why I can say today, unequivocally, that we are committed to working with all school boards to expedite and ensure more substantive and regularized demographic data collection at the board level. This will help to monitor the implementation and success of these initiatives. These transformative changes represent Ontario's early steps to enable our system to give all students equitable opportunity for academic achievement and help them graduate with the skills and the confidence they need to be successful on whatever path they may choose. Our shared goal is an education system that is safer and more inclusive, and that promotes success for every student in school, in life, in the workforce and beyond.

Likewise, our government is committed to protecting and promoting French-language and bilingual education in Ontario, now and well into the future. We want to ensure that all students who want it receive a high-quality French-language or French-as-a-second-language education. In fact, the rising enrolment and increased popularity of our

French-language and French-as-a-second-language programs, coupled with a long-standing national shortage of educators, underscores the need for action. It's why we're ensuring schools have access to more qualified French-language educators. It's also why I recently announced the province is supporting various initiatives, such as career fairs, as well as partnering with two working groups in order to address the recruitment and retention of teachers in the French-language school system—groups that the parliamentary assistant and I met with as recently as this morning to express our gratitude to boards, labour, all voices represented at the table working to fix this long-standing challenge plaguing French schools in the province.

In closing, I want to acknowledge that so much has changed over the past seven months. Collectively, students, families, communities and education partners—we've all risen to the challenge. Despite the many challenges, our shared goal continues to be building an Ontario education system which is fair and more inclusive and promotes success for every student. This includes an unwavering commitment to ensuring children and students have every opportunity to reach their full potential and achieve lifelong success. Our mission is to build a province where equality of opportunity is a reality, not an aspiration. That is a legacy that we can build together.

**The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns):** Thank you very much, Minister.

And with that, we'll go to 20-minute rotations between parties. We'll start with the opposition and then go to the government.

MPP Stiles.

**Ms. Marit Stiles:** I'm going to return a little later to some more questions related to the devices and the online learning.

I want to talk about another issue that has been of enormous concern and continues to be of great concern to families, to students, to educators. At the end of July, the Hospital for Sick Children said, "Smaller class sizes should be a priority strategy as it will aid in physical distancing and reduce potential spread from any index case."

Then we had the government, I think around July 30, announcing its safe reopening plan, which included just \$309 million in funding—again, we don't really know where that sits because we don't have that in the estimates—which did not include any commitment to class size reductions in elementary and only limited in some secondary, in hot spots.

I think it's fair to say that there was an enormous outcry around this plan. Some said that it was risking public safety. I know that at the time this came out, 65,000 parents had signed a petition, which was actually started by a constituent of mine, Kelly Iggers, a parent, demanding smaller class sizes as part of any return. That petition now has over 270,000 signatures.

The plan included about \$80 million to hire additional staff, as I see, but at the time, the province's largest school board, the TDSB, said it would need \$250 million alone to cover the cost of staff to ensure smaller class sizes of 15.

Back on June 19, when we look back to that time, I remember very clearly—and I was actually rewatching some of these press conferences today where the minister said that cohorting "of no more than 15" would be there in September. So I'm wondering if the minister can tell us what changed, because not only did class sizes in this province largely stay status quo—and I'll pre-empt the minister here, who is going to say, "Well, there are many smaller class sizes in some of our schools." Let's be honest: That's because those boards used their additional resources. They really fought hard to keep those numbers down in parts of this province and in parts of the city of Toronto where we had higher rates of infection.

We've also seen, which I think is telling, large numbers of people who have shown that they have families who have no confidence in the return to school, in the safe return to school, without those small class sizes, who are going online or in some cases sort of disappearing—they're unaccounted for—and when they leave, the classes are then collapsed. We see this again and again. I have, yet again, a slew of emails from parents from all across this province furious because students are leaving the classrooms. Parents have no confidence in this government's plan. And then, rather than remaining small, we're seeing those classes merged and collapsed, and this is causing more and more chaos in our classrooms.

So I go back: What was it that changed after June 19 that the minister decided that small class sizes and distance between our students—that class sizes of 15 was no longer in the plan?

**Hon. Stephen Lecce:** We asked school boards in the spring to prepare for three eventualities: for a full day-to-day conventional return with heightened health and safety protocols; an adapted model of 15, which as you know is imposed in high schools and communities with high risk, which have been—those adapted boards, boards that have been designed in conjunction with public health; and a remote option, should that be required province-wide.

To date, over 2,700 teachers have been hired in the province of Ontario, which is not insignificant—a pretty significant one-time influx of monies. Just to enumerate how that came about, we announced \$30 million originally in the COVID-19 reopening—

**Ms. Marit Stiles:** I appreciate that you want to go through all of this, but I really want to understand what changed in terms of that decision around the 15. In June, both the Premier and the minister were saying school class sizes of 15 is what they were looking at for September. I think I speak for parents all across this province in trying to understand what changed between then and July.

1710

**Hon. Stephen Lecce:** The proposal for March was for an adapted model—cohorts of 15, every other day of every other week—depending on how the boards implemented it. That approach was implemented in secondary schools in designated school boards, in high-risk boards, in the province of Ontario. It was not a choice by the board; it was an imposition by the ministry, because we recognized, according to the emerging evidence of the spring, which I

believe continues to be the case today, that transmission risk may be higher amongst older children. That was the basis for that decision point.

