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

E-20

**Journal  
des débats  
(Hansard)**

E-20

**Standing Committee on  
Estimates**

Ministry of Education

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

Wednesday 28 October 2020

**Comité permanent des  
budgets des dépenses**

Ministère de l'Éducation

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

Mercredi 28 octobre 2020

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Chair: Peter Tabuns  
Clerk: Thushitha Kobikrishna

Président : Peter Tabuns  
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LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF ONTARIO

ASSEMBLÉE LÉGISLATIVE DE L'ONTARIO

## STANDING COMMITTEE ON ESTIMATES

## COMITÉ PERMANENT DES BUDGETS DES DÉPENSES

Wednesday 28 October 2020

Mercredi 28 octobre 2020

*The committee met at 1530 in room 151 and by video conference.*

### MINISTRY OF EDUCATION

**The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns):** Good afternoon, everyone. We're going to resume consideration of vote 1001 of the estimates of the Ministry of Education. There is now a total of two hours and 40 minutes remaining for the review of these estimates.

I would just note that in the room at present we have MPP Stiles, MPP Skelly and the minister, MPP Lecce. We've had people who are on Zoom check in, so I'm not going to repeat that.

Any questions before we start? There being none, when the committee last adjourned, the official opposition had five minutes and 46 seconds remaining in the rotation. MPP Stiles?

**Ms. Marit Stiles:** Thank you, Mr. Chair. Good afternoon. I'd like to start back at the beginning of my questions yesterday. The government committed to tabling the actual updated spending plan for the ministry, so I'm wondering if that's ready and if you can share that with us now.

**Ms. Nancy Naylor:** Thank you. My name is Nancy Naylor; I'm the Deputy Minister of Education. The estimates that are before the committee today represent the current estimates for the Ministry of Education that are approved by Treasury Board and the Ministry of Finance, and the ones that we are working with. We do acknowledge that they don't yet incorporate two key announcements that the government has made and committed to. One is the \$309 million that was made with the reopening announcement this summer; the second is the \$381 million that was provided by the federal government, which we anticipate will be flowed to the province of Ontario and into our estimates. However, we have made the commitment to school boards that those funds are in their hands. We are flowing them those funds. It's really a matter between our ministry and the approval mechanisms of the government, including Treasury Board and finance, and we expect that eventually our estimates will be updated to reflect those government commitments.

**Ms. Marit Stiles:** So again, just reiterating what I said yesterday, my understanding was that there was a commitment to provide that. This ends up being a bit of a shell game, because we need to know where the dollars are and how they're accounted for. The Legislature is the body

that gives the authority to spend this money, this is the committee that reviews and approves that, and we do not have the updated expenditures or estimates.

While I appreciate that it's \$309 million here and \$381 million there, again, we don't have it before us, and certainly some of those announcements were made some time ago, so I was hoping we could have a commitment from the government that we would see those submitted and presented here to this committee before anybody has to vote on it.

**Ms. Nancy Naylor:** Perhaps I could just add two other points: first, to acknowledge that the estimates that are before the committee are, as always, presented in the form of the fiscal year estimates; we have to transpose them to the school year, which is the form that we normally communicate them to school boards in. The other is that we want to acknowledge that the Minister of Finance has announced that he'll be sharing his budget on November 5, and we would defer to that budget to reflect any updated numbers that the government might wish to recognize at that time.

**Ms. Marit Stiles:** So from that I understand that we're not going to be receiving this. So we don't have updated expenditures or estimates to vote on. That's unfortunate, Mr. Chair. I'm going to move on, and maybe we can go back to that later. I would have liked to have an undertaking to have that presented. We always have this issue, but still, it makes it almost impossible for a committee like this to actually review and approve when we don't actually know what we're approving.

When we look at reopening schools, repairing schools, in the context of a pandemic, the physical state of the schools, I think, has become a major concern. We know that experts have been very clear that the ventilation systems in buildings are a major factor in managing the risk of COVID transmission, and we know our school building stock is woefully behind on HVAC repairs. We have windows that don't open in many schools etc.

Last year at estimates, we heard that the repair backlog had grown by \$400 million in the first year of your government, to \$16.3 billion. Can you tell us where it stands today? I just need a number. I'm going to ask you more questions about funding after that.

**Hon. Stephen Lecce:** I'll just advise the committee that earlier today, the Premier, the Minister of Infrastructure, the Minister of Long-Term Care, the Minister of Municipal Affairs and I announced an additional \$700 million for

the very purpose of ventilation as well as for other small retrofits under \$10 million dedicated to school boards, a one-time infusion of funding. It wouldn't be represented on the estimates, obviously, but it is a new investment that is most relevant to improving air quality, which is been something that has been—

**Ms. Marit Stiles:** Minister, if I may, I actually will give you lots of opportunities to talk about that, I promise—

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

**Ms. Marit Stiles:** I only have one minute left. I'd like to get the actual number for the capital repair backlog, which I believe last year Deputy Minister Naylor was able to provide.

**Ms. Nancy Naylor:** Thank you for the question. As of last year, we acknowledged that the repair backlog was assessed at \$16.3 billion. It continues to be \$16.3 billion in our assessment on a real estate base of \$55 billion.

**Ms. Marit Stiles:** Thank you. Can you confirm if the allocated amount for school renewal is still \$1.4 billion for 2021?

**Ms. Nancy Naylor:** Yes, it is.

**Ms. Marit Stiles:** I think I'm going to run out of time here, so I'm just going to—

**The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns):** You have 15 seconds.

**Ms. Marit Stiles:** Okay. Well, I am going to ask you after this, Minister, and you'll have a chance to talk a bit more about that announcement.

**The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns):** Okay. Before we go to the government, I just want to note that we've been joined by two other MPPs. I need them to identify themselves and note their locations. I have MPP Parsa.

**Mr. Michael Parsa:** Good afternoon, Chair. It's Michael Parsa and I am in Ontario.

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

**Mr. Sam Oosterhoff:** I'm in Ontario as well.

**The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns):** And you are MPP Oosterhoff.

**Mr. Sam Oosterhoff:** I am MPP Oosterhoff.

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

With that, we go to the government. MPP Skelly.

**Ms. Donna Skelly:** Thank you, Mr. Chair, and good afternoon, Minister. I will be asking you some questions about our government's efforts to provide expanded broadband service in Ontario, but just before we came to our side to ask questions, you started to talk about an announcement earlier today. Can I give you a few minutes, perhaps, to expand on that before I ask my question?

**Hon. Stephen Lecce:** I'd be pleased to do so. The federal government has a stream of funds that is allocated for small projects up to \$10 million, which need to be expended by December 31, 2021. Working with the Minister of Infrastructure, Laurie Scott, and the Premier, we've been able to dedicate a significant sum, \$700 million roughly of that \$1 billion, for schools, which I think is a pretty significant one-time infusion of capital, when we all know and, across party lines, recognize that our schools are in a state of disrepair, inherited from a former government, respectfully, that had let the deferred maintenance backlog increase year over year.

We will provide, very quickly, guidance to the sector to make sure that they can get projects under \$10 million. It could be for improving HVAC or air flow systems. It could be for retrofitting a classroom or a staff room. It could be for expanding child care. Whatever we can do incrementally—and I would argue \$700 million is not incremental; it's significant in helping to reduce that backlog. Anything we can do to improve the environmental conditions of our schools, given the emerging evidence that has suggested that is an overwhelming action that could be taken to reduce risk, we will do. The fact that, of this billion, we dedicated \$700 million of it underscores how the Premier and the broader government are prioritizing the safety of children and the staff within our schools.

**Ms. Donna Skelly:** Minister, when you were speaking earlier to the backlog and the billions of dollars, of course, that isn't from the past year; that is a cumulative amount over 15 years of neglect from the previous government. This \$700 million, as you said, will go towards chipping away at that. I'm so pleased to hear that you have announced that. I'm sure we'll hear more over the course of the next few days as we have an opportunity to chat with you.

I would like to go back to what I wanted to talk to you about. As you know—because you've been to my riding many times, talking about investments this government is making in some of our local schools, whether it's announcing a new school or money towards renovations—Hamilton's Flamorough–Glanbrook, the riding I represent, is a mix of rural and urban. While it has many delightful things I could spend the afternoon talking about, it also presents challenges, especially in the rural area, one of which is the inability to access reliable broadband. But you knew that. I know you recognized that when you were first appointed as minister, because you, almost immediately, put into effect plans to address the need for young people who were interested in perhaps utilizing an online educational tool—now, it's a necessary tool. You were putting in plans and steps to provide that service, but COVID even escalated that.

1540

Can you share with this committee all of the efforts that your ministry and our government have taken and have made to ensure that our students can access the type of online education that they require, especially in light of the COVID pandemic?

**Hon. Stephen Lecce:** I appreciate the question. Look, I think it's incumbent on government, in 2019-20, certainly, to look to technology as a way to augment and complement learning; and I would argue perhaps right across government, enterprise-wide, we have an opportunity to embrace that pivot.

I appreciate full well the impacts of COVID have been really tough on a lot of folks out there, and our students—perhaps especially our young people who, while they are resilient, probably have a lot of questions on why this is happening to them. But we believe technology can be transformative when it comes to universalizing access to education, and I think it can be particularly relevant when it comes to providing options for students.

As you alluded to, for many months over the past year, as we were going through a negotiation, we made the case as a government that providing options to students is a net strength. The determination of that negotiation concluded that two courses for every child, with an opt-out option for the children and parents, is a sound embrace of online learning and the course offerings that just didn't exist within many schools.

Having visited your riding, appreciating that it is an increasing suburban and rural community, sort of a beautiful blend of both—and I would draw some parallels to my own—I appreciate that in some of the schools, particularly the smaller schools, the more remote schools and the northern schools, course offerings are a dream where you get a whole list of diverse, specialized courses. We want to create access to that and help these kids, particularly in the context of embracing STEM courses as a form of learning.

So we took a decision, worked with TVO, with TFO, respecting minority rights, making sure that the systems are in place—five English, five French for this September; an additional five English, five French for January 2021. All of that has been important when it comes to providing options.

The first principle is you have to have Internet in your schools. We worked quickly to ensure all high schools, by today, had that Internet within school, which is important, and we are working very hard, to the extent humanly possible, trying to accelerate the delivery of every elementary school by next September, which is part of our broader Internet modernization.

The other point of it from an equity consideration is tablets. There are many kids out there, many families that may have a tablet, but they may not have three for all of their children, who have to use it sometimes at the same time. We were cognizant of that in June, when in the Grants for Student Needs, which was increased—the per-pupil funding was up, the overall GSN was up, north of \$25.5 billion. But what we did in that announcement was influx an additional \$15 million for technology, to procure tens of thousands of units. Over 200,000 are out supporting students, and we expect many more. In fact, we're aware of many boards utilizing provincial funds—in some cases, federal funds etc. [*inaudible*] their devices are on back order, so we actually expect to see many new devices entering within our schools in real time, now and in the coming weeks.

All of this is important to providing a standard of learning that is defensible, both in class and online.

The other aspect of it, if I may, is just in the context of the standard we set for online learning. For context, colleagues, there is not a province in the country that has the gold standard of online learning criteria set out of 75% live learning, synchronous Zoom-style learning. No province that I'm aware of paid for professional development of all educators before we started school. A component of our PD training, part of the three days that we have in the system, was on online learning, to ensure every educator is better able to provide learning through that medium.

I think what it underscores is a full government commitment to building the system up, a system that does not exist in Ontario, a system that was fundamentally opposed by a variety of segments, including, respectfully, members opposite. We believe an option is a strength, we believe standing up for parental rights to choose is important, and we also believe in giving the resources, which is why we provided—again, unique to Ontario; I'm not aware of other provinces that have funded virtual school development, to hire principals and administrative support to staff those virtual schools.

I can go on, I suppose, but what I can tell you is that there is a lot of work we are doing. I recognize fully there is more to do in this respect. I mean, we're in month 2 of a system that has never existed in Canada, so I appreciate the imperfections, I appreciate the growing pains. I appreciate we've got to keep stepping it up and challenging the system to do better for our kids.

We are offering something that is unique, and I am proud of it. I think if we continue to collaborate with our school boards, our front-line workers, we can really make this a gold standard that embraces the spirit of what parents want and what students deserve.

**Ms. Donna Skelly:** If I may, Minister, I would like to expand a little bit about what you just touched on. Of course, as a member of government, I was stunned, actually, at the level of opposition, even from the member opposite, prior to COVID at trying to provide any level of instruction to young people across Ontario when it comes to online learning. It was unbelievable the pushback that we received from the members opposite and from the official opposition just trying to give these opportunities to young students in Ontario.

Can you expand on why it is important for young students in Ontario to be given, as you call it, what we hope will be the gold standard of education when it comes to online learning?

**Hon. Stephen Lecce:** Thank you. I've had the benefit of speaking to many employers—non-profit, for-profit corporations, major charities and foundations—right across the workforce. The overwhelming message, if you ask them for a skills matrix, what the competence is they really want to see within the next generation of workers, imparted are some of the soft skills: EQ and some of those elements I think we build up through character and value-building within our public education system, led by our educators who lead by example. The other element that I often hear, particularly now, is the lack of technological fluency, the inability of a young person—you know, knowing the basics, but not really knowing the next level.

