

PRINCE EDWARD ISLAND LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY



Speaker: Hon. Colin LaVie

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Standing Committee on Education and Economic Growth

DATE OF HEARING: 6 AUGUST 2019

MEETING STATUS: PUBLIC

LOCATION: LEGISLATIVE CHAMBER, HON. GEORGE COLES BUILDING, CHARLOTTETOWN

SUBJECT: CONSIDERATION OF WORK PLAN

COMMITTEE:

Karla Bernard, MLA Charlottetown-Victoria Park [Chair]
Hon. James Aylward, Minister of Health and Wellness
Sonny Gallant, MLA Evangeline-Miscouche
Ole Hammarlund, MLA Charlottetown-Brighton
Hon. Ernie Hudson, Minister of Social Development and Housing
Robert Mitchell, Leader of the Third Party

COMMITTEE MEMBERS ABSENT:

none

MEMBERS IN ATTENDANCE:

none

GUESTS:

none

STAFF:

Ryan Reddin, Clerk Assistant (Research and Committees)

The Committee met at 1:30 p.m.

Chair (Bernard): Welcome everybody to our first Education and Economic Growth meeting – our planning meeting.

I hope that you will bear with me today in my new role as Chair for this committee.

Just a little reminder, if you wanted to share an idea, just kind of come through me so that – say your name so that it's clear for people tuning in.

Could I ask for a motion – has everybody had a chance to look over the agenda?

Some Hon. Members: Yes.

Chair: Could I ask for motion to adopt set agenda?

Mr. Hudson: I'll so move (Indistinct)

Chair: Ernie Hudson.

Shall it carry? Carried.

Moving on to number (3), the consideration of the committee's work plan – an opportunity for us to discuss any subjects we may like to see included in our plan.

Just as Ryan and I were chatting this morning, just a little bit of a reminder that the House sits again November 12th. So, that gives us – what did we say – depending on when we start our meetings – if we were to start let's say the first of September depending on vacations, it would give us roughly nine weeks.

Clerk Assistant: Nine, ten.

Chair: Nine, 10 weeks, if our goal is to kind of be able to wrap up some work by the time the House sits. While ambitious plans are great, if we want to keep it kind of realistic for the moment and then re-evaluate as we move along.

I'm wondering if anybody has any subjects they would like to put on the table?

Robert Mitchell.

Mr. Mitchell: Thanks, Karla.

I have several that I've referenced a few already to you. I do, I understand that our timelines will be short before the fall session, however. Ambitious plans are not terrible and if they fall off, they fall off, I guess.

But there's several that I have that I'd like some attention brought to. First one is the topic of the Grade 3 assessments; because I'm having a little trouble understanding not continuing with that work based on the fact that (Indistinct) have gone from, kind of last to almost first.

I'm wondering, could we get that on the agenda to have some department people, some experts to come in to kind of explain the rationalization of beginning with Grade 3. I think there was a reference of possibly doing away with them altogether. Could we get that on our work plan to bring somebody in from the department?

Chair: So, specifically focusing on –

Mr. Mitchell: I'll say Grade 3 assessments today, that the discussion was that they were going to eliminate those. If we could get some understanding of just how that would be based on where we are now nationally, as opposed to where we were 10, 12 years ago. That's one thing.

Will I just go through my list and you can jiggle in or out or somebody can say 'yea' or 'nay'.

The other thing is, I wouldn't mind, probably, as school starts and into the fall, the breakfast program that was not acted upon, kind of some status updates and what work is going on in regards to that, or what work needs to be changed from what was already done in the past 11 months or something like that – if we could get that one on there.

Another one is – as we are all out and over PEI over the summer – the skilled labour shortage primarily in the trades, what kind of work are we doing to trying to close that gap. I know it's a big gap and everybody else – things are booming in a lot of areas. So, what can we do, or what could we help to do, to kind of create linkages there – if that's the proper term – as to what we could come up with there.

Mr. Aylward: (Indistinct) minimum wage (Indistinct)

Mr. Mitchell: What's that?

Mr. Aylward: (Indistinct) minimum wage (Indistinct)

Mr. Mitchell: Yea, and maybe it's something like that, or maybe it's repatriate – I don't know, right? We do know, like I talked to lots of people that – they can't get carpenters, they can't get electricians, they can't get plumbers and what should we be doing differently?