In the city of Toronto—where you noted an example, the parent and educator you had cited, and others we've heard from—TDSB, for example, had 366 teachers hired; yes, indeed, partially because of reserve funding, which we thought was important to unlock—federal funding and, no doubt, provincial funding. We have class averages well below the provincial average—not only in those communities that have the highest risk, as designated by Toronto District School Board and Toronto Public Health. The average in kindergarten is 18.6. The average in grades 1 to 3 is 17.3. The average in—

**Ms. Marit Stiles:** Minister, I'm sorry to interrupt, but we do have limited time here and I feel like you're meandering a little. I had a very specific question.

Something in the advice you were receiving changed. Suddenly, it wasn't just 15 in a class for all of our children, but it was just high school students in some parts of the province. Where we ended up, I would argue, probably has a whole lot more to do with the fact that there are a lot of children who actually left in-class learning; we know that.

Going back again: What were you told? Which experts told you to go back to status quo class sizes, during a pandemic, for most of our students in this province?

**Hon. Stephen Lecce:** To suggest class sizes are [inaudible] 18, 19, would just be false, according to the surveys presented by boards. That's just not the case.

**Ms. Marit Stiles:** But that's not what you're requiring of them; that's by default. The fact that boards have managed to get there is not because of any directive on the part of the ministry.

**Hon. Stephen Lecce:** No. Indeed, member, in our guidance to boards, we've asked for enhanced distancing, and the consequence of that is a reduction of pupils within classrooms to ensure distancing.

**Ms. Marit Stiles:** But you have veered away from the 15 in a class. I'm asking very specifically—honestly, I can't tell you how many people have asked me this question. I genuinely want to know what happened. Why was the advice so different? We had a subsequent report come out from SickKids after they looked at—they studied this and came back and said what educators had been telling everyone, which is, you can't possibly provide that kind of distance between students in a regular class unless you're at about 15. What changed? What advice did you receive, and from whom, that shifted this plan?

**Hon. Stephen Lecce:** We made a determination early in the pandemic to ensure that school boards are prepared for three eventualities. In June, we would not have known the risk in September. We obviously endeavoured—the adapted model, as suggested, that every-other-day blended model, every-other-week model, which is an important element to include in the question. Not just the quantum of children, but the every-other-day, every-other-week model was also part of that proposal. I think it's important to note that our aim—and I believe I was called upon by the opposition, as well. I think an increasing consensus amongst

civil society was to make sure kids could get to school every day if the data enables it, and—

**Ms. Marit Stiles:** What we asked for, if I may, Minister, was a safe return—

**Hon. Stephen Lecce:** I'm sorry, Chair, if I could just reply, I will defer back to the member. I'll try to be brief.

**The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns):** Please let the minister reply.

**Hon. Stephen Lecce:** Obviously, given the overwhelming consensus—the one consensus, perhaps, of the medical community was that children really ought to be in school, and I think that's a position held widely within the Legislature.

We endeavoured to do two things: one, because public health data over the course of the summer did not pose the same risks as they did when we had to close schools, according to the Chief Medical Officer of Health, we were able to allow students to go to school each day in elementary, in those designated models—and again, the every-other-day, 15-student cap in high school. The data and evidence which has been emerging throughout the pandemic—governments, societies are learning much more now than they did even three or six months ago. The emerging evidence was that older students can have a higher rate of transmission. We made a determination to cap those classes in designated school boards, to impose it on a variety of school boards where the critical population is, and we have allowed students to go back, day to day, to learning, with blended virtual and in-class. That is a strength supported by provincial funding that has allowed a new online learning system that did not exist in Ontario to be developed—

**Ms. Marit Stiles:** Minister, was this discussed at the so-called command table?

**Hon. Stephen Lecce:** It is not an abstraction, member; it is a group of dedicated public servants, including the Chief Medical Officer of Health—

**Ms. Marit Stiles:** And who sits on that command table?

**Hon. Stephen Lecce:** Minister Elliott has advised us that it is populated—there is a variety of tables including leaders like Dr. Yaffe, Dr. Williams, the Minister of Health—

**Ms. Marit Stiles:** Do you sit on the command table?

**Hon. Stephen Lecce:** I do not.

**Ms. Marit Stiles:** Are there any education experts at the command table?

**Ms. Nancy Naylor:** We're occasionally invited to either share information about the school system at the command table or at a number of tables that the Ministry of Health convenes, and occasionally invited to hear presentations there. We don't sit there as regular members—neither the minister, myself or anyone from the ministry. However, we do regularly join a number of committee meetings, including the public health measures table with medical officers of health from across the province, and the Ministry of Health has been very generous in offering us agenda time when we've needed advice or wanted advice from a range of public health experts.