Part of it, to be fair, is not their fault; it's the system's fault. We are introducing next September a new grade 9 math curriculum. It took until 2021 in the province of Ontario to mandate coding for students. We are getting it right. The government has course-corrected. We're introducing it as young as grade 1, age-appropriate foundation competencies to build upon in grades 1 through 8. That's going to dramatically improve, I and job creators in the province would argue, the competitive advantage of our young people.

We still have a high youth unemployment rate. We still have a high debt-to-income rate for millennials. There is a problem, and I would submit: Is it every young person or is it the curriculum and the system? Do they need to be better aligned with the labour market needs of our province and our broader economy? I would argue it's the latter. So we are doing that.

Look, there is often an aversion to change. That is an often-told story in the context of government. When it comes to our students and the next generation of workers, I think it actually is a strength to look at innovation within the system. And I think parents want it. They embraced the changes to our math curriculum. They welcomed the fact that we have mandated coding, financial literacy. I think they like to see these types of progressive actions. Irrespective of if some do not like the change, at the end of the day, the benchmark for our actions is, is this going to help improve the life of a child, give them a better advantage, incentivize them to go to post-secondary and help them get a better-paid job? I would argue the answer is yes, yes and yes. That's the basis for why we acted.

**Ms. Donna Skelly:** Thank you. Let's hope that we can get co-operation and support this time from the official opposition.

Mr. Chair, I believe MPP Pettapiece—is MPP Pettapiece with us as well?

**The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns):** I don't have him registered, MPP Skelly.

**Ms. Donna Skelly:** Okay, then I'm going to turn this over to MPP McKenna.

1550

**The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns):** MPP McKenna? The floor is yours.

**Ms. Jane McKenna:** Thank you so much. Hello, Minister. I want to begin by thanking you for the many investments you've made, even before COVID-19, in mental health supports for our students. My constituent whom you know very well, Natalie Pierre, speaks very highly of you and your commitment to improving and increasing the mental health supports available for Ontario students in elementary and high schools. As you know, Minister, your compassion and action on behalf of her son, Mike, who sadly took his life two years ago when he was just 17 years old—your efforts have meant so much to Natalie and her husband, Paul, and their daughter.

I also want to acknowledge your parliamentary assistant, Sam Oosterhoff, who has always been available and accessible and has helped my office resolve numerous issues in support of local parents.

I wanted to talk about a few things first, Minister. In September 2019, when approval for the \$16-million expansion of Nelson High School in Burlington was winding its way through the bureaucracy, you took quick action to ensure that the Halton District School Board had the approvals they needed to proceed. You even took the time to call the director of education, Stuart Miller, to give him the good news.

On April 19, 2020, when the Halton District School Board raised concerns that COVID-19 could derail completion of the projects at Nelson High School and the

elementary school in Oakville North–Burlington, Minister, once again, you took quick action. As a result, by April 29, these local projects and school construction projects across Ontario were able to resume. You took quick action again to speak with the local director of education.

On July 29, you visited the YMCA child care and early learning centre at St. Mark elementary school in Burlington and met with the CEO of our local YMCA, Jim Commerford. Jim certainly expressed to you then how much he appreciated your support, Minister, to ensure the safe reopening of the child care and early learning centre.

More recently, on September 4, you partnered with myself and two of my constituents to share their stories of the importance of mental health. Minister of Education, your level of engagement and willingness to always go above and beyond is certainly well noted and much appreciated by our local boards and early learning centres here in Halton.

For many young people, these times are incredibly trying. Kids are not able to be with their friends, classmates and even family members. Countless students have struggled with the isolation and the extreme level of change that has occurred in their lives. What efforts are being made to help students in this incredibly trying time to keep up their mental health and promote healthy development?

**Hon. Stephen Lecce:** Thank you very much for the question and for your advocacy for mental health. I remember well meeting Ms. Pierre at CAMH when we announced the doubling of mental health funding on World Mental Health Day. I will forever remember her story and the sadness that came with the adversity and pain of losing a child. I can't begin to imagine what that is like. But obviously she is simply one of many others, unfortunately, who have faced that trauma and that difficulty—

**The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns):** Minister, I'm very sorry. If you could raise your voice or pull the mike closer.

**Hon. Stephen Lecce:** Sadly, she is one of many parents who have had to deal with that trauma. I think why it was most helpful to get to know her a bit is the humanizing element of just how this impacts everyday people of all walks of life, incomes, geographies, ethno-cultural backgrounds and family make-ups. Mental health, obviously, has no border and does not discriminate.

This has been a big issue for us, I think, writ large. I would submit during the pandemic the focus has been wellness, full stop. Obviously, we are concerned about learning gaps and quality pedagogy. We care deeply about these children's learning. That's why we beefed up the summer learning program to the highest level ever in provincial history.

But we also recognize that the question is, what is the fundamental priority of education right now? I would argue that it's making sure, from a mental health and wellness perspective—and safety, obviously, from COVID. That remains the most pressing emphasis of government, school boards and, of course, our front-line staff. That is what we're doing. It's why we moved quickly to not impose the EQAO tests for grades 3 and 6, for example,

and we removed the literacy requirement for graduation, just to reduce the pressure associated with assessment.

We also increased the training. As you know, every year we have three days of professional development, PA days, for staff. We dedicated at the front end—we moved them early—a component of that training to mental health, because we acknowledged before school started that the isolation, the impact will be dramatic on students, and obviously more acute for some than others. So we did better training and fulsome training of every staff member, out of all educators in Ontario.

Then we expanded the mental health supports. In June, earlier on, when we didn't really have a full sense then of the full impact of what we're feeling now, we made a judgment call to increase mental health investment. We put \$10 million, and then we systematically increased it to now over \$30 million in mental health and special ed monies, which were supported, in part, by the feds.

What it underscores is that we have more than doubled the mental health portfolio in the last seven or eight months as we dealt with the pandemic. It underscores a real commitment that we're making to improve the safety of children—

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

**Hon. Stephen Lecce:** —and make sure that their mental health is a priority. That has also allowed us to hire new psychologists and psychotherapists, social workers and other therapists in the province that are providing real value and real support within our schools.

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

I want to take this gap to note that MPP Pettapiece has joined us. So that you are formally part of this meeting, MPP, would you please identify yourself and indicate where you are?

**Mr. Randy Pettapiece:** MPP Pettapiece. I am in Ontario.

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

We have about 20 seconds left. MPP McKenna, did you have anything further to ask?

**Ms. Jane McKenna:** Yes. I'll just quickly say, Minister, that Natalie said to me that you, without a doubt, have touched her heart and soul forever. She wanted me to say that to you today because she knew I was on this committee. It's one thing that you've been an unbelievable minister, working collaboratively with two million children in school and 100,000 teachers, but it's another to have one of my constituents, who was brought to tears today, say, "Please tell him he's not only a minister, he's real, and he has touched my heart and soul forever." So thank you very, very much.

**The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns):** Thank you, MPP McKenna. With that, we're out of time for the government. We now go to the opposition. MPP Begum.

**Ms. Doly Begum:** Hello, Minister. Hi, everyone. Good afternoon.

Last week was early childhood educators appreciation week, so as the critic for early learning and child care, I want to start off today by first thanking our ECEs, as well

as our child care workers, as well as our parents across the province, who have been putting in an incredible amount of effort to get through these tough times. This pandemic, I think, has highlighted even more so how important child care is for families in this province and for the physical and mental health growth of our children, as well as the economy. So I want to thank all of the folks in our child care sector.

I also want to thank the minister as well as the deputy minister and the full team we have here today for answering my questions. I have a lot of questions, and I know I have a very short amount of time, so I would appreciate some clear and concise answers today.

Last year when we were doing estimates, we saw a reduction of about \$94 million to capital expenses. Adding that to the \$154 million cuts that the government made—a total of \$250 million cut to child care funding. On the other hand, we saw the government spending about \$390 million on the CARE credit. From the Auditor General's report, there were about 300 families, or 0.1% of families, that would receive the CARE credit.

Now that we're in the midst of a pandemic, I would like to look at the numbers that we have in this estimates. It looks like we are spending significantly less than last year's actuals for this year while we're in the middle of a pandemic.

I would like for the minister to give me an idea of what his priorities are and why there is a cut in our child care budget in the middle of a pandemic.

**1600**

**Hon. Stephen Lecce:** Thank you very much. It's good to join you as well. I want to echo, as I did in the House, our recognition of our ECEs, who have been working hard right through the pandemic and, to be fair, including providing emergency child care at the worst of this time, really, going back to the spring. So I echo your position, and I express gratitude.

I'm going to turn it over to Mr. Graham, who I believe is on the line with us. He'll be able to provide a breakdown of those data points.

**Ms. Nancy Naylor:** I'm going to ask our assistant deputy minister for child care and early years division, Phil Graham—and he is on the phone, from his home office. Perhaps, Phil, I could ask you to respond to the questions.

**Mr. Phil Graham:** Sure. Thank you. My name is Phil Graham. I'm the assistant deputy minister for early years and child care at the Ministry of Education. Thank you for the question.

The government is looking at investing \$2.2 billion in early years and child care. The breakdown of this includes about \$1.8 billion for supporting our early years and child care sector through base operating dollars for wage enhancement for early childhood educators as well as child care subsidies for families. It also includes, as noted, the investment in the Ontario child care tax credit for families as well as direct operating expenditures. This does include a variance from last year whereby the planned reduction in administrative funding for municipal service

managers has been reversed. The variance identified in the estimates is about a \$72-million increase to reflect the adjustment of the planned administrative efficiencies and the reinstatement of those dollars to ensure that our municipal partners who administer and plan for early years and child care could adjust to the realities of the COVID pandemic.

In addition to that allocation, through an agreement with the federal government for a safe restart, there's an additional \$234 million that has been flowing to child care operators to support their needs as they relate to personal protective equipment, staffing, enhanced cleaning, disinfecting and other associated costs.

**Hon. Stephen Lecce:** I think she's trying to speak; she just is muted.

**Ms. Doly Begum:** Thank you. I was trying to unmute.

When I'm looking at the FAO report, it looks like there is an increase of only about 0.4% in the budget outlook in child care. So to me, that is a little alarming, because we are looking at additional costs. So I'll just go straight to that. I have a lot of questions, so I would really appreciate if you have brief answers for me. First, how many child care centres are closed currently? Do we have the exact number? Just a number.

**Hon. Stephen Lecce:** What I do know—and I'll turn it back to my colleague—is that around 94% and rising of child care centres are open in the province of Ontario as of, I believe, last week, and that number continues to rise week over week.

**Ms. Doly Begum:** Okay. So from the numbers that we have received, it looks like there are over 250 child care centres that have closed in our province. My next question is, how many child care centres have permanently closed because of the pandemic and have had to shut their doors because they couldn't keep up with their expenses since March?

**Hon. Stephen Lecce:** I'll turn it back to my colleague.

**Mr. Phil Graham:** Thank you, Minister. Phil Graham, assistant deputy minister, early years and child care.

There are 40 child care centres that are currently closed.

The tracking of permanent closures is an ongoing challenge, because there are several fluctuations in the child care sector. New child care centres open. We are actually increasing—we have seen a year-over-year increase in the number of child care centres that have opened. Then there are unfortunate closures, and these are due to a variety of reasons. We know through our work with the sector that the majority of closures due to COVID are temporary and are based on the advice and direction from local public health. With permanent closures, it is always difficult to track whether or not the root cause of that is COVID or other reasons related to financial sustainability, staffing and other things like that, but as of today, we do have 40 centres that are closed and, again, reopenings are happening daily, with one reopened as of today, as well.

**Ms. Doly Begum:** Thank you for that. Across the province, we're seeing a lot of centres closed. I actually have some media reports showing that it's about 125, so

I'm curious to see some sort of numbers or, I guess, some sort of analysis for how we are finding out which centres are closing. I do appreciate that it is difficult to track across the province. The reason that a lot of these centres are closing, that a lot of spaces are being lost, is because of the trouble they have keeping up with the costs.

My next question is how much money—and I do want to clarify how much money that is new, that's not including the federal investment—did the province actually provide to support child care centres? I do want to say that this is new money that the province is providing, and not the federal announcement.

**Hon. Stephen Lecce:** I'll just start, and then I'll turn it back. First off, in the context of child care centres, we have approved through the pandemic over 1,770 new child care spaces for approval. We've also funded through our capital round well over 1,000 net new child care spaces, which will obviously be built over the coming period. That's just an important note: That was happening during the pandemic.

In the context of funding, my colleague just mentioned the fact that the feds and the province teamed up in a partnership of \$236 million. I do think it would be imprudent to try to decouple the fact that the governments of the province and the country are working together. We extended the Canada provincial bilateral agreement by an additional year with Minister Ahmed Hussen to provide stability to the sector, and that represents over \$230 million.