Some of the businesses are actually paying out-of-pocket to pre-train these people, whether it's driving a truck, or whether it's doing something else, is there anything that we should be doing in that regard? Something along that line.

Probably – so what have we got – I got the Grade 3, I got the skilled labour that I'd like to see – breakfast program. I'll throw it on there, just whether we get to address it or not – George Coles Bursary and anything that is being worked on there.

I'll leave it at that for me.

Chair: Thank you, Robert.

When you say breakfast program, are you talking kind of the school food program in general? (Indistinct)

Mr. Mitchell: Yes, the school food program.

Chair: Ok, just to –

Mr. Mitchell: I used the wrong term in that.

Chair: No, just wanted to clarify that.

Great, thank you.

Any other – Ernie Hudson.

Mr. Hudson: Yes, thank you, Chair.

I have, similar to Robert, a number of ones on here. I certainly do realize the time constraints that we are under with regard to the fall sitting and the like, but with that, I'll share with you my list.

I would like to – for the committee – to take a look at the process it would be undertaking to move towards elected school boards, just how (Indistinct) school boards when elected, what jurisdiction or what areas that they would cover. Are we going to look back to say: two school boards. Are we going to look back to a situation like we had a number of years ago where West Prince itself, actually had an elected school board with administrative support?

I would see part of that too, the committee being provided with information as an overview for present governance structure, parents' councils, what roles they do entail.

I would suggest too, that something that we could take a look at would be; in the curriculum given that marijuana has recently been legalized, if there should be something put into the curriculum with regard to the education. Personally, I would say even starting at the elementary school level. But just what may result from use, and/or abuse, of marijuana at certain ages.

I would also like to see an overview of career awareness and just to see what is provided to students, whether it's junior high – certainly into high school – as to what career options are available to them, right across the board. It doesn't matter as far as if you're looking at moving on to university, if you're looking at trades and the like.

Certainly from my position in social development and housing, especially housing, we do see that there is a tremendous need for skilled trades' people. Just to have that brought to the forefront or to have our students be aware of what the possibilities are for them, not only post-secondary university, but in trades as well.

One thing that I did hear going door-to-door by a number of parents, was a concern with regard to social promotion. I think that as a committee, it's something that we could take a look at, just what the benefits and what the drawbacks may be with regard to social promotion.

Two more things; presentation to the committee in infrastructure programs eligibility as far as, whether it's municipal governments, private sector, what have you,

the cost-sharing of criteria that is used for approval or decline of applications.

The last one that I had here – and I see that immigration is under this committee’s mandate – would be to have a presentation from the PEI Association for Newcomers to Canada, just to provide information to the committee as to what programs that they do have, where throughout the province that they are delivering, things along that line.

That’s my list, Chair, thank you.

Chair: Thank you very much.

Just as quick clarification; whenever you mentioned the first one, the elected school boards, would you be curious in hearing specifically from information on that? Or, would you be interested in hearing kind of what we’ve got going on now and maybe a little presentation on what they do now, versus that?

Mr. Hudson: Absolutely, Chair.

That’s one of the things I think I’d mentioned. Just also, take a look at the present governance system, what is in place right now, the roles again of parents’ councils.

But again, I think that we have to take a hard look at moving back to elected school boards. That’s a personal opinion, but I think, as a committee, that we do need to look at the options there and what is in place presently.

Thank you.

Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Hammarlund: Okay, (Indistinct) –

Chair: Ole Hammarlund.

Mr. Hammarlund: I have a few things, too.

The first one on our list is the Holland College construction of related skills programs. If we are aware, too, like everybody else has mentioned, that we have a severe shortage of skilled workers, and it seems like we need to go to the schools and find out how we boost the attendance, and I want to bring that up.

It kind of goes together with my pet project, which is net zero buildings. Our recent amendment to the sustainability act means that we basically have to reach net zero by 2050. That’s only 30 years away to do all the buildings, including all the existing buildings on PEI, so we should start on that. It should start at the school.