**Ms. Marit Stiles:** When I sat in on a briefing with the Chief Medical Officer of Health and, I think, yourselves about a month ago, one of the things that the Chief Medical Officer of Health said when we asked questions about distancing between students and how it is possible to maintain two metres of distance between students in a classroom of, say, 28 or 30 students—the response we got was, “Oh, the teacher could divide the class into two groups within the classroom and somebody, an assistant, could come and help.” I thought, “Wow. That’s what we’re basing our decision on?” To me, that does not reflect the reality in any classroom I know. There are not spare assistants—whatever that is—floating around in our education system.

This is why I am so deeply concerned about what this decision was based on. I really would like to know—and perhaps you can come back to me with a list of people who you consulted with to get to this point, to reject this widely held recommendation, this widely held belief that 15 in a classroom was a better way to go. This government has been given many, many opportunities to change, to shift. Other things have shifted; I appreciate that. Why not this? Why not this one?

One other thing I want to add is—sorry, did you want to say something?

**Hon. Stephen Lecce:** Yes, if I may.

**Ms. Marit Stiles:** Go ahead.

**Hon. Stephen Lecce:** I just wanted to note that systematically through the past months, we have increased investment in unencumbered funding, unrestricted access to funding for school boards to do just that—\$100 million was provided in the summer, \$30 million provided in June, \$70 million for temporary hiring. At several times through the pandemic, we’ve made a determination to enable school boards—using their reserves; the feds, which we’re grateful for; and provincial money—to allow us to reduce those numbers. Just as a proof point of investment flowing, respectfully, 2,727 educators are employed today because of all governments coming together to invest in public education and to ensure that the kids are safe.

It is important to know what the chief medical officer and the SickKids report that you cited said very clearly: Distancing must be done in collaboration with other actions; in isolation, it will not be enough. It needs to be an all-of-the-above approach. We are taking that approach in the context of enhanced cleaning, of ventilation improvements, of, obviously, cohorting the kids and ensuring minimizing the contact. When you compare us to BC, for example, the indirect/direct contact of students is 120; in Ontario, it’s 100. We have worked right across the board, going above and beyond, working with our education partners to make sure that these kids remain safe. I am grateful for the work of our principals, our school boards, our public health, and the fact that this government decided to double public health nurses. These are all steps taken by government to help, and together, that is the basis for the chief medical officer’s endorsement. I cannot speak for him; I can just tell you his advice to us was to do all of the above, and in our plan, we do that.

1720

In fact, a unique element in our province is taking either considerable action or any action when you benchmark it to Ontario. I recognize the importance of the issue, and that’s why there are 2,700-plus more teachers, there are 256 more EAs, there are 470 more ECEs, there are 111 more mental health workers, there are over 1,200 more custodians—

**Ms. Marit Stiles:** And yet, Minister, if I may—

**Hon. Stephen Lecce:** These are not—

**Ms. Marit Stiles:** This is the only chance I have to ask these questions, so give me a moment.

Minister, we have reports daily of students who do not have a teacher yet, who have had occasional teachers in and out of their classrooms—students in French immersion classes who don’t have a French teacher. We know that has been a long-time issue; absolutely. But they don’t have a teacher who speaks French.

What is astonishing to those of us who have been watching this and trying to propose solutions to this government is that you waited. What was happening between January 25 and September to bring all of those people into our schools? Minister, if you’re going to say to me, “We’ve done all of these things,” I’m going to respond to you with, “It’s not enough,” and the proof is in the fact that we still have students with class sizes that are collapsing, bigger class sizes than they had when they broke in March; that we still have students who are working off their mobile phones and multiple students in a family working off the same device; that we still have schools without enough custodians and enough PPE. This is what we are hearing.

Now I have another question I would like to move on to.

**Hon. Stephen Lecce:** May I respond?

**Ms. Marit Stiles:** It’s related to your response, though?

**Hon. Stephen Lecce:** Yes, it is.

It’s not a series of actions that we’ve taken; it is a novel element. You had posed a question in the context of what we can do for some classes that don’t have teachers. I will accept that that’s an unacceptable reality for those parents. The question, if I may, is to ask for unanimity—

**The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns):** Three minutes left.

**Ms. Marit Stiles:** No, no. I don’t want you to ask me questions. That’s not what we’re here for.

Mr. Chair, please.

**Hon. Stephen Lecce:** Sorry, Chair, I’d like to respond with the answer to the question of how we’re helping to remedy the teacher shortage in the province of Ontario.

**Ms. Marit Stiles:** I didn’t ask that. I want to move on to another question. I have lots of questions about that, but I’d like to move on.

**The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns):** She does get to ask the questions; she doesn’t have to get an answer.

**Ms. Marit Stiles:** Thank you.

I want to go to the issue of nurses. You’ve told us a number of times the number of nurses who have been hired to date. I was talking to a bunch of parents in Simcoe North the other day, and also folks working in our schools,

including administrators, and what I'm hearing repeatedly is that nurses are not coming into schools, that there haven't been visits, that there is a lack of clarity about what these nurses are supposed to do. As we know, they are not employed by boards. So let's confirm that. They are employed by the public health units; correct? Can you tell us how many have actually been hired to date and what they're doing? Again, we're hearing from boards that they don't really know what these nurses are doing.