**Ms. Marit Stiles:** Point of order: I think the member's question was quite clear. The member had a very specific question, and the minister is just sort of avoiding that. Can we move on, so that we get that answer to the question?

**The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns):** Well, it's up to the member to carry that forward.

**Ms. Doly Begum:** I will. We're having a difficult time, I think, understanding what the actual investment is from the province. We have heard the same numbers from the federal government over and over again. In terms of future investment plans to ensure that we don't lose any more quality programs in the pandemic, is there any future spending that will be happening from the province?

**Hon. Stephen Lecce:** Yes. Literally hours ago, we announced a \$700-million net new investment to support schools and child care. Those funds—

**Ms. Doly Begum:** Respectfully, Minister: Is this from the federal funding that's coming in, or is this the province that's actually investing?

**Hon. Stephen Lecce:** Well, again, in the agreement announced today, it's a provincial-federal agreement. I can acknowledge the federal government is part of that, a major role of that, and we're grateful for their investment. But the point, if you're an end user, if you're a child care centre operator or a parent, is that they are getting more funding access to \$700 million for schools and child care to expand, to retrofit, to improve air quality, all of which is a significant investment that will be realized between effectively today, if you will, until December 31, 2021, when the projects must be spent, when the projects must

be completed according to the federal criteria that they've set out for this, the green fund, which is a federal program administered by the province—and there's a cost-sharing component with the province, in fact.

**Ms. Doly Begum:** Thank you. I think that was actually a clear answer: It is the federal funding.

I'll go into the way that the funding has been disbursed. I've heard from so many centres that they have experienced long delays in receiving funding for PPE, additional staffing, cleaning and all the other expenses associated with COVID-19, as promised by the province. When can we expect this basic health and safety funding to be delivered to the centres?

1610

**Hon. Stephen Lecce:** I'll turn it over to the deputy in a second. We took significant action earlier on to ensure that the integrity of the supply chain remained intact, especially at the beginning, to our emergency child care centres, those designated to provide emergency child care, those that stepped forward and were approved by local public health.

The continuity of access to PPE continues today. In fact, in our schools and in our child care, we're seeing literally tens of millions of PPE flowing. We continue to monitor this because we appreciate, like you, that for staff, it is critical.

In September, when we had changed the cohorting—we expanded it to pre-pandemic ratios, in effect—we actually instituted another requirement for workers to wear a mask and a shield, all of which is being provided, and the funding is being backstopped by us.

I'll permit the deputy, maybe, to build upon some of the PPE elements that we've delivered for these centres across the province.

**Ms. Doly Begum:** I'll just add right in the middle, actually, before I go to the deputy minister, that some of the child care operators are going into bankruptcy. They're actually closing their doors. We have lost quite a few centres; like I mentioned before, about 250 centres. So it's very critical that a lot of these centres receive the funding as soon as possible, or should have already received that funding.

In terms of the impact that it's having on our province, on families and on our economy, I cannot emphasize this enough: If we lose the amount of child care spaces that we're already lacking in, this is going to have a devastating impact on our economy.

Actually, I'll ask my next question before we go to the deputy minister, which is, in terms of the regulatory changes that you mentioned, I do want to ask about some of the ratio changes and how you're conducting the current consultations per se for the regulatory changes. What is the method being used and how are you making sure that child care centres across the province as well as ECEs are able to put their input in for this survey? This is for the regulatory changes that are being proposed.

**Hon. Stephen Lecce:** Yes, in July we announced the start of a review of the Child Care and Early Years Act, which is the launch of two online surveys on our website

to date. We're asking the sector, we're asking workers, we're asking operators to participate, to have a voice.

This is important. Part of it is a statutory requirement to ensure we're reviewing the act, I believe, every five years to make sure that it really reflects the requirements and the needs of the labour market and of parents. But in the context of what else we're doing above and beyond sort of normative consultation, really working with district managers and municipalities and going above and beyond just to make sure that every perspective is heard, including the parents, we've launched a public website. We're encouraged by the many participants who have brought forth proposals and concepts so far.

Deputy?

**Ms. Nancy Naylor:** I'll ask Phil Graham to speak to the regulatory question, the consultations and the regulations.

**Mr. Phil Graham:** Thank you, Deputy. Phil Graham, assistant deputy minister, early years and child care.

There has been quite a range of stakeholder engagements and partner engagements as we look to modernize early years and child care in the province through proposing important regulatory changes. It is important to note that these are proposals at this point; they are regulatory changes that have been proposed and posted for comment and feedback.

Leading up to the development of those regulations, there was extensive consultation with and feedback from the sector, including those working in the sector, like early childhood educators. We had over 11,000 responses to a family survey that was issued and over 4,000 responses to a sector survey that was issued. We also undertook targeted engagement sessions with key partners and received just over 50 formal submissions with ideas and feedback that really formed the basis behind those regulatory proposals.

As the posting period is currently under way, we are undertaking conversations and discussions with key partners, including the College of Early Childhood Educators as one example, to gather their feedback, to answer questions and to help them understand the context within which those regulatory proposals were made. The feedback is coming in quite frequently. We're learning a lot through those engagement sessions. We expect to learn a lot more as the formal feedback from the regulatory postings come in, and those will form the basis for ultimate recommendations to the government around final regulatory changes to be made.

**Ms. Doly Begum:** Thank you, Mr. Graham. Can you tell me, since you already have some surveys, what was the basis for the proposal to increase the ratio, especially in terms of adding infants and toddlers in the same space as well as increasing the ratio to that?

**Mr. Phil Graham:** Thank you for the question. Sorry, Minister—

**Hon. Stephen Lecce:** No, you can proceed. I'll build upon anything at the end.

**Mr. Phil Graham:** Okay, thank you. Thanks for the question. The feedback that formed the basis—

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

**Mr. Phil Graham:**—behind this regulatory proposal and others was really about flexibility and choice, both for families and service providers; a recognition that a one-size-fits-all model for early years and child care does not necessarily meet the needs of families and the different working environments that they're in and the different child care needs that they have. So offering a different model that could be offered under the regulatory regime to provide that flexibility both for families and for providers to deliver child care differently in a manner that does not compromise in any way the health and safety of our kids and the quality of programming was the basis behind that particular and other proposed regulatory changes.

**Ms. Doly Begum:** There is an extensive amount of research—and I do appreciate that response, because we do need more child care. But, in essence, all the research for the past decades, as well as the previous attempts by previous governments to do just that, exactly that—we have an enormous amount of research in terms of quality child care, the safety of children. Some of these regulations were put in place for the safety of children because children actually died in some centres, some places, because the ratio was too large. Frankly speaking, it's scary to have such young children—babies, we're talking about—with a small amount of staff.

I think it's a matter of caution to really look at proposals like this because a lot of educators, a lot of advocates, a lot of folks who have been doing research on the ground on this exact—

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

We go to the government now. MPP Pettapiece?

**Mr. Randy Pettapiece:** Yes, thank you, Chair, and thank you, Minister, and your staff for being here today. This is a great conversation, and certainly I appreciate your openness and what your answers have been.

Minister, I do also want to give my appreciation for the daycare and the daycare centres and the money that we've had flowing to my riding in Perth–Wellington. It has certainly helped us out quite a bit, and I do appreciate having that money here. I guess my question is going to be about something else right now.

Minister, as you know, I grew up in an agricultural environment, and I tend to relate things to agriculture a lot of the time when we're dealing with some of these matters. Certainly, COVID got me to thinking about a lot of things that the agriculture industry has done to make sure that we have a safe food supply, and animal farmers disinfecting their barns is one of them. You may know that you can't get into one of these barns, for the most part, unless you shower in, shower out. They will supply clothing for you to go into these barns to make sure that you're not bringing disease in and that you don't spread anything to their animals. This is part of their biosecurity methods. They've been doing this for years. As I look at COVID, we're kind of in that right now. In fact, we are in that right now.

I'm thankful to all the efforts that the students and their families are doing to help stop the spread of COVID-19. Minister, I specifically would like to ask you about custodians. These hard-working members of every school in

the province have been essential to having schools remain open. Would you, sir, please share with the committee the efforts undertaken by the government to assist custodians to protect students, their faculties and their facilities?

1620

**Hon. Stephen Lecce:** Thank you very much for the question. I fondly recall your questions and analogies at the last estimates, so I was excited for this one.

Our custodians, these are women and men who, in many respects—I draw parallels to our bus drivers. They're unsung heroes. They work very hard. They do not complain. They love their kids. They work hard. They go above and beyond. We should give them the shout-out and the recognition they deserve.

Throughout the pandemic, we have increased investment for the cleaning of schools—over \$100 million, net new, for buses and for schools. Specifically in the context of hiring new custodians, we have realized, I believe, just over 1,200 net new custodians hired to date—1,285—and there are more being hired. In some cases, there could be shortages that have affected some boards, but overwhelmingly, we were able to hire more of these front-line workers in our schools.

We have also ensured better training of all staff in the context of how they can be part of the solution of reducing transmission, reducing the risk—constant points of contact being cleaned. A different approach we took in schools and in child care was to declutter the rooms, change the environmental reality of these rooms, often taking out certain toys or items that just weren't essential and perhaps could only compound the transmission. So we followed public health advice in this respect.

We also ensured a supply chain from the Ministry of Government and Consumer Services. I'm very grateful to the minister and her team for working closely with ours to make sure that those cleaning supplies, disinfectant, hand sanitizer, soap—you name it, they're getting it. We really pride ourselves on having a supply chain centralized within the ministry, providing literally millions of pieces of PPE every month to all school boards and school authorities in the province of Ontario.

I recognize that this is fundamental to the safety of schools, and we're very grateful. In fact, just before school started, I was able to go out to Durham and meet with some of the custodians, the new generation of custodians who were being hired and trained, to express the gratitude that I think I can share on behalf of all of us for the important work they're doing, this year more than ever in the past.

**Mr. Randy Pettapiece:** Thank you, Minister. That's a great response. I think that we're certainly learning lessons as we go concerning this terrible virus. You're doing a great job at managing the system as best you can.

I believe my colleague MPP Kusendova has some questions right now, Chair.

**The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns):** MPP Kusendova?

**Ms. Natalia Kusendova:** Yes, good afternoon. Can you hear me?

**The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns):** Yes, we can.

**Ms. Natalia Kusendova:** Good afternoon, Minister. Good afternoon, colleagues. First of all, I would really like

to thank the minister as well as PA Oosterhoff for their leadership, especially during this time of the COVID-19 pandemic. I truly believe that we are leading the country with the most comprehensive and fully funded back-to-school plan, and I've been hearing a lot of great feedback from parents and educators alike that our plan is working.

Today, the topic of discussion that's top of mind is child care spaces, for both members of the opposition and ourselves. Child care is essential to allowing parents to go back to work. I would like to thank you, Minister, for coming to my riding—we recently did a tour of the Edenrose child care and daycare centre when they were getting ready to welcome students back—as well as for the huge investment that we made in my riding of Mississauga Centre back in August of \$15.8 million. We're actually building a brand new elementary school in Mississauga Centre which will also include 73 new child care spaces, which will be placed in four child care rooms, as well as one EarlyON Child and Family Centre room. This is a brand new investment, and I'm very, very excited to get the shovels in the ground. But we know, Minister, especially during the time of COVID-19, many Ontario families rely on child care, but parents want to know that when they send their children to child care, that they are safe. Can you elaborate a little bit about what our government is doing to maintain safety in our child care spaces?

**Hon. Stephen Lecce:** Thank you very much for the question. I obviously celebrate with you the important school being developed in Mississauga Centre in a growing community. I know a lot of vertical growth is being realized, and I appreciate your leadership for your community and your advocacy for families across Peel region.

Look, I mean, child care perhaps couldn't be more important in some respects, because we often hear a legitimate phenomenon of this pandemic having an acute impact on women and on working people. I think the fact that there has been over 1,700 net new child care spaces that have been approved over the course of this pandemic, the fact that last year we had well over, I believe, 16,000 net new spaces opened—I do not give credit to government. I think we create the conditions for that, but ultimately independent child care operators, non-profits etc., stepped forward and were incented to open up more spaces.

Today, as per the question by one of our colleagues in the opposition, "critical mass" is putting it gently, but roughly 94% of child care centres are reopened, notwithstanding the dramatic economic impact of this recession on non-profits and on for-profits. The fact that they are opening, they have trust in the guidance and they have the financial resources to stabilize them, especially during the earlier parts of the pandemic—a decrease in capacity, a decrease in usership—I think really underscores the systems are working well to get our child care spaces back online.

And I joined the Premier last week to announce another round of capital. Schools often get the priority or get the

main headline, but let's not forget that the expansion of our child care in both capital rounds within one calendar year—two fiscal years—we announced two rounds of capital to expand child care within schools and that, again, is going to help. These are institutional, often, affordable, and they're accessible in urban and rural communities across the province, if I'm not mistaken, including in Mississauga Centre. So I know that it's going to make a difference.