We’re concerned about the school food program as well and other priorities: early childhood, education, wages, and how we expand the improvement that has already taken place. The economic plan that’s got right now seems to have been started with a private group. We’d like to work with that, and obviously, I notice that the economic plan works with other aspects as well. If you’re going to invest a few hundred millions in net zero buildings in the next few years, it’s going to have a very significant positive impact on the economic plan, but obviously that’s not the only aspect of it.

The last item is improving rural net. We’d like to know what the actual steps are that has been taken. I know there’s an agreement. We’re not so sure that the local firms have gotten enough of the piece of the pie.

Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Hammarlund: That’s about it.

Chair: All right.

Sonny Gallant.

Mr. Gallant: Thank you, Chair.

I’d like to commend everybody for their comments. Those are some that were on my mind, so I’ll just go into one that I have.

The vacancy rates across the province, as we all know, we have housing shortages, and from students to people that want to live here, and it’s been stated by a few different people that our population is growing faster than our supply for the past couple of decades, at least the last decade. The population has grown. We’ve outpaced the rest of Atlantic Canada; and with the increase in popularity of Airbnbs that also added to the pressure and has kind of driven up rent prices. As we know, that’s sometimes only on a short-term basis, but it

kind of alleviates some long-term rental opportunities.

So just as some suggestions: where the vacancy rate's 0.3% in Charlottetown and nationally it's 2.4, maybe we should have the deputy of housing come in and we address these housing shortages, and maybe also the deputy minister of economic growth, and talk about the tourism factor in all this. I know that there's been things done, but it might be a good idea just to explore some of these areas.

Chair: Yeah. Thank you.

Anybody else have anything they'd like to add in?

James Aylward.

Mr. Aylward: Thanks, Chair.

It's one of the areas that I'm quite interested in, and it's nothing new – it's been happening now for a long time – but psycho-educational assessments for children in schools, when it's determined in the early years that they might have an issue with their learning, and there's still an issue with wait times. I'd just like to see the committee do a little bit of work on that so that we might be able to do some research, get some research back and help advise government moving forward as to some of the remedies; or again, what kind of work the government is doing to alleviate these wait times.

The topic that several people have already mentioned with regards to the trades, Holland College, I think it's a very important one. Obviously it is, because of the number of people who raised it as a topic for our work moving forward.

I remember when I was in school at one time, there was a more robust program; we called it PVI, Provincial Vocational Institute; and we got away from that, where we started to steer our students, pretty much all – you need a university degree, you need a university degree. So I think that's where we need to refocus, and whether it's talking with Holland College or getting into even, obviously, the high schools, but do we need to start earlier, and starting to plant the seeds at the junior high level. As far as you know, these are opportunities as well.

So I think that that component, it impacts so much, and when I made the comment about, well, let's start paying more than minimum wage, my son went through the program. He's a carpenter, and he's 23 now, and he's just barely making over minimum wage. How can he go out on his own, afford an apartment – not that he'd be in Stratford, because they're all Airbnbs – but we need to ascertain how best to get a level playing field there as well, so that if you are going through that process to enter into the trades, the economy around it.

While I do know my son gets probably two calls a week from different firms looking for him to go to work with them, well, they're only maybe offering a dollar over minimum wage; and so if we had more of a competitive wage, I think we would have a better outcome there.

But, I mean, Robert, a friend of yours, a friend of mine, Sam Sanderson would be able to provide us with some great insight into that as well with regards to that.

Mr. Mitchell: (Indistinct)

Chair: Robert Mitchell.

Mr. Mitchell: (Indistinct) Mr. Aylward's suggestion of bringing back a PVI type of situation, that's been – I've been part of that discussion as well for the last number of years in committee, and revisiting or relooking at that, and maybe that is something that you may introduce to young Islanders after Grade 9, as it was previously, and give them a couple of years of a head start in a skilled trade. We may find more and more take that route, and more and more develop skills that will get them on the job site.

Now, the wages thing, that's probably an issue that we need to continue to work on as well, so – but you're right, Sam Sanderson may be a perfect person, and that's exactly who I was thinking of initially to bring in to talk to us about what the construction association sees as gaps or voids that government could be a part of helping out with.

Chair: Thank you.

Good?

Mr. Aylward: Thank you, Chair.

Chair: Right.

Wow, we have a very ambitious –

An Hon. Member: Looks good.

Chair: – list, yes we do.