**Hon. Stephen Lecce:** Thank you for the question.

There are over 600 public health nurses working within our public health units in the province of Ontario. That more than doubles the capacity that existed, for example, last year, when there were roughly 460 public health nurse in the province, I believe. That has now more than doubled. We started with over 500 in September; we're now at over 600 today and well on track to 625. As you'll know, we funded 500, and then the federal allocation enabled an additional 125. We're well under way to complete the hiring.

In the context of the job description, as you noted rightfully, they're not my employees—although, to be fair, nor are most teachers in the province; they're of the boards. In this case, it's public health units. They are at the discretion of the public health leadership, often working in supporting training of our staff, which has been a critical value-add, especially as students get back in school; contract tracing within our schools; when needed, being deployed by public health within schools—and these are determinations made independently by the medical officer of that community, knowing where to triage and dedicate those staff, both on the ground and within their office, wherever it may be. They've been able to add great value to school boards, particularly to schools that have seen either transmission from the community in the school, outbreak etc. I met with them personally over the summer, before the school year, to learn from them and to understand how we can best enable their success. I express our gratitude on behalf of, I think, all parents for having more health practitioners within our schools. This is a unique differentiator in Ontario; there is not something like this that I'm aware of—

**The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns):** I'm sorry to say, with that, you're out of time.

We'll go to the government side. MPP Oosterhoff.

**Mr. Sam Oosterhoff:** Thank you to the minister for appearing before the committee today.

I want to also thank the team at the Ministry of Education for their work, not just today before the committee in speaking about so many of the initiatives that have been under way, but really over the last year, since the last time the estimates committee had the opportunity to go through the estimates for the education ministry. Of course, that year has been eventful, to put it mildly. Everyone is talking about how 2020 has been a year with many different surprises. I think the word that's used most often is “unprecedented,” when it comes to the realities of 2020.

I know, having seen first-hand, how quickly the Ministry of Education acted, as soon as this virus was seen

as a challenge, to become the first province of the provincial governments of Canada to shut down schools. We were very careful, and I know the minister was very careful, in making sure we took that virus seriously, and we held off, as well, on ending the school year, at least in class, due to the reality of the importance of education. I think that's an important piece to remember here.

Going back to the spring: I know the Ministry of Education instantly sprung into action working with partners at school boards, working with our federal counterparts, to make sure that we were preparing our education system for September—remembering, of course, that in March we didn't know what September was going to look like. That's one of the pieces of this process, as well. I'm going to ask the minister to speak about that, too. We tried to plan for every eventuality, both as a government and in all the ministries, but the reality is, especially in March and April, what September was going to look like, what October was going to look like was very, very difficult to predict.

I think we do have a bit more knowledge now of the virus and how it works. We have a bit more knowledge of how we can deal with that, also, within our education system.

I want to ask the minister if he could talk a little bit about the importance of working with our public health officials, as well as the investments that have been made that today we're going through at the estimates committee. As we know, significant investments in our public education system have been made already, prior to the pandemic. But what we've really seen is an incredible level of public investment from the ministry and from the government's substantial capital funding and substantial Safe Restart Agreement funding for school boards. And partnerships with provincial governments, public health agencies and with all our school boards are working on implementing the recommendations and guidelines in their local communities, recognizing the challenges of a pandemic that manifests itself differently, I would argue, in areas in the GTA versus even Niagara or in the north or in rural Ontario—so bridging some of those gaps between urban areas and suburban areas.

We hear the number \$1.3 billion bandied around a lot. It's a substantial form of investment, and I'm wondering if that could be broken down into more of its constituent parts, and if that funding could be described in more detail for the benefit of the committee before we move into further questions.

**Hon. Stephen Lecce:** Thank you very much for the question.

I'm definitely committed to ensuring that the school boards within the province of Ontario have the resources required. We took a targeted approach, making sure that the funding flows quickly and rapidly.

As I noted, of the \$1.3 billion, including \$900 million in provincial funding and utilizing the \$381 million in initial federal supports, to date the government has provided the following—and this just gives a bit of a summary of where that expenditure of provincial investment of roughly \$405 million went or is going as we speak.

1730

Some \$16 million was dedicated for procurement for medical and cloth masks for students and staff. As you will know, we provided a mask for all students in the province, and likewise PPE for our staff. With board direction, they're there to ensure that students who cannot afford a mask have one.

We provided an additional \$30 million for teacher staffing to support supervision, keeping classrooms small and other safety-related measures within schools.

As noted in the previous question on nurses, \$50 million was dedicated for 500 public health nurses within our schools, to support them and our public health leadership on the ground for testing, screening, contact-tracing and any mitigation strategies, as well as training.

There's over \$23 million to provide testing capacity to help keep schools safe; an additional \$79 million in funding to hire new custodians and purchase cleaning supplies for our schools; \$40 million to clean school buses; \$10 million for health and safety training for occasional teachers and casual education workers; \$10 million to support special education students in the classroom; an additional \$10 million to support mental health; \$50 million to support ventilation upgrades and purchases for classrooms; up to \$18 million to support boards in the administration of remote learning; an additional \$25-million investment in mental health and technology, including for mental health staff, resources and programs, and technology funding to support the procurement of devices to support their synchronous learning.