I also appreciate that this is not the end. This is really the beginning, as we start to build capacity over the coming weeks and months and working with the sector, including with many regulatory changes they have been calling for from non-profit child care operators to further strengthen their ability to compete and, ultimately, to deliver safe, affordable child care for children right across the province.

**Ms. Natalia Kusendova:** Thank you, Minister. My next question is on one of my most favourite subjects, which is on francophone education in the province of Ontario. I was pleased to have you on Franco-Ontarian Day in my office. We had a round table discussion with some of our leading educators and the two school boards, the francophone school boards. They actually had some great suggestions for you that day. And we learned a French word. I wonder if you remember it, which word we learned that day in French. Do you remember, Minister?

**Hon. Stephen Lecce:** I—

**Ms. Natalia Kusendova:** It was "pénurie," which means a shortage. As you know, this is something that the francophone community was advocating for years about, the great shortage of francophone teachers that we have in the province of Ontario. I was so pleased that, literally a few days later, you have announced a comprehensive plan to address this shortfall. Can you maybe share with this committee the plan for addressing the shortfall of francophone teachers in the province of Ontario?

**Hon. Stephen Lecce:** Absolutely. First off, let's just recognize that we're doing something very special when it comes to delivering francophone education in this province. We have a constitutional obligation. We're proud of linguistic duality, proud to work very closely with the Minister of Francophone Affairs, with you in your advocacy, the parliamentary assistant and others who care about this and who want to make sure that, for the over 600,000 Ontarians who proudly consider themselves Franco-Ontarians, we have that heritage and linguistic capacity that their children are able to get a very high standard of education in both languages, in this case in French.

We have very high standards. I mean, we have the highest success rates. Over 90% of students graduate after four years, very high data points back from parents on the experience from students of varying age, and very talented educators. I've dropped into many Zooms, if you will—with, of course, the boards' consent to join and to listen and to see how dynamic these educators have been—in both languages, but I've seen it most especially amongst our French-language educators. It's really an amazing

interface of technology and the live experience, so I'm very impressed with them and I'm grateful for their work.  
**1630**

Now, in the context of your question, we just launched, supported by the parliamentary assistant, who took great leadership in this respect, the development of a task force, if you will, of labour partners: school boards, advocates, everyone who has skin in the game, who has now, for well over a decade, been acutely aware of the problem that no government has been able to solve, which is a national decade-long shortage of French teachers. Now, we also are challenged in part because of poaching from some of our other provinces taking our talent, and other jurisdictions around the world, but the bottom line is that we have, for the first time, brought together every critical voice, including our federation partners, at the table. It was an agreement coming out of our negotiation.

That committee has met. I met with them, with the parliamentary assistant, just a day or two ago to personally affirm my commitment as minister—yes, during the pandemic—to continue to focus on building a plan and unveiling and actually implementing the plan to attract and to retain talented French-language educators. It is not fair for a student to not have access to that type of learning experience. So we're going to work hard. We've been working with the federal government in some respects, as well as colleagues in the Francophonie—consuls general and ambassadors—to see how we can work together on bilateral agreements to get more of that talent into our schools.

We've taken an all-of-the-above approach—and I want to just express gratitude to you, as well, for facilitating that dialogue, because many of those concepts either are being actioned or are already under way, both of which are important, because obviously, for a parent within one of these schools, they want to see results.

**Ms. Natalia Kusendova:** Thank you very much. As someone who graduated from the French extended system, I'm really excited to see that we will be educating and hiring more Francophone-speaking teachers in Ontario. I also know that PA Oosterhoff attended the AGM of the Assemblée de la francophonie de l'Ontario, so I know that your ministry is working and forging new relationships with this community.

But now, I would like to shift gears to maybe something sadder of a topic, and that is the topic of systemic racism. In my home, in my own backyard here in the region of Peel, we have had great challenges when it comes to the Peel District School Board and anti-Black racism. The report that has been commissioned, I read it back to back. It was chilling to the bone, some of the recounts of what was happening right here at home in the region of Peel. So again, I would like to thank you for your leadership, because you took swift action to address this, and I know that the community was very grateful for everything that you have done. Can you elaborate a little bit on this?

I know that in our recent legislation in July, which supports Ontario's marginalized students, you are taking concrete action to combat racism of all kinds, and

specifically anti-Black racism in our schools. I know that in the region of Peel, for example, our partners in policing, the Peel police, have recently signed a memorandum with the Human Rights Commission to address systemic racism in policing. Can you please elaborate on what the ministry is doing to combat anti-Black racism not just in the region of Peel, but across Ontario?

**Hon. Stephen Lecce:** Thank you. Look, this is a matter of personal priority to me. Earlier on in my time as minister, my aim was to meet with different affected groups within the system. When I met with, in Mississauga, young students, racialized students, Black students in this instance; when I met an older sister whose mother faced this type of discrimination within Ontario public education, and the child now faces this system—and now she graduated in this actual, real story, and her younger sister, I believe really early in elementary school, is now progressing—intergenerational racism.

It's not a comment on party. I think we all, in the abstract, aspire to root it out, but we now need to act. We're very cognizant of the problem. In Peel District School Board, for the first time in Ontario history, we placed a board under supervision for non-financial reasons. If that doesn't send a signal to directors, to chairs, to board management that we will unequivocally and unapologetically move in to counter this type of experience and this type of unacceptable behaviour, then—I think it probably had the effect as was intended, which is to say to everyone in the system that we've got to do better.

Now, in the context of the Ministry of Education, the Peel report, as commissioned, outlined some very egregious data points that you commented on, one of which is the over-representation of Black children in kindergarten who were suspended when you benchmark it against non-Black children—disproportionality in the data, sometimes three times that of non-Black children. In the context of streaming, we saw the disproportionality of Black children streamed into applied.

The question is, fundamentally—and you look at the educators. In the Peel report, it also makes a comment on the lack of diversity of merited educators. Now, we've taken action in each and every area knowing fully that there's more we must do. This is long-standing, and it must be a full commitment met with action, continuously.

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

**Hon. Stephen Lecce:** But the fact is, in each of those areas we took decisive action to end discretionary suspensions for this September, as in, last month, to end the streaming of children in grade 9—the only province in Canada to do it, one of the only provinces within the OECD to do it that young. That has been eliminated effective next September when we unveil our new grade 9 math curriculum. That is an important start.

Also, tomorrow, regulation 274 will no longer be a regulation in this province. It will be reverted to history where it belongs, because it really was regressive. It undermined the ability of principals to hire qualified diverse candidates, which we need more of. In fact, in Peel, I believe the report suggested schools have north of

55% racialized students and less than 25% racialized staff. That is a problem, and we took action to help incrementally fix it, to arm our principals with the latitude they need to bring in the right leaders to better reflect their communities.

Something that doesn't really get spoken about a lot but that I think is important is part of the challenge is also with our trustees. Overwhelmingly, they're hard-working, decent people, parents, but, look, there have been challenges. There are many examples, including in the Ottawa district school board, where I had to condemn a trustee for targeting a young Black man, a student, because of her bad behaviour, not his. So there's a problem there. We need to do better in training. I've negotiated with all four trustees' associations a unanimous agreement to implement annual anti-discrimination, anti-racism training for all trustees in the province of Ontario.

Finally, we ensured our professional development days, of which there are three, have dedicated time for anti-racism for all educators in Ontario—

**The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns):** I'm sorry, Minister, you're out of time. Thank you so much. We go to the official opposition. MPP Begum.

**Ms. Doly Begum:** It's interesting listening to the government members, and I would appreciate and welcome the minister to visit me in my riding and visit some of the child care centres, because they're going through a tough time, and parents as well. Parents across the province are struggling financially due to the pandemic, yet, Ontario we know still has the highest child care fees. We're not leading in the child care sector; we actually are one of the worst.

We need and expect parents to keep their children home during this time when they're sick. Yet, for days that parents are keeping their children at home, that children are absent, families are actually being charged fees because, without this revenue, centres would close.

My question is—I want to share, actually, a quote I have from a parent who recently wrote this in the Ottawa Citizen, parent Annie McEwen, who wrote, "Last month alone, runny-nose absences cost us more than \$1,000 in fees for days not attended." And yet, "Our beloved child care centre would not survive without consistent income."

Minister, why, in the middle of a pandemic, are parents being punished financially for keeping their children home when they're ill? And what are your government's plans to support parents and child care centres with sufficient, immediate—and I mean immediate—and sustained funding?

1640

**Hon. Stephen Lecce:** Thank you very much. I do accept that child care remains out of reach for many parents in Ontario, and I also acknowledge that when we came to power two years ago, or when we were given the privilege to serve the people of Ontario, we inherited the most expensive child care system in the country. That is a matter of fact, and I appreciate that during a year or two, that will not change—but increments will make it more affordable, more accessible, both from an institutional perspective and supporting the choice of parents.

In the pandemic, we announced an initiative of support for parents which was money set aside for all children, representing over roughly about \$145 million of investment directly into the pockets of parents because we recognize for all young children that there are incremental costs being borne on working parents in Ontario.

That's one initiative amongst many that the government has taken, but within my ministry, as noted within the numbers before you in our estimates, \$145 million was expended to just shy of supporting over 880,000 children, if I'm not mistaken, or 825,000 children, so a significant investment in that respect.

Now, also during the pandemic you will know that up until September 1 we denied the operator from charging the parent, the client if you will, for costs given that there was a service not being rendered during the closure period for many of these.

Very much in the consumer's interest, it's a consumer protection initiative we took action on because we recognize, I think quite obviously, that if you're not using the service, you probably ought not to be paying for it. We took that initiative as a government because we wanted to protect parents from automatic withdrawals of monies that they couldn't potentially afford and, inevitably, many of them could not.

We did that, and we backstopped the operator to make them whole by increasing our supports of operating dollars through the pandemic systematically, not with just federal dollars: our own dollars at the beginning when there were no federal dollars at the time, and then of course the feds constructively came along and built up those supports for child care nationally and for education nationally.

I will just say in the context of the future, obviously there's a budget in November. I will just note that we are constantly, as a government, focused on efforts to make life affordable for parents in the province of Ontario. I can just say that culturally in the last budget and throughout we have brought in relief for parents. Now we have twice under my ministry within one calendar year put monies back directly in the pockets of parents. One, to be fair, was an initiative because of the costs borne of strikes as imposed by various strikes taken by teachers' unions, but as well—

**Ms. Doly Begum:** I do appreciate the numbers you're giving me, but I'm giving you an example here, Minister. I do appreciate all the amounts that you're giving me, but when I'm looking at the child care programs, for example, as well as the amount of funding that has been given out, there are centres that have closed. There are parents who have been charged without having their children in these spaces. These are real stories and they're not getting the supports. I have said this in the past: It's mind-boggling as to how much money is going in and yet there are real stories of a lot of centres, a lot of parents who are struggling because they're not able to get this funding.

Child care programs are now trying to plan for the future and provide consistent and clear information to families. So when you're talking about these numbers, I would appreciate if you could be a little bit more clear in

terms of how that's being spent. In the province just now—and I believe we talked a few minutes ago about the way the money is being dispersed. The province is just now reconciling the March 15 to June period and municipalities still don't know what funding they can confirm for programs for this period. The July and August period, if I understand correctly, will not be reconciled until either November or December.

I'm sure you're aware of the child care programs and how they're holding on by a thread. My question is, when will the ministry provide some sort of assurance to child care programs, as well as parents, as to what money or what funding they will be receiving for the closures and the reopening periods, and what can municipalities and child care centres expect in terms of confirmation for their allocations for 2020? And we're almost done the year.

**Hon. Stephen Lecce:** Starting September 1, child care EarlyON funding to service system managers resumes their pre-COVID levels and is pro-rated based on the original 2020 allocation. This is in addition to the announcement made with the federal government, in partnership with them, of \$234.6 million to help keep children and staff safe in these child care centres. The funding from the Safe Restart Agreement, also in partnership with the federal government, is a significant influx of funding to help with enhanced cleaning, PPE and other supports required to make sure that they remain competitive through the system.

What you will note is in the emergency child care, we made it free for the end user and we paid for it for the operator. When we expanded cohorts incrementally, we provided more funding. We did that again and again, and of course, in September, we announced an extension of the Canada federal bilateral agreement, which gives more predictability to a sector that's facing, as many employers are, a great sense of disruption. I think that is going to help demonstrate to the employer, to the operator, to the worker that we're going to be there for them.

**Ms. Doly Begum:** And I appreciate that, Minister, but I'm asking for a timeline.

**Hon. Stephen Lecce:** A timeline of the expenditure of dollars?

**Ms. Doly Begum:** Yes, because there are centres that have yet to receive funding for even PPE. So I'm asking for a timeline as to when they can actually get their funding.

**Hon. Stephen Lecce:** Well, I'd respectfully note that child care centres working through their district service managers are getting funding. I would just respectfully refute a premise that there is a child care centre now, eight months later, that has not received monies or PPE from government, should they be eligible. If there are examples of that, then I would like you, outside of the committee, to raise them with me and I will follow up, because that is unfair to those centres. I'm not aware of any, because we have worked so hard, our officials have worked hard, working with municipalities to get those dollars out the door.