The government has also expanded financial flexibility for school boards to augment the health and safety of their reopening plans where they feel it's necessary, in consultation with local public health. That includes, as noted, that district school boards are allowed to incur an in-year deficit of up to 2% of their operating allocation; it was previously 1%. This will allow up to \$496 million to be used to support the safe reopening of schools across the province. Obviously, for those boards that did not have 2%, as was previously announced, we have ensured that money was provided—about \$11 million—to backstop those boards so that they get up to 2% of their operating allocation.

Then, finally, on the federal side, I'll just note briefly that the feds have kicked in an initial \$381 million for Ontario; \$200 million was announced that we dedicated in the province. We allocated the funding for reopening, implementation for health and safety measures, which was really a broader fund to support PPE, additional hiring of educators, things like that, giving boards discretion on where the needs are based on their own locality and the risk profile for COVID-19. So \$70 million was added for student transportation, which included the renewal of the driver retention program; \$12.5 million for special education and mental health supports; another \$12.5 million for additional public health units to support schools in managing potential COVID-19 cases—this is the additional nurses; \$36 million for remote learning, ensuring each school board that offers virtual learning has a dedicated

principal and administrative support; and \$50 million was set aside for future pandemic learning needs.

The \$381 million represents the first half of that allocation of \$763 million. The next allocation will be for January 2021. We're working with the federal government to make sure that those dollars flow as soon as possible.

**Mr. Sam Oosterhoff:** Thank you, Minister, for that response.

I'm wondering if you could go into some of the important areas that I've heard from constituents, who have heard different things, who have been following closely and want to do, obviously, what's best for their children—specifically, those families who are looking to send their children back to class. They had questions, especially in July and August, but also even in the spring. I think people forget just how much of a Herculean effort it was on behalf of the Ministry of Education—but really the boards at the ground level, who actioned ensuring that students were still able to access learning materials at home, that they were able to be supported, that they were able to continue that and finish their year. I know that didn't happen without a lot of investment, as well.

Here at the estimates committee, what we are talking about is, of course, those financial investments. Could we talk a little bit about some of the broadband infrastructure piece and some of the investments in, for example, iPads or tablets for those families, as well as the work that went into the Learn at Home program, in order to ensure that students had access to the resources they need at home?

**Hon. Stephen Lecce:** We understand, I think, right now, more than ever, the importance of access to technology and the Internet. Universalizing access to the Internet is critical from a competitiveness perspective—and our national productivity. The federal government has made a commitment to the CRTC, which is federal, to expand high-speed Internet access. Obviously, I join my provincial colleague Minister Scott in calling on the federal government to expedite delivery and get on with the business of connecting Canadians to the Net, given the economic imperative and, increasingly, the educational. We know how important this is. In the provincial budget, we've allocated over \$350 million to do that—a leveraging investment that's going to get the private sector to step up and support Internet expansion. Within the ministry, we have ensured that high schools are connected, and we are working very hard to ensure all elementary schools, what is the remainder of those that are not connected to the Internet, are connected by September 2021—part of our Internet and connectivity modernization plan.

In the context of technology, Chromebooks, iPads, things like this, we allocated a significant investment in June of about \$25 million to purchase computers both for class and remote learning. We announced \$18 million to bolster remote learning on August 13. This was to support virtual principals and administration. An additional \$36 million was allocated soon after to do more of that—essentially, hiring more virtual principals and administrative support for both high school and elementary and to really bolster that system that did not exist in Ontario. It was not

an option that was perhaps embraced by some within the Legislature or within certain stakeholders, but the reality is, it's what I think parents needed in this moment as an option, in lieu of having their children in class, because of the safety challenges, according to public health, in the spring. And it only underscores the importance of keeping that choice now in the pandemic for parents, and giving that choice to parents.

In the summer, we also worked with TVO and TFO to have 10 new online courses—five in French, five in English—available for September, and an additional five in French and five in English available for January 2021. That's going to help further support greater options of courses for students.

As was noted, over 200,000 devices were deployed. We've enhanced our technology investments and will continue to do that. We obviously are giving thought now, on a go-forward basis, on how to strengthen our IT infrastructure and support the fact that there are many more students utilizing online learning and some of them are participating in virtual schools. As a consequence, we want to make sure the system is robust and is sufficiently able to manage hundreds of thousands of kids who are participating in this type of learning and the online experience.

Finally, there was work, in partnership with Rogers and Apple and a variety of other businesses through Ontario Together and other portals—which were really leveraging the private sector, in some respects, to help us with the priorities of government, one of which included getting technology and getting it out the door as affordably as we can—low-cost, high-impact solutions. We were able to do that on a fairly ambitious basis to help well over 20,000 students, through that alone.

I appreciate, obviously, that we need to continue to support technology and Internet expansion. As noted, we are looking for additional ways to strengthen the IT infrastructure systems of school boards and just make sure that the system in place, the physical infrastructure, is able to take even more students online, should that be a choice of parents over the coming months.

**Mr. Sam Oosterhoff:** Minister, I'm wondering if you can also provide more context on the amount of increased funding that the Ministry of Education has been flowing through to school boards and to students in the classroom. At the end of the day, it's important that we recognize that students and families drive our education system. In every decision we make as a government, as a ministry, yourself as the minister, your staff and our partners at all levels, including in school boards and right down to educators in the classroom, we're all motivated by a desire to ensure that our students are given a world-class education system, that they are being kept safe and that they are being given all the opportunities that they need to succeed and to thrive, not just today, but into the future.

1740

I'm wondering if you could speak a little bit about that commitment through the lens of the investments made this year. This is a year when we have seen extremely challenging impacts when it comes to our economy and, as a

result, also in tax revenue and, of course, also in government revenue. That strains coffers, it strains government resources, and yet we've seen an unprecedented amount of investment through the Ministry of Education this year—significant funding, over a billion dollars allocated to school boards across the province.

I'm wondering if you could first go into the Grants for Student Needs and the increases in that particular portfolio, and talk a little bit about where that money is going. The Grants for Student Needs—not everyone is confident in what the allocation of that particular fund goes to. Could you speak about that and then some of the other areas of increased funding that we've seen from this government as a commitment to ensuring our students' safety and success into the future, today and tomorrow?

**Hon. Stephen Lecce:** Yes, the GSN, as announced in the spring, has increased by over \$736 million. That represents a 3% net increase year over year in expenditure. This is the largest—this is pretty much the vehicle funding largely for school boards in the province, and it makes up about 90% of revenues that they will use for both elementary and secondary students. So a significant increase in June, of which the per pupil funding is up an additional \$250 as of that point—it doesn't include any expenditure made thereafter—or a 2% increase on a per pupil basis year over year.

I would just note that there are new grants that we've announced; 10 of the 15 have actually increased our expenditure. Things like in the per pupil grant system—there has been a net change of \$719 million there alone. It's just over 6.5%, which is assisting school boards in the context of supporting children and obviously staffing, which is critical.

We have the School Foundation Grant, which has also gone up in the province. The Special Education Grant, which obviously supports children with exceptionalities in the province, is up \$61 million. The Language Grant is up \$38 million. The Indigenous Education Grant is \$6.5 million. I believe that represents the largest total allocation for First Nation education in the province.

There is the Learning Opportunities Grant, which has increased by about \$18.2 million; again, another proof point that funding is flowing. For mental health and the well-being grants, that is up \$25.6 million, or over 50% net increase—not insignificant, and it underscores the government's priority in June, earlier on in the closure period, although recognizing some months after March, but systematically increasing funding in mental health, which is critical. We've more than doubled it, writ large within the portfolio. We've added 50% through the GSN in June. In the summer, we announced an additional 30-million-odd dollars for special education and mental health to bolster that investment and to hire more supports—which we've seen proof points of more mental health workers, over 100 mental health workers, for example, being hired in the province of Ontario.

The Student Transportation Grant is up \$21 million. This increase is important given the stresses on boards of getting students to classrooms.

The school renewal allocation is up 3.2%, which is important. I think that's actually quite critical in making sure our schools remain—

**The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns):** One minute left.

**Hon. Stephen Lecce:** —in a sound space.

I would just note that the ministry continues, through the GSN, to look for innovative ways to deliver positive educational programming for students in Ontario, and I think the emphasis in the GSN very much on the new Support for Students Fund that's hiring more special education, more STEM education, more mental health, more Indigenous education—all these types of programs that I think are really meaningful to the student experience.

Also, I think what you'll note is that technology and mental health—they're all at the highest levels that the province has ever invested in Ontario history, and I think that really underscores the government's and the Premier's commitment to ensuring that our GSN and our investments writ large reflect the priorities of parents and students in the province of Ontario.

**The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns):** With that, Minister, we're done. We'll go to the opposition for our final, roughly 15, minutes.

**Ms. Marit Stiles:** In talking about some of the announcements that were made this summer—on August 13, the government announced that school boards would be allowed to borrow an additional \$244 million from their reserves, enabling total borrowing of up to \$496 million. We know, of course, that this money is already allocated for other purposes by boards. The chair of the Halton District School Board said of the plan, "It's robbing Peter to pay Paul."

Minister, the ministry is forcing school boards to run what amounts to operational deficits during this pandemic. How does the ministry expect school boards to pay back the funds that are borrowed from their own reserves?

**Hon. Stephen Lecce:** Well, I think these reserve funds were set aside, as was referred to by some school board chairs, as a rainy day fund. We believe, in a pandemic, in a recession, in a generational crisis that has affected all provinces, all countries and all peoples, that it was prudent to unlock funding, given that school boards themselves—some of whom had come forward saying, "Look, we want to utilize these dollars, because this is a priority in the midst of a pandemic." Perhaps nothing is more important than the health and safety of the children that we want to unlock this 500-million-odd dollars in funding for. So we have allowed them to incur that deficit. We have allowed them to unlock north of \$490 million. Many boards have done that, in their own judgment, and we believe, together, when you add up the reserve funding, the federal allocation, the provincial allocation, it is giving a significant influx of investments to the school board.