But I will turn to Phil Graham, who may have some additional context on the dispersion and when those

dollars have moved out the door at each point through the pandemic.

**Mr. Phil Graham:** Thank you, Minister. Phil Graham, assistant deputy minister, early years and child care. Thank you for the question.

As the minister pointed out, funding has continued to flow over the course of this year. It has been a different year, as the member would appreciate, just in terms of the demands placed on child care operators and the municipal partners who helped to plan and provide that funding directly.

The funding has continued to be provided, both during the emergency child care period and, as well, during the closure period. During that closure period, funding continued to acknowledge that many child care operators do have fixed costs, and even despite being closed, they were incurring those costs. As noted, the funding through the federal restart agreement has been helping to support additional costs related to cleaning, staffing and personal protective equipment, and we have recently communicated with our municipal partners increased flexibility in the use of those federal dollars to support COVID-related costs.

We are certainly working to confirm future-year allocation, to the question about early information to help with planning. Decisions on that are expected shortly.

**Ms. Doly Begum:** Thank you for that. I'm still unclear as to the timeline for what I was asking in terms of the fact that funding for March 15 to June is being disbursed right now, and I'm unsure of what's going to happen for folks from July to August. I think having a clear understanding of how the municipalities are getting that funding—if we could get a copy of that, that would be greatly appreciated so that we can communicate with the centres that are reaching out to us. If we could get that, Chair, I would like to ask for that.

Also, my next question that I want to ask—I've got so many questions and so little time. I received a letter from a child care operator in Peterborough. I want to actually quote this: "Our educators are working hard cleaning, screening, donning PPE, and all the regular duties of an ECE. They're heroes. They go above and beyond to keep children, families and colleagues safe and healthy, and yet, they are receiving no increase in pay. They do it because they have heart. They believe that children are worth it."

My question to the ministry is, when will the Ministry of Education step up and provide additional funds to compensate these educators for the extraordinary amount of work that they are doing on behalf of children and families?

1650

**Hon. Stephen Lecce:** Thank you for the question. I do appreciate the hard work that they do.

During the pandemic, we made a determination to permit eligible child care operators to reapply for the wage enhancement, which will help in part. I acknowledge, member, that is in itself not going to, perhaps, solve the challenge, but it's going to help, and I think what it demonstrates is we're trying to incentivise the retention of

those folks who are working hard and are critical to our economic recovery, as you noted, to stay within the sector. I think that, at the very least, underscores the respect we have and the commitment we have to providing them with a competitive wage, providing them an enhancement, in this instance, for those who are eligible, in addition to PPE and training and all the other ancillary elements that can make them feel safe, which I think also are very important to the decision that individual may make to stay in a place of work. You want to make sure that they are supported, that they have access to training and PPE and, likewise, that they are working in spaces that are safe. We can say in our child care centres across the province that that is the case. There has been strong compliance with the public health guidelines that have been implemented within our centres, going back to, essentially, March. We are grateful for their work.

**Ms. Doly Begum:** I appreciate you recognizing them. As much as we appreciate them, I think it's also necessary to recognize them through real benefits and pay that they deserve. I'm sure you would agree with me on that. Child care workers are some of the underpaid workers—mainly women workers—across our province.

It's also important for me to point out that a lot of the ECEs have been temporarily laid off because the centres—you mentioned 94%, although we have various different numbers that we're receiving—a lot of ECEs are temporarily laid off because centres are not fully functioning because of COVID and, obviously, because they're not able to keep up with the lack of funding they have.

Before I pass on to my colleague Marit Stiles, MPP for Davenport, I want to also say that we are getting a lot of concerns from parents who are getting charged, as I have mentioned, but not receiving an answer from the ministry. This is happening to a lot of families, and I would like the minister to look into this, in terms of concerns that families are sending in for getting charged for their kids not attending child care.

**Hon. Stephen Lecce:** Yes, just so I'm clear on the question, a post-September 1 example where a parent decided not to utilize the service of child care, and therefore, either having the choice of losing the space or paying for the space, even if the child is physically not in the place of care. I just want to be clear: Is that the question?

**Ms. Doly Begum:** Yes, and for some cases, they are getting charged in these situations, and the ministry has made some inconsistent responses to your announcement.

**Hon. Stephen Lecce:** So effective April 9, we put in place an emergency order that denied child care operators the ability to charge parents for a service not rendered. Overwhelmingly, many parents were not using child care in April or May—some were, but most were not, statistically. Therefore, we thought it would be unfair. So we provided a backstop of funding, time limited, to ensure that the operators aren't closing—we don't want that; we want to make sure that they remain whole or at least competitive, so we backstopped increased operating supports, then did a variety of actions that helped them get

through the worst of it when there was very little demand, to be quite frank—

**Ms. Doly Begum:** So we have cases right now—I apologize for interrupting, respectfully. We have cases right now where parents have reached out, who are getting charged despite what you're saying—it's quite contrary in terms of what the announcement was—and the ministry has ruled that the parents are obligated to pay. They're in a very difficult situation.

What I will do is I can pass these concerns, again, to the ministry and find out if we can get some clear response regarding this, because a lot of parents are getting charged—and rightfully so in terms of centres having a difficult time keeping up with their revenues because they're not—

**Hon. Stephen Lecce:** Yes. So we're clear, as of September 1, the emergency order was in place to deny operators from charging that fee; as of September 1, that was rescinded. Obviously, we're cognisant that—we want to make sure that child care operators are able to sustain in the absence of parents making a decision point, which I appreciate—in the heated moments and weeks of April, May and June, it was a tough decision. But come September, the solvency of these operators was very much at stake, so we said to them, “Look, by that date, we will relinquish, or revoke, that requirement.” But we will continue to provide funding to the operator to make sure they remain sustainable and find ways to make child care affordable for the parent. I think there's a variety of ways we can do that and we will do that over the coming months.

**Ms. Doly Begum:** Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Minister.

**The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns):** Thank you. With that, MPP Stiles, the floor is yours.

**Ms. Marit Stiles:** So we established yesterday that the minister was first briefed on COVID-19 around January 25. Today, we heard that the capital repair backlog is at \$16.3 billion. There has been no dent in it. I think it's fair to say it was a bit of a lost opportunity. Everything was shut down, people were saying this would be a good opportunity to get some of this work done, boost the economy—nothing happened. I think there are many who suspect that the government was trying to save some money in that period and that now what we're doing is seeing the government try to catch up a little bit.

Notwithstanding the announcement about an hour ago, what it looks like to me is that the amount allocated for school repairs is about the same as last year. My colleague, I appreciate, did try to get an answer from the government about the \$700 million that was announced today and what percentage of that was federal dollars. I had suspected it was 80-20, which would leave the provincial contribution at about \$140 million. We gave the minister lots of opportunity to respond; he clearly did not want to provide that information, so I'm going to move on.

I'm going to talk about capital funding to build new schools. The government recently re-announced its capital funding plan and has started to inform boards about

approvals and has been holding a lot of press conferences. Can you confirm that the amount of capital funding for 2021 for new schools is \$550 million?

**Hon. Stephen Lecce:** Sorry, member, I must admit I don't recall you asking the differential between federal-provincial. It's in the news release we issued today, so it's not a secret. It's 80% federal, as per the green fund, and 20% provincial.

**Ms. Marit Stiles:** So \$140 million is the provincial contribution then. Okay. Good—confirming.

So if you could go back to the new school builds: \$550 million, is that what we've got budgeted for new schools this year?

**Hon. Stephen Lecce:** Yes.

**Ms. Marit Stiles:** Okay. The commitment that the government made previously was for \$12 billion over 10 years, so shouldn't we then be expecting to see an investment of about \$1.2 billion per year? Maybe you could explain why—here we are in the middle of an economic crisis with an urgent need, obviously, for new school space. Wouldn't that warrant significantly more investment than what we've seen so far?

**Hon. Stephen Lecce:** Well, it's hard to “notwithstanding” the \$700 million announced 90 minutes ago—

**Ms. Marit Stiles:** No, I'm talking about \$550 million for new school buildings, Minister.

**Hon. Stephen Lecce:** I appreciate that, member. I'm just noting an ancillary investment was announced minutes ago that allows us to further reduce the backlog we inherited from the former Liberal government, and it underscores a commitment, when it's a matter of priorities—we could have allocated that anywhere, to be fair; we chose education for \$700 million of funding.

**Ms. Marit Stiles:** Mr. Chair, I have very limited time, and the minister is not answering the question that I have put to him about the new school buildings.

**Hon. Stephen Lecce:** Yes, we will build upon it; I just wanted to note for the record that, today—it couldn't be less contemporary, Chair—we have announced money.

**Ms. Marit Stiles:** You've said it a thousand times today, Minister. We heard it.

**Hon. Stephen Lecce:** Well, I just think it's important for the record that we are cognizant, when we're speaking about the deferred maintenance backlog, we are self-aware of the problem, and we have taken—

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

With that, we go to the government. MPP Khanjin, you have the floor.

**Ms. Andrea Khanjin:** Great. Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Minister, for coming before committee. One thing—I wanted to ask you a series of questions, but I was going through some of our local Simcoe county newspapers recently, and there was a poll done as of October 26 at 3 o'clock. Parents and students were asked, “How is school (either virtual or in person) going so far?” Everyone who said, “So far, so good”—over 53% of voters say that it was really good: “So far, so good.” That kind of gives you a snapshot of how people are feeling in Simcoe

county. But even when I talk to parents, their response to what you and your parliamentary assistant, Sam Oosterhoff, have been doing has been very, very good, especially when it comes to mental health supports as well, which I'll get to in a bit.

But, to follow suit, I did want to ask you about the new school funding. As you know, Innisfil is a growing community, as is Barrie, and I represent both. You did come down to Innisfil to announce the new school in Lefroy, the Lake Simcoe school, and the fact that it's going to be getting some new licensed child care spots, and, of course, some new funding.

**1700**

I wanted to ask you—in my community, obviously, it's going to make a tremendous impact. But in your opinion, what does that mean for families? What does that mean for our province? What does it show in terms of growth in our province? And specifically, what does it mean for those students who take the bus to school every day?

As you saw through your tour that you did in Innisfil, we are a community of communities, whether it's Lefroy, Bell Ewart, Cookstown, all these towns that make up what is the town of Innisfil, and certainly vast spaces. By building new schools in communities like Innisfil, what does it mean for the quality of education, the quality of life for both the students and the parents, and the impact on them and the time they spend on buses?

**Hon. Stephen Lecce:** Yes, thank you for the question. It's good to hear that feedback from some parents across Simcoe county in the context of online learning. I appreciate there's more to do in this respect, but I also am grateful for a new program, in less than 60 days, up and running. It demonstrates to the country what a can-do spirit can do, what innovation in pedagogy and education can deliver as a choice and a backstop to parents.

To be quite frank, there's not a unanimous position or a consensus within the political class in the context of offering online learning, but we do believe it is a strength; we had well before the pandemic. We remain steadfast in our commitment to offering it and building it up.

In the context of building schools, Innisfil is a prime example of explosive growth: large families, young families moving into that part of the GTA. When you speak to the parents and likewise the trustees and the students, the impact of them busing great lengths to go to schools that have available accommodation, because some of the schools there—the growth in the communities, the permitting has not kept up with the school infrastructure.

One could argue that in many of these communities, including yours, there just wasn't the investment that was needed. The fact that you were able to announce that expansion and make sure it remains on track, keeping the ministry accountable on getting the construction approvals through, getting them out—I think what it underscores is that speed, action and investment are necessary, to pick up a point by the member opposite. In the midst of the pandemic, we made a determination: one calendar year, two fiscal years, two allocations of roughly a billion dollars, an investment to rebuild schools, new schools, renovate existing schools and expand child care.

For a family to be able to go to a school closer to home that is accessible, that is Internet-connected, that is modern in its composition, I really think can make a big difference in attracting people to stay within your community and, more importantly, providing a quality learning experience everywhere in the province, particularly in more rural and suburban parts of Ontario that deserve that investment, and likewise within our urban centres.

This type of investment is desperately needed, as you have reminded me, and obviously, we're going to continue to be there. We have a 10-year plan of capital allocation because we recognize, in addition to the fact that we meet the Auditor General's requirement of 2.5%—north of \$1.3 billion, on track to be \$1.4 billion of maintenance funding on an annual basis—to make sure these schools are updated and in a state that is safe for our kids, essentially. The fact that we infuse more money today only builds momentum towards reducing the backlog and improving the state of schools for every child in Ontario.

**Ms. Andrea Khanjin:** Thank you again, Minister, for helping us by securing that school. It means the world to the upcoming students and the parents.

The child care spaces that are going to be created because of the building of the school: You went to Tiny Hoppers with me way back before COVID-19 even hit. I followed up with them a few days ago, and I have to say, when you talk about speed, action and investment, they've been getting lots of PPE from your ministry. I wanted to let you know that I was just there on Friday, and they have a very good supply. I wanted to pass that on to you, your officials and your team. We thank you for those efforts.

I just wanted to ask you, in terms of the building of new schools, what does that also mean for daycare investments and the future of allowing parents to have a little more choice when it comes to sending—maybe they have several children in the family, different age groups; one is going into grade 3 or 4 and one is going into daycare.

**Hon. Stephen Lecce:** Right. Yes, I mean, child care is incredibly important. My colleague Minister Jill Dunlop has really made this point, I think, very effectively in government: that the co-relationship of access to child care to the labour market participation of moms—and dads, but obviously with an emphasis on women, given the gap that existed pre-pandemic, there's a necessity to do more in this respect.

In the midst of this pandemic, we have now twice expanded child care within schools. We have provided support directly to child care operators to make sure they remain open and they remain viable, given the massive economic disruption and the market changes and the demand by the clients, which has obviously changed as a consequence of a variety of factors, including many people working from home. We have, from the day we had to close our child care centres and our schools, since day one, taken action and built a plan to make sure that they knew, without a doubt, that we were going to have the monies in place to back them and to sustain that funding throughout the course of COVID-19. That remains true today.

We could have not extended the federal-provincial bilateral agreement on early years and child care; we could

have just continued negotiating and not made it a priority. But we accept that stability is a strength right now. Giving predictability to a sector that has seen, among many other sectors, great challenge and disruption, we renewed the agreement for one more year. Why? It provides stability, full stop. And we infused another \$236 million along the way that could only help.

We're looking for additional ways we can support them, and we recognize, as you've noted, just how important it is that they remain open, remain viable and remain accessible within small towns and big cities across the province.

**Ms. Andrea Khanjin:** Thank you, Minister. I'm going to pass along the rest of the comments to MPP Parsa.

**Hon. Stephen Lecce:** Thank you.

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

**Mr. Michael Parsa:** Can you hear me?

**The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns):** Yes, I can. You're quite clear.

**Mr. Michael Parsa:** Much appreciated. Thank you very much, Chair.

Minister, I want to start off by saying thank you, truly; and I want to thank your parliamentary assistant, Sam Oosterhoff, for all the work that you have done—yourself, the deputy minister and your entire team for the work that you have been doing. It's a very, very difficult time, Minister. That's on behalf of myself and my constituents.

My question is about hiring practices. You briefly touched on this when you were answering one of the earlier questions. I'm not quoting here; I'm just paraphrasing. You said that moving forward, merit will lead hiring within our schools, and that teacher hiring in our schools would be dictated by merit, diversity and the unique needs of our schools' communities within our province. You said that students perform better when they see themselves represented in class, including in the educator at the front of the class. We know this to be true.

Minister, you've been to my riding. You've attended and you've been to schools with me. You know that I proudly represent a very diverse riding in Aurora–Oak Ridges–Richmond Hill. The changes that you and your team have brought in recently with the hiring practices of teachers: I'm wondering if you would elaborate on these changes and the impact they will have on our province's education system.

And Minister, before you answer, I also want to let you know that constituents and parents who I've spoken to cannot actually believe that this is already not in place and that we're actually doing this, so I just wanted to leave you with that. Thank you, Minister.

**Hon. Stephen Lecce:** Thank you. I definitely appreciate that.

Look, the premise of this action is an acknowledgement that when it comes to the hiring of educators, it should not be a controversial perspective of anyone—nor should we be the only party in the Legislature that believes this, I would argue; this seems like a common-sense conviction of any parent in the province of Ontario—that qualification and merit and, yes, the diversity of those candidates must be the leading consideration of a principal to hire.

Currently, this regressive regulation, brought in in 2012 by the former Liberal government, negotiated a way, if you will, in that round of negotiations, to undermine the ability of a principal to select the right candidate for the job based on their own local needs, having to choose amongst five names that really were chosen predicated on their seniority within their union. That gives me a great sense of concern, because the question fundamentally for us as legislators is, who built the system and who does it serve? I would argue that the system of public education needs to be built by and for kids, students and their parents, in the province of Ontario.

1710

I do not apologize for taking this action, doing it, yes, in the midst of a pandemic, when we are hiring over 2,700 net new teachers. We need to give our principals the speed to act. We are cognizant of some shortages in the province. We have made this case quite clearly to our federation partners. In the absence of their action, we took action on this regulation to incentivize our school boards and our principals, most notably, principals whose association, the Ontario Principals' Council, has called for years—perhaps the most compelling public policy reform they've called on government to abolish or amend is this regulation. It also happens to be endorsed by the Ontario Public School Boards' Association and likewise, the Catholic association, likewise public and Catholic and French parent associations. I mean really everyone has come out in its defence with the exception being the opposition parties, respectfully, and, of course, organized labour in the province.

But, at the end of the day, when it comes to the maintenance of quality teaching, according to our numbers and our estimates, you see monies flowing for our school boards to hire over 2,700 people. We want to make sure that speed is a strength. We want to make sure that principals can do what they need to do and that they can hire candidates of the highest competence and experience, and that better reflect the community they serve.

I just think the reason why it has been overwhelmingly received is because it wasn't a regulation imposed on the system that actually helped children. It didn't serve our kids. It didn't help strengthen quality in our learning, and perhaps even undermined it.

This is an important step forward. I feel very passionate about the matter, and I'm pleased that, tomorrow, the regulation will be rescinded and an interim reg will come into place to ensure that the principles of merit, of mobility for young teachers—qualified, talented teachers—and diversity—that they triumph in this province.

**Mr. Michael Parsa:** Thank you very much, Minister.

**Ms. Donna Skelly:** How much time do we have left?

**The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns):** Six minutes, actually, and it's going to?

**Ms. Donna Skelly:** MPP Khanjin.

**The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns):** MPP Khanjin, you're taking the floor? Please.

**Ms. Andrea Khanjin:** I have a few more questions just to follow my colleague MPP Parsa, and that's just building off my previous questioning.

Talking to a lot of parents and students, obviously mental health has always been a growing concern amongst parents and in young people. As we know, 400,000 young people in Canada, per year, are unfortunately committing suicide and how important, now more than ever during a pandemic, that morale among students is so important.

Minister, I want to talk about the investments you made even before going into the pandemic to build that resiliency in our students, like great mental health capacity, and not just the dollars. You know, when you talk about speed, action, investment, you can talk about the investment dollars you make in mental health, but also the action and speed you're doing this at, because whether it's curriculum changes or funding changes, you're tackling it from all ends. Can you talk about pre-pandemic and during pandemic and the impact it's made?

**Hon. Stephen Lecce:** Thank you very much for the question. I will ask Yael Ginsler to build upon some of the actions we've taken in this respect. What I will note is that pre-pandemic we doubled the mental health portfolio in this province from the peak of Liberal spending under former Premier Wynne. I think there's a consensus within our Legislature that this is important and now we benchmark monies as one way by which we demonstrate commitment. We doubled it last November when I stood with the member from Burlington on World Mental Health Day as a proved point that we're going to do more.

We doubled the ASD portfolio specifically for children on the spectrum within education—I'm not talking about what my colleague did, the Minister of Social Services—in education, the highest level of special education funding is north of \$3.1 billion.

I'm going to turn it over to my colleague because there's more to tell during the pandemic and before, but there's also a new curriculum we developed; for the first time in Ontario, a progressive intervention of having social-emotional learning embedded in this curriculum that I think is a true standard that helps to build resilience and confidence of students with the consideration for their mental health, because we appreciate the interrelationship between what we're teaching and how our kids are interpreting it and feeling about it.

With that, I'll turn it over to Ms. Ginsler.

**Ms. Yael Ginsler:** Thank you, Minister. Yael Ginsler, assistant deputy minister of the student achievement division at the Ministry of Education.

Thank you for the opportunity to talk about the work that we've done to look at mental health, particularly in the context of curriculum. I'd like to start by talking about our newest work that we've done in the math curriculum. This is truly innovative for Ontario. We have now integrated right into our curriculum social-emotional learning skills. These are the skills that fundamentally lead to positive mental health for our students. I think this is a really important addition to our curriculum. This learning will support students to develop confidence, cope with challenges, learn from mistakes, think critically.

The social-emotional learning skills are in combination with mathematical processes within the math curriculum

to really help students to think critically about the math that they're doing, but then really find it within themselves to build resilience when they're coming up against challenges, when they've got the answer wrong; to learn that it's okay to make mistakes and to be able to learn from those mistakes. These are all skills that fundamentally can apply to all aspects of their life and, really, all aspects of the curriculum, in terms of building those social-emotional learning skills really throughout.

This was just one particular addition to the math curriculum. It's a math curriculum that we know builds students' skills across many important areas that will lead to success now and in their future. The social-emotional learning skills are one of those, in addition to the others that the minister has spoken about before, about preparing students with, for example, financial literacy skills, coding skills, which are also all part of the new curriculum.

As I said, this is something that we are going to see across other curriculum areas. We see that, of course, in the health and physical education curriculum as well, both in the social-emotional learning skills, as well as in a really in-depth component around mental health specifically in the HPE curriculum.

Those are just a few examples of how we've looked at this through a curriculum lens, but as the minister has said, this is only one aspect of how we've approached mental health in the province. We had a number of programs that were offered this summer in preparation for the start of the school year.

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

**Ms. Yael Ginsler:** There was significant [*inaudible*] as well.

Back over to yourself and the minister, and thank you very much for the opportunity to have spoken about this important work.

**Ms. Andrea Khanjin:** Thank you, and thank you to the minister for your work on this. I know you certainly probably keep track of the numbers of suicides, unfortunately, due to mental health, but in my local area, in one school alone, Bear Creek—it's caused a lot of news—unfortunately, we had a teen suicide in August and another one recently. This investment you're making now will—what parents are telling me locally, especially parents like Rachael Cameron—save lives. So thank you for your work on that.

**Hon. Stephen Lecce:** I just will note that, just as a notation, Kids Help Phone, as well as organizations like School Mental Health Ontario, both of which have received funding, both from the Ministry of Education as well as—

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

To ensure the remaining time is apportioned equally, it will be split as such: 19 minutes and 30 seconds to the official opposition, 19 minutes and 30 seconds to the government. That should take us to about 6 o'clock.

Ms. Stiles.

**Ms. Marit Stiles:** Before I start my questions, MPP Begum had asked the minister to commit—and I think we

need a verbal agreement here so that it's on record so that we can actually have this information tabled—both for the timeline, as she was mentioning, but also for the amount of funding for child care programming and funding to municipalities. If you could please provide us with that spending plan and table it with the committee, that would be appreciated. We're going to need a verbal commitment.

**Hon. Stephen Lecce:** I'm comfortable providing a timeline of investments throughout the pandemic.

**Ms. Marit Stiles:** And the spending plan?

**Hon. Stephen Lecce:** And the associated monies of when we released that, yes.

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

**Hon. Stephen Lecce:** I will note, Chair, it is publicly accessible, but we're happy to prepare it for the committee.

**Ms. Marit Stiles:** We were establishing, just before we went over the government side, that the funding this year, which is supposed to somehow keep up with the \$1.2-billion commitment per year that the government has for building new schools, is \$550 million. It seems like so far, a lot of those announcements have been in ridings represented by government MPPs. Is that correct? I think one of those, at least one of those has been in your own riding. Can you please confirm that?

1720

**Hon. Stephen Lecce:** Well, what I could confirm is in the 2019-20 round of funding, a new school was approved in the Algoma board for MPP Michael Mantha, a new school—

**Ms. Marit Stiles:** Oh, I'm so sorry. I was talking about the recent round of announcements this summer—

**Hon. Stephen Lecce:** Well, we announced the recent round of announcements from the 2019-20 year, member, which is the one I'm reading, and I'll continue.

For Sol Mamakwa, his school, Savant Lake, received a new school. In Lakeshore, in Taras Natyshak's riding, a new school was approved by our government this summer in the 2019-20 round of capital. In the former Premier's riding, an addition was approved at Hodgson Middle School. In Durham, in Jennifer French's riding, in Oshawa, an addition was approved. In London—

**Ms. Marit Stiles:** So you're just, if I may, Minister, not doing the announcements there—but there have been approvals. That's all I need to know. Good. And if you could please—

**Hon. Stephen Lecce:** In the 2019-20 school year, the school boards would be cognizant. Most of those school boards have put out some communication. Sometimes local members have. It really depends. But the funding, they are aware of this as of the summer.

**Ms. Marit Stiles:** So if you could, it would be appreciated if you could table a list of the approved new school projects for both 2019-20 and 2020-21 with this committee.

**Hon. Stephen Lecce:** Yes. The entire list of capital allocations for 2019-20 and likewise 2020-21 that was just announced last week will be available, publicly available, posted on a website, as per every capital approval by all

governments. In the context of 2021, I believe that will be known by next week, and I'll make sure that that gets to you and to all members of the committee. They will literally be on the education website.

**Ms. Marit Stiles:** Great. Okay, so moving along, thank you for that. So you will be tabling that list of new school projects. I have a question. We have seen—and I just want to quote something that the minister said. The minister has been referring quite a lot in the Legislature and outside about—in question period, you quoted Dr. Williams in saying that school reopening had been a “resounding success.”