**Ms. Marit Stiles:** Let's just confirm, though: This is not new money. I find it interesting; it's about \$500 million of the one-point-whatever billion dollars that you keep quoting, but it's actually not new dollars. I think we should just confirm that.

**Hon. Stephen Lecce:** It's funding that is in the reserves that we believe should be used for this unprecedented pandemic.

**Ms. Marit Stiles:** When you say "rainy day fund," let's be clear: Boards have allocated these dollars. My question again is, what is the long-term impact going to be of this policy? Directing boards to use their own reserves—to be fair, boards asked to use those reserves because the government wasn't giving them enough, obviously. That's why they decided to dip into it, instead of putting up new money.

If the school boards are going to run deficits and dip into these funds that are there for important purposes, actually, are you going to put them under supervision? What is the long-term plan here to find that funding and to ensure that those boards are made whole?

**Hon. Stephen Lecce:** There is nothing more important in the middle of this pandemic than the health and safety of our students. These are tax dollars. Just so we're clear, it is a taxpayer's dollar being held in a reserve that is used for extraordinary circumstance. This meets the mark of that type of challenge. If this once-a-century pandemic that is coupled with a recession does not meet the standard of any reasonable voice to utilize that rainy day fund, that reserve fund, that contingency fund, then we have a very different definition of "extraordinary circumstance."

The province stepped up. Boards stepped up. The federal government stepped up. Together, we have the lowest classroom sizes. We have 2,700 more teachers, we have 1,100 more custodians, and we have an investment that by every measurement is the highest in the country. That doesn't happen by coincidence; it happens because we have thoughtfully utilized all dollars available to us. We have leveraged federal dollars and we have given the school boards the resources they need to do the important work, which is why we see classroom sizes down and boards in your community, in my community, in all of the communities that the members are representing—

**Ms. Marit Stiles:** Sorry, Minister, if I may—I think the minister is taking up a lot of time here that I could otherwise use to add a few more questions, because I have more.

Minister, you say that there is nothing more important, but yet you wouldn't come up with those dollars yourselves. To be fair, as I've mentioned previously, those are dollars that are already previously allocated, so somewhere along the line, you're going to have to come up with some way of helping cover boards—

**Hon. Stephen Lecce:** Member, there's \$2.2 billion—

**Ms. Marit Stiles:** So why did you only come up with \$309 million for reopening? If you knew that we needed more like \$1 billion, why not come up with that yourself?  
1750

**Hon. Stephen Lecce:** There's \$2.2 billion in reserves, of which \$1.5 billion is available that is not dedicated. I just want to correct the record, given your statement to the contrary. There's \$1.5 billion available.

The question, fundamentally, for decision-makers is, does this unprecedented challenge meet the standard of

utilizing those dollars? I would submit, member, that, yes, it does, keeping in mind—

**Ms. Marit Stiles:** I think the minister should go back to the boards and ask them what they were planning to spend those dollars on. I don't think anybody would argue that this isn't a priority. The question is why you continue to use this, I think, inappropriately to inflate your numbers, when it's actually false.

**Hon. Stephen Lecce:** These are tax dollars—

**Ms. Marit Stiles:** Minister, I want to ask you specifically about some HVAC money that you proposed. Back in that August 13 announcement, the government also announced \$50 million for improved ventilation and HVAC. I have to say, at the time, when the Premier was talking about how—I think it was actually a little later than that. The Premier started talking about how boards should spend all of this money in time for Thanksgiving, and that all the schools would have new HVAC, which was a preposterous commitment to make, to be fair. To me, it just indicated how little he understands about the size of our school system in Ontario and what it takes to actually address some of these issues. The minister will know that many of our schools are over 100 years old. Busting open a wall alone is going to—you're going to have asbestos in the air, and you're not going to tackle that solution for less than a million bucks.

Minister, as the Premier had committed, do all of our schools now have their ventilation issues solved and HVAC completed?

**Hon. Stephen Lecce:** School boards, as encouraged by the ministry, in the spring and summer reviewed their HVAC systems, triaged those—as you noted, some of the older schools in the system—with improvements, some of which got HVAC upgrades, some of which got HEPA filters, different decision points made by the local board on how to utilize the \$50 million the province allocated to optimize ventilation and air quality that obviously is very important. That includes upgrading current air filters to the highest possible MERV and increasing the frequency with which the filters are being replaced to ensure maximum airflow. That also ensures performing a recommission of current HVAC systems to optimize airflow and purchasing portable air filtration systems with high-efficiency particulate air filters, the HEPA filters, for classrooms that have limited air ventilation.

So we put that funding in place. We've asked school boards to get those dollars out as soon as humanly possible. That, of course, is not the only investment in HVAC. I think you will know, member, that the province meets the Auditor General's recommendation of 2.5%, over \$1.3 billion, in renewal funding every year that enables them to do this work as a matter of course. Obviously, I accept it is an imperative this year, most especially, hence why we allocated an additional \$50 million and then unrestricted \$100 million of federal dollars that could be used for air quality systems or partially used for air quality systems.

You also know the school condition improvement, the SCI, is a focused capital renewal program that's intended to revitalize and renew aged building components—

**Ms. Marit Stiles:** So, Minister, that this work is ongoing is, I assume, your answer. This work is ongoing; it hasn't all been completed.