**Hon. Stephen Lecce:** No, I did not say that, member. I think you're reading a quote from a reporter. Would you use my quote in the transcript from Hansard today?

**Ms. Marit Stiles:** Okay, fine. So we'll seek to make sure we get the correct one. But in any case—

**Hon. Stephen Lecce:** No, I've got it right here. Would you like me to read it? Would you like me to read it, member? I have it right here.

**Ms. Marit Stiles:** No, I'm fine. I haven't asked my question yet.

**Hon. Stephen Lecce:** I'll make sure you're accurate.

**Ms. Marit Stiles:** I think it is fair to say, though, Minister, that you have expressed an enormous amount of pride in what your government has done. But I've got to tell you, Minister, that that is not what people in this province are experiencing. It is certainly not what students and families and educators are experiencing. In fact, what they are experiencing has been enormous delays, miscommunications. A lot of people, as I've mentioned many times here, are trying to understand what happened between January 25 when your government was, when you were first briefed on this pandemic—potential pandemic, at the time—and what came out in August, September and the chaos in our schools as they reopened.

I have a few questions I wanted to ask specifically, because I have to say, as we've going through all of this, one of the questions I always have is, what is the government doing to monitor and evaluate all these new measures that are being thrown around? There has been so much change happening, it's hard to keep up with. I think everybody would acknowledge that, right?

What's really worrying me, personally, as a parent and as the critic for education is, where do we go from here? Because this isn't ending anytime soon, it would appear. I'm really concerned that the government doesn't seem to have any means by which not only—now, really collaborative.

I know you're going to say there are all kinds of tables and committees or things, but no really meaningful, constant collaboration happening, but also no monitoring and evaluation that will inform the direction we go in. So I think if we're going to correct some of these past mistakes, we need to see that kind of monitoring and evaluation happening. I wonder if maybe the deputy minister would want to comment on that.

**Hon. Stephen Lecce:** Well, if I may just begin, in the context of the assertion that I just corrected off the top,

what I have said, respectfully, in the context of the reopening plan and the data points that I think underscore the safety within our schools. What the Chief Medical Officer of Health of this province, the foremost medical authority, but not just him—Dr. Michael Silverman, last week, who is, as I understand, the medical director of infectious diseases at St. Joseph's Hospital in London, Dr. de Villa of Toronto. And Dr. Brown, the dean of the Dalla Lana School of Public Health at the University of Toronto said, according to Toronto figures, the lowest source of outbreaks was actually schools and coronavirus transmission in schools is “relatively staying under control.” That message is not mine. It is that of the medical community, which believes, amongst 1.6 million children within our schools, when you have 2,000 confirmed cases cumulative since September, amongst 1.6 million, and 200,000 staff, what that means, with not a solitary school closed in the province of Ontario today—no schools are closed: 99.86% of staff have not had or contracted COVID; 99.92% of students have never had COVID.

All I'm simply saying, member, is that protocols, the layers of prevention and the Herculean efforts of doctors, nurses, teachers and principals are making a difference in reducing the risk.

**Ms. Marit Stiles:** Minister, my question now, as I asked you—I'm going to ask again. What I need to know, I'd like to know—what I don't see in anything that you've provided is any information about what kind of monitoring and evaluation is going on.

The minister likes to talk about data points. I'd like to know how much instructional time for our students has been lost, because I can tell you from hearing from parents daily about the fact that their children may not still have a teacher in some cases, or have had teachers changing every single day. What kind of monitoring and evaluation is happening?

**Hon. Stephen Lecce:** I will just say, I wish that position was taken during the strikes, member, when a lot of quality learning—and there was silence from you and all of your colleagues and the members opposite.

But I will answer the question, if you would be so kind—

**Ms. Marit Stiles:** Families in this province told you exactly what they thought of your plan to increase our class sizes and force students into mandatory online classes. If you want to go there, Minister, we can go there.

**Hon. Stephen Lecce:** Member, you didn't, one time, oppose the strikes that hurt our kids, and that is most regrettable.

But you did ask a question, and I do accept the premise that accountability for the taxpayer and the tax dollar is critical. We, in the context of that, in the context of accountability, were the government, on our volition—I understand one of the first governments to do this—to disaggregate the data to demonstrate to parents what the COVID cases are within schools, outbreaks and school closures. We did that. That wasn't a motion by you—

**Ms. Marit Stiles:** Minister, I'm not talking about the number of COVID cases. I'm being very specific about the

success of our—for example, let's get to the pedagogy. Let's talk about the things that matter to parents, like actual instructional time. How is this quadmester system working? Because I can tell you, I get those questions daily, and as a parent, I can tell you there are issues with it, right? So we know that. It's not that there is not room to manoeuvre here, but what is the ministry doing to monitor and evaluate?

**Hon. Stephen Lecce:** We put out a PPM 164 in the context of online learning recently. Part of that requirement, as you will note, is to set a standard to ensure instructional time—300 minutes of instruction per day, as all members will know, in the public system of education. For online learning, 75% must be live synchronous learning, because we sought to create a comparable parallel learning experience, with a schedule and a timetable and, in some schools, the national anthem, just trying to create that in-class experience.

I accept that we need to ensure quality remains at the heart of what we do. That's why we issued very clear instruction for online learning, where there are no less than 400,000 to 500,000 kids within that system, to ensure that we retain high standards and that we create accountability for the parents, so that their educator is conducting live, dynamic synchronous learning. I think that's important.

**Ms. Marit Stiles:** Okay. So what I am hearing, then, is that that's not part of the ministry plan right now, which is concerning. It's one thing to set targets and say, "We want to have all this instructional time online," but what's actually taking place? I think that is what we are looking for as parents: What is the quality of education my child is getting?

I want to say, a lot of money, I know, is being spent on D2L Brightspace technology. Yet what I'm hearing from parents is that children are frustrated because only eight of them can get on at a time, or that teachers—and I know you've said over and over again that there has been professional development, but—I'll ask this question to the deputy minister: How many teachers have actually participated in professional development? Because what we keep hearing is the minister adding all these new requirements around professional development. But actual days? I've talked to many teachers and many parents. Certainly, teachers are saying very clearly that many of them have not had any professional development, particularly in these online tools. In fact, most teachers that I've talked to are purchasing their own technology. They spent their whole summer planning around this. Where is this and how many teachers have actually received professional development?

1730

**Hon. Stephen Lecce:** I'll turn it to the deputy, as you asked, but if there is an educator who didn't receive professional development in online learning, then they would have skipped the mandatory day provided by the ministry at the start of the school year. We made it mandatory, as a lesson learned from the spring where we saw unequal application—and to be fair to the educator, in the spring, not all of them needed to know how to use

online learning or D2L or virtual learning environments. They now are expected to know that—

**Ms. Marit Stiles:** Are you evaluating the use of D2L?

**Hon. Stephen Lecce:** Yes, but just—

**Ms. Marit Stiles:** See, this is a good question. This was my question before: What are you evaluating and monitoring? How are we learning?

**Hon. Stephen Lecce:** I just want to be clear that that training has been extended and funded for all teachers, and they would have received it before school commenced, but I'll turn to the deputy to build upon that.

**Ms. Nancy Naylor:** I would just add to the minister's comments by saying we did provide for a PD day before the beginning of school on online learning. We also, during the school closure period, offered a number of webinars and training on D2L and Brightspace, which is our province-wide virtual learning environment. We were fortunate to have that in place with all teachers having an account for it during the school closure. It allowed Ontario teachers to get up and running.

In some cases, and we do permit this, boards use different learning management systems such as Google Classroom or alternatives. So all teachers, I think it's fair to say, had the opportunity to have a virtual classroom with their students. That was invaluable during the school closure period and it's invaluable now during the virtual learning classes in schools that boards are offering.

We did see thousands of teachers voluntarily do professional development with our ministry experts in D2L during the school closure period. They offered their own time. All the major school boards offered it as well, so many, many teachers did their training in the spring on that. Subsequently, we've used the same mechanism to provide training on the new math curriculum, and we've had, I believe—I will say thousands. I know my colleague Yael Ginsler could—if I wait long enough, she will email me the numbers and I will read them into the record.

**Ms. Marit Stiles:** Yes, if you could, that would be appreciated. Thank you. Okay, I'm going to move on, because I have limited time here.

Speaking of online, the move to control and administer online curriculum through TVO and TFO has a lot of francophones, particularly in this province, I think, very concerned about control of their own education and of their curriculum. I'm wondering if you would comment, please, on how you are working to prevent that or to reassure them that their voices, that their—because let's face it: They've all had these online curricula for years. I mean, the Minister likes to act like this is something brand new, but in fact, francophone boards, and every board, really, has had some form of online curriculum for many years. But this is a particular concern to francophones in our community. I'd appreciate your comments.

**Hon. Stephen Lecce:** Thank you. I believe pre-pandemic there were 60,000 credits extended. We now have perhaps approaching 600,000 students who are—certainly, a quarter of them within the system, so the scalability would be profoundly different in high school versus a full suite of classrooms. There is something new

here, and it's profoundly new. I couldn't draw a parallel to what existed for one-off courses.

I do appreciate it within the French-language community, given the minority and constitutional obligations we have to French-language education. That's why, as you will note in the legislation, it did not come into force. We enacted the legislation, but committed to doing a meaningful consultation with our French-language-sector educators and, of course, activists to make sure that their voices are heard.

We also understand with TFO—we've worked very closely with them. They've got a very strong digital footprint. They do this very well. They have a massive reach on YouTube, for example. I remember attending their one-billionth view. They have a very good strength in digital education and they have experience in it, which is why we're leveraging them, as well as TVO in partnership, to make sure that we provide quality learning in both languages. We could have opted, I suppose, for one agency and the exclusion of the other. But, to your point, member, we accept the importance of linguistic duality, and we've leveraged the talents of both agencies to support us in the execution of that mandate.

**Ms. Marit Stiles:** Okay. I have another question. We know that because of this lack of funding and the late planning and confusion that happened over, I'd say, August, September, into this month—certainly, it continues—boards have had a lot of difficulty staffing—that's clear—and maintaining the virtual schools and in-school learning. Increasingly, it looks like a lot of boards are turning to this hybrid model, which I believe—and certainly many educators and experts in education are flagging concerns about how this might undermine the education that our students are receiving.

I again just want to reiterate: We're talking not just about for how many kids we can, say, tick off a box and say they're in school, but about, actually, the quality of their learning in this moment, because we know there will be a big impact down the road.

So my question to you is, what happens to the funding for principals? Because you've put this money into virtual school principals, what happens to that money when those virtual schools are shut down and this hybrid model is adopted?

**Hon. Stephen Lecce:** I would just say, you noted the importance of quality learning. We accept how important it is. Notwithstanding the priority being on wellness and mental health, quality is important, and that's why, a week or two ago, we made a determination to stand up for quality by rescinding O. Reg. 274.

Deputy, I may turn to you for additional context.

**Ms. Nancy Naylor:** Thank you. I think that the government's offer to fund administrative staffing for virtual schools is a good example of an agile response to a suggestion that came from boards.

In early August, boards were flagging for us that they expected that students registering in the virtual option, which we had asked them to provide, were heading towards 5%, and they felt that in some of the larger boards it would make more sense if they could set up a virtual

school. They asked for some administrative support to create a school ID, some record-keeping. They also raised the idea of whether or not they could have staffing for principals and vice-principals, and that was an idea that we took in very short order back to the minister and the government. We were fortunate that they were positive in their response—

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

**Ms. Nancy Naylor:** That staffing has really been invaluable in terms of boards being able to respond to the surprisingly large interest in virtual education. So that funding—I believe we've provided a total of \$54 million in additional funding for school leadership. That's been invaluable. There are no plans to change that, even when boards are changing their model.

We do give boards a tremendous amount of credit for being responsive. Parent preferences are changing, and boards are doing their very best, and, I think, a very good job—perhaps not an instant job in some cases, but a very rapid job—of trying to respond to those parent preferences. We do acknowledge the extraordinary efforts. In some cases, I would say, they're using that funding to bring back retired principals to help timetable, to make sure class assignments are there and all the administrative work that is required to respond to those changes in parent preferences.

**Ms. Marit Stiles:** So the plan, as I understand from what you've said, is not to move the money back; it will remain.

**Ms. Nancy Naylor:** Correct.

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

**The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns):** With that, the time is up for opposition. We go to the government. MPP McKenna, you're first up. The floor is yours.

**Ms. Jane McKenna:** Thank you so much, Chair.

In January of this year, I know that a member of this committee asked the Toronto Sun to correct the record regarding attendance at an anti-war rally. Having had that experience, I would expect the member would not rush to attribute comments incorrectly reported in the media to the minister.

Moving forward from that: Minister, the Canadian Mental Health Association says COVID-19 is taking a toll on our mental health. On September 23, elementary school office administrator Leslie Lascelle made a tearful plea on Facebook, describing her experience of being yelled at and ignored by parents. I want to thank all of our school office administrators here in Halton region and across Ontario for working so hard to keep our kids and schools safe during these unprecedented times. I want to say how much we appreciate your efforts. I want to acknowledge these often unsung heroes that look out for our kids and grandkids in our schools every day.

Last week, the Ontario government announced \$24.3 million in targeted investments to hire additional staff, increase access to counselling and therapy, create new programs to help manage stress, depression and anxiety, and address eating disorders and other challenges facing children and youth. Minister, can you highlight some of

the measures being taken to support the mental health and well-being of the staff who work in our schools?

1740

**Hon. Stephen Lecce:** Thank you for the question. I will turn to ADM Jeff Butler in a moment.

I just want to note that we have invested a further \$43 million in additional funding for special education and mental health, dealing with the consequences of COVID-19. We're working and leveraging the incredible talents and goodwill of School Mental Health Ontario. They do really good work. I've spoken to and met with their leadership team many times, including through the pandemic virtually. They're providing boards with professional learning frameworks and tool kits to support the mental health of all students, and they're trying to be tailored to the board, making it as specific and granular as possible for the different audiences, staff being an important constituency—we want to make sure that they're cared for and supported—our students, most obviously, and the broader community.

Minister Tibollo, the Associate Minister of Mental Health and Addictions, announced last week another investment. These are for community-based supports to augment the in-school supports. Together, that is a massive infusion of investment, because we recognize the needs are real. One may suggest that we may have to continue to go further in this respect. I know many members feel very passionately, as I do, that we cannot leave kids behind as a consequence of COVID. It's not their fault in any way. We want to make sure the system is responsive and they get access to care, virtual care, whatever is required to keep them safe, to keep them motivated and just make sure that they can get through this, given that this was recognized—I think there's a bipartisan consensus of the reality. We just don't know how long this will go on for.

We've put a major investment into mental health on that basis, but I accept that we may need to do more. In fact, we are inclined to continue to do more in this respect to respond to their needs.

With that, Jeff Butler works very closely with many of these stakeholders and is intimately involved with them. If you wouldn't mind, ADM Butler, building upon some of the work we're doing and anything I may have missed.

**Mr. Jeff Butler:** Yes, thanks very much, Minister, and thanks to the member for the question. My name is Jeff Butler. I'm the assistant deputy minister for the student support and field services division here at the Ministry of Education. We've been very aware of the impacts of the pandemic on student mental health. From the start of the school closure period in March, we provided direction to school boards to continue providing mental health services to students and made a virtual care platform available to school-based mental health professionals so that they can continue to provide those services to students virtually.

Over the summer, we provided additional funding for programming: \$8 million to provide the continuation of mental health services over the summer months. Typically, these are services that are provided during the school year and they don't continue during the summer months.

This summer, we provided additional funding so that they would continue over the summer.

We also provided \$7.6 million for transition programs for students with mental health—

*Interruption.*

**Mr. Jeff Butler:**—and special education needs in the two weeks prior to school entry, to refamiliarize themselves with the school environment. We also worked with School Mental Health Ontario to provide resources for educators, for professionals, for families and for students. I note that you asked about staff, so one of the things that School Mental Health Ontario did was provide additional resources for staff and for educators.

For this school year, we're providing an additional \$20 million in mental health funding to support school reopening. That's additional funding for additional mental health professionals and training for staff as well. There is also \$12.5 million of the federal funding that has been allocated to support additional mental health supports and supports for students with special needs.

One of the things that we're working with School Mental Health Ontario on right now is the development of a professional learning framework for educators that will support them in supporting student mental health. That was used to support the training over the PA day that the minister mentioned, and they continue to provide training for mental health workers and other school staff. Of course, you mentioned yourself, MPP, the additional investments that the government has made in mental health that will support staff mental health as well.

Lastly, we have worked with school board superintendents as well as staff and labour partners to identify best practices to support mental health and are making those available to boards to support both students and staff with mental health.

Thank you very much for that question.

**Hon. Stephen Lecce:** I'll just note that we are very proud to employ working parents within the Ministry of Education. Thank you very much, ADM Butler, for that.

**Ms. Jane McKenna:** Thanks so much. I just have one more quick question, Minister. As you know, COVID-19 has been very difficult for all of us, especially young people. Can you highlight some of the announcements made since the start of COVID-19 to support our students in elementary and secondary in the way of mental health?

**Hon. Stephen Lecce:** Yes, absolutely. We announced an investment of \$10 million in June when we announced the Grants for Student Needs. That was to help support the hiring of additional psychologists, psychotherapists and social workers, among others, immediately.

We also ensured in the Summer Learning Program that there were transitional opportunities, particularly for students with special education needs, to help them transition into school, given the massive disruption in their lives and the lack of consistency in learning.

In addition, we announced \$20 million in new dedicated funding. This was to be used specifically to deal with the escalating impacts and, obviously, the compounding reality that COVID is making, for some students, in their own personal lives and circumstances, much worse; and in

some cases, for those who didn't have or weren't afflicted by mental health, for the first time they may be facing this type of challenge.

That money is critical. It's a \$20-million investment. An additional \$12.5 million in one-time federal funding, in this instance, was utilized by school boards in areas of both spec ed and mental health to do more hiring, more programming, more training of our staff, and to hire more staff.

Just as context, something I ought to have mentioned earlier is when you look at the amount of hiring being done in the province of Ontario, when you look at mental health workers, we have today over 111 net new mental health workers, which is important to note. They support many schools across the school board. That is really something that should be given an element of attention, because I think the work they're doing, complementing the already expanded hiring of new psychologists and psychotherapists—over roughly 180 that we announced last year—is materially going to help improve access, decrease wait times and get these kids the support that they need immediately. We believe that, and that's why the funding has been announced. I also recognize, though, that there's a lot more we're probably going to have to do, notwithstanding that we lead.

The last time I checked, I was not cognizant—and I stand to be corrected—at least when we announced in September, of any province that had put a net investment in mental health at that time, which I think positions Ontario with a compassionate lens that we have been, on this, cognizant of these impacts, and we've been working earlier on in the pandemic to mitigate them and prevent them from becoming worse for these kids.

We'll continue to be there for them, and obviously we're very pleased to see net hiring of more medical practitioners. The fact that we've more than doubled public health nurses—while this wouldn't be, perhaps, their core competence or core mandate, if you will, they also will provide supports in both mental health and in the physical health of a child. I've met with Minister Scott, Minister Bethlenfalvy and others in Durham, and a variety of other medical officers and the head of the nursing unit that focuses on schools, and they acknowledge that many of their nurses, when they interface with children—some of them will work on and support mental health. So that is going to add value. The fact that we doubled that capacity, I think, is also a pretty significant take-away and it underscores our continued commitment to their safety and well-being.

1750

**The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns):** MPP Oosterhoff?

**Mr. Sam Oosterhoff:** Thank you, Minister and Deputy Minister. I appreciate all the time you've taken to appear before the estimates committee. I know, as it wraps to a close, all the members appreciate the level of detail that you've provided with regard to the investments made by the ministry and by the government of Ontario.

One piece I know that the NDP has talked about and that of course we've taken action on is with regard to

investments in ventilation, substantial investments in HVAC ventilation systems across the board; incredible investments being made by school boards but also by the government supporting those school boards. I'm just wondering if you could talk about our leadership on that file in making sure that we're providing high-quality air in our schools for students, especially during the pandemic.

**Hon. Stephen Lecce:** Yes, thank you very much. This is an important element. According to the emerging evidence, obviously, perhaps not known in March, it became quite clear that air quality, airflow and ventilation is critical to countering the spread and mitigating COVID-19 transmission. So we allocated \$50 million, in addition to the 2.5% of our entire operating budget which we dedicate to the maintenance of our schools—\$1.3 billion to roughly \$1.4 billion annually—to do that. We recognized that wasn't enough. We face an extraordinary challenge, an invisible threat, and we need to ensure that our kids, and their parents when they go home, and potentially grandparents for intergenerational families, are safe and that the staff in our schools are safe, particularly because they would be older, and of course our students. This was the impetus for why we put \$50 million in.

I'm very pleased to report that we anticipate well over 21,000 HEPA filters have been purchased. For example, 96% of school ventilation systems across the province have been assessed, either in-house or by board staff or by third parties, really triaging the older schools; the newest schools perhaps may not get that type of assessment. But the point is certainly, for those that are older—aging HVAC systems, older infrastructure—they would have been done and covered in the 96%. Some 90% of schools have had either an upgrade or an increase in the frequency of filter changes, and obviously, 7,000 to 8,000 air filters have been procured, for example, in the TDSB alone.

We know how important this is in the context of improving air quality and airflow, improving air systems, and that's why we moved quickly, early in the pandemic, encouraging boards to do that type of review and assessment of their systems. They moved quickly in getting maintenance funding out the door for larger projects, which historically is HVAC.

Now, just to bring us back to today's announcement, which we cannot underscore enough: \$700 million of investment for capital purposes. One of the areas of focus we've dedicated is in the areas of air quality and air ventilation, both for schools and child care as well, where applicable. That money—it's under \$10 million; it's to be for shovel-ready projects to the extent possible, or near-shovel-ready, to be done by December 31, 2021. Why is that relevant? Well, it's time-limited. It's quick; it's rapid. The federal government, to be fair, not us, imposes a deadline of when those monies are supposed to be expended and the projects must be completed.

That creates, behaviourally, an incentive to the board to get these projects done. We're going to move mountains to approve them. We nominate them to the feds and then they ultimately sign off. We will literally work through the night if required so that the school boards get approvals from the feds. We then will lobby them and urge them to

do their part and get approvals back to us so we can get shovels in the ground and we can see the expansion of air ventilation capacity in schools. The \$700 million that was dedicated for that area alone would make a major dent in improving a system that has already received improvements throughout the summer and, really, throughout the year.

**Mr. Sam Oosterhoff:** Thank you very much. I understand that MPP Pettapiece had a question as well.

**The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns):** MPP Pettapiece.

**Mr. Randy Pettapiece:** Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Minister. I've been very interested in the whole afternoon and the answers that you've given and your openness and transparency and certainly that of your staff.

I'd like to return to the math issue that we've had in the province for many years. For your information, I have three sons; two of them are in the trades and one is a police officer. I can remember the one who is the police officer, when he was at high school—and he had always wanted to be a policeman from a young age. He was taking advanced math in high school, and he came to me one time and he wanted to get out of that. He wanted to do something else. I said, "What's your issue with taking math, or this advanced math course?" And he said, "I want to be a police officer, so therefore I don't need math to do that." And I said, "Well, I think you do." It wasn't long after he was hired as a police officer that he got transferred to the traffic department, the traffic division, and guess what kicked in? Math, because he had started investigating accidents, doing angles of collisions and all this type of thing. He came back to me, and this doesn't happen often, but he thanked me for making sure that he stayed in his math courses, because it certainly helped him in his work.

I do know that financial literacy is certainly important, and that's something that has to be addressed sooner than later. I'm glad you're doing this. It's too bad that when we were in opposition—I've been a member since 2011—whenever we tried to address this to the then Liberal government, first under Premier McGuinty and then under Premier Wynne, the opposition kept supporting the Liberal government all the time, and we didn't get this change at that time, because time passed and we needed to get this math issue addressed. I know I heard from parents, and I know the math scores that were coming in, the figures we were hearing, and our kids were failing that. So I'm certainly glad that you have addressed this, certainly for future generations to come.

All our contractors use math. Different trades use math. It is there. Scientists use math. We need to make sure that

these types of things are taught in our schools, to give our children at least a good chance for their future, and it certainly cannot be done with what has happened in the past as far as our math scores being so low.

Minister, I wonder if you could comment on this curriculum in the short time you have left. Again, I want to congratulate you on taking the bull by the horns and getting this done.

**Hon. Stephen Lecce:** Thank you very much. I look forward to the privilege of meeting your children.

But look: Math is important, I think, in every facet of life, in all elements of public service and private enterprise. We need to strengthen numeracy as a basic, foundational skill that young people learn and learn to love. We want to make sure that we build up the resiliency.

I am so proud of the work that the ministry—among many members, the deputy minister, ADM Ginsler and others—have done to shepherd this curriculum through, probably in record time. Yes, in the midst of a pandemic, we introduced it for September, with funding associated, and what we did is, we listened to experts. We listened to those from a pedagogy perspective, the job creators, to make sure that coding is implemented as of grade 1. For the first time, financial literacy is implemented, starting in grade 1.

Computational skills and problem-solving, all the areas that are critical to a young person, to be able to apply these often abstractions in their life, making it relevant—in the grade 10 curriculum, you will recall last summer, you cannot graduate in this province anymore unless you are able to complete a budget for the year after graduating. It's real experiential learning that's going to make a difference—

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

Just to note: It looks like the time for the independent member will not be used. It will therefore be divided equally—

*Interjection.*

**The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns):** I'm sorry—and that's why I say "it looks like." We will see at the next meeting to be sure. If the independent member does not show up to claim his or her time, it will therefore be divided equally, with seven minutes and 30 seconds to the official opposition and seven minutes and 30 seconds to the government.

That's all the time we have available for today. The committee is now adjourned until Tuesday, November 3, at 9 a.m.

*The committee adjourned at 1759.*

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