**Hon. Stephen Lecce:** There's significant work done by school boards in the province to improve air ventilation in the oldest schools and schools without windows. Obviously, the direction to boards was to get those dollars out the door by Thanksgiving—

**Ms. Marit Stiles:** See, this is something I'd just like to comment on, Minister. I think what is so annoying to folks—myself, being a trustee, but for school boards—is this kind of unrealistic expectation. You put these things out there, like the Premier said, "We're going to get this in every school board," and you say to the school boards, "This is our expectation of you"—but the reality is very different on the ground. So you set boards up to fail. What we're seeing, and certainly what we're hearing from many, many students and teachers and others in our schools right now is that this continues to be a major issue for most of our students.

Minister, I'd like to move on, very quickly. I don't think I have much time left.

**The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns):** No, you don't.

**Ms. Marit Stiles:** A few minutes?

**The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns):** About five.

**Ms. Marit Stiles:** I'll start on this. As the school year approached and it became clear that the province wasn't going to be putting up any more funding, the federal government stepped in with a commitment of \$763 million. I'll just intervene here and say we know that half of that came in September and half of that is supposed to come in January.

Did the minister know that that funding was coming, and was that why the minister held back at the beginning of the summer on any major funding announcements?

**Hon. Stephen Lecce:** Well, I would just note that the province announced an expanded GSN with a higher per pupil investment, the highest Grants for Student Needs, in June, of over \$25 billion. We then announced an ancillary \$309 million over the course of the summer for the safe reopening of schools. It was supported by federal dollars. I did not have much advance notice on that investment. That would have been a discussion for the Council of the Federation.

**Ms. Marit Stiles:** So when did you know?

**Hon. Stephen Lecce:** I wouldn't recall the dates, but it was—

**Ms. Marit Stiles:** It seems like a big deal, though, to find out that the federal government was going to come up with almost \$800 million. I would think I would have made a note of that somewhere.

**Hon. Stephen Lecce:** Well, I made a note of the investment, which is why, member, the day the investment was announced, we were one of I think the few provinces that actually flowed the monies that day, with a memo that went to the sector to dedicate the funds and get them out the door. Subsequent to that, I've worked with the Premier to ensure the funding moves as quickly as humanly possible. I've also called in the Legislature for all parties

to agree for the feds to expedite the delivery of the next tranche—yes, as you noted, scheduled for January 2021—because I believe that boards should be able to have the latitude to utilize those dollars if they think they need to be spent in the current calendar year. It's the same fiscal year, after all.

So we have worked very hard to get the money out the door. We welcome the investment, and we look forward to allocating the next tranche on the first day that that funding can flow.

**Ms. Marit Stiles:** I want to get to one final point here; I'm going to explain why. The government told municipal transit agencies, particularly the TTC, that there were going to be conditions attached to the remaining two thirds of the \$2 billion in transit funding that came in through the Safe Restart Agreement. These conditions included things like willingness to hand over certain transit routes to Uber or other forms of microtransit—which obviously have nothing to do with fighting COVID-19 at all. Will the ministry be attaching conditions to the remaining half of the safe-return-to-school fund that has not yet been allocated? For example, are boards going to be required to draw down their reserves before they're given access to the remaining federal dollars?

**Hon. Stephen Lecce:** That was not the case with the first iteration of federal funding. In one case, we provided \$100 million largely unrestricted, but we provided tranches for some thematic areas—

**Ms. Marit Stiles:** No, I should be clear: I understand that, but what about this next tranche?

**Hon. Stephen Lecce:** I just wanted to, for the record, note that weeks ago when we had to go through this, we did not—and that action would inform the next tranche of federal investment. We want to give boards areas of focus, but we will provide them the latitude to put those dollars to work where it's going to really maximize safety and

improve the safety of the staff and of the kids within our schools.

**Ms. Marit Stiles:** You didn't really answer, though. Will there be any conditions attached to the dollars that are going to be—for example, are you going to require that boards, as I already asked, draw down on all of their reserves before they can access that funding?

**Hon. Stephen Lecce:** As I just said, we did not do that in the first round, and we'd be informed by what we have done in September for the next rounds, meaning we will provide an area of focus for where those dollars can flow and we will provide latitude to school boards to spend it, but we will urge them to get those dollars out the door, like we did with the federal dollars. That's actually why, member, on the day that the feds had made the announcement, we moved quickly and we worked in advance proactively to make sure that boards swiftly and immediately knew where they could spend those dollars. We worked hard with the feds to make sure the funding flowed as soon as possible.

**Ms. Marit Stiles:** I'm still not sure I got that confirmation I was looking for.

Anyway, in the ministry's press release around this time, a portion of the federal funding dollars was meant to go to the hiring of additional custodians. Can you tell me how many have actually been hired with that federal funding alone?

**Hon. Stephen Lecce:** Well, I believe we have well over 1,100 custodians hired—

**The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns):** I'm sorry to say, that's all the time we have available today.

The committee is now adjourned until October 28 at 3:30 p.m. The opposition has about five and a half minutes left.

*The committee adjourned at 1800.*

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