So within it, we've got – oh my gosh, we've got, like, 12, 13, 14, maybe 15 things here, more than that. Would it help to prioritize some of these things?

Mr. Aylward: I think just the ones that Robert and I mentioned are probably the most important.

Some Hon. Members: [Laughter]

Chair: Thank you for that, James.

Mr. Mitchell: What about if we all (Indistinct) a little bit of time to think about now that I've heard what everybody else's – was on their mind, to soak that up a bit and say: I think we should hit that one early. Can we have a one-meeting delay on developing that priority list?

Chair: That might be a good idea. It is an extensive list.

I was trying to keep tabs on some things that were common, but the skilled workers obviously is –

Mr. Mitchell: That's obviously one that –

Chair: Yeah.

Mr. Mitchell: You know, maybe we could – to that point, maybe we could put that as a priority one, and the rest of them we'll use down the road to fit in the level of priority.

Chair: Okay.

Mr. Mitchell: But I think everybody has touched on that. Let's work on that one, and maybe it's reaching out to Holland College to have somebody to talk to us – where Sam Sanderson – Sam would come, I'm sure, anytime, to give his thoughts and views on that. Let's put that as number one and the rest we'll –

Chair: Yeah, okay.

Mr. Mitchell: – fit in a schedule.

Chair: So Ryan, I've noticed you're taking some notes here. Would you be able to email us – are these your private kind of personal notes? Are you able to email –

Clerk Assistant: No.

Chair: – those out to us so we kind of know what we're doing? Or is that something that I don't mind –

Clerk Assistant: No, I can certainly do that.

Chair: Okay.

Clerk Assistant: I take notes on what the committee's discussing and then I'll send around the list of the subjects, essentially, that were raised today.

Chair: Okay.

An Hon. Member: (Indistinct)

Clerk Assistant: I think it's more like 15, 16, 17. Some of them cross over, but yes.

Chair: Yeah. I think some of them cross over really nicely, yeah.

Mr. Mitchell: And I mean, for instance, there may be something that, you know, James brought up there, wait times, so there may be one representative that deals with four different things in one meeting. I don't know, just for instance, right?

Chair: Yeah, get creative. All right.

So everyone's good with that? Ryan will email us out the list and we can kind of prioritize them.

Clerk Assistant: But just for clarification, is skilled workers the thing to start with?

Chair: The number one.

Clerk Assistant: Yeah?

Chair: And I also heard a few people say the school food program as well. Maybe we can just leave that for now.

Yes, James.

Mr. Aylward: So, while I agree with Robert – the skills seem to be a prominent topic that several people, if not all of us, brought up – but what if we had Ryan send out the minutes with that list, and then we all make a commitment that a minimum of three days before the next meeting, or maybe we come to the next meeting prepared with our own priorities of, okay, I rank that one, two, three kind of thing, so –

Chair: Sure.

An Hon. Member: I'm good with that.

Mr. Aylward: Yeah.

Chair: Everybody good with that?

Mr. Aylward: (Indistinct) prefer that we submit our priorities back before the meeting?

Mr. Mitchell: I'm fine with that.

Mr. Aylward: Yeah, I think that would be a good exercise, because then the Chair and Ryan can consolidate that and save the committee the time trying to consolidate it.

Chair: So maybe we – and figuring out our next step here, maybe then we can have a date that if we could get back by?

Mr. Aylward: Yeah.

Chair: And then we'll have a better idea of the meeting. So maybe we could pause – I think that's a great idea if everybody – did you have something, Ole?

Mr. Hammarlund: Well, I was just wondering: how are you going to, in the future, once we have set our priorities, are we going to dedicate one meeting to one subject so we can really dig into it? Is that the plan?

Mr. Mitchell: The problem with that is the other person's schedule. If we can get one ahead of the other, then we'll bump priority three to priority two. That's what – as the past I've found it's based – like if somebody else's schedule that you're going to bring in as an expert on an item can't make it that one and somebody else can,

then in order to keep the flow we'll shift them around a little bit, but keep them as tight as we can. That's been my experience anyway.

Chair: Sonny Gallant.

Mr. Gallant: Can I just suggest there seems to be a consensus to bring Sam in? Sam –

Mr. Mitchell: Sanderson.

Mr. Gallant: – Sanderson. So we can do that, and after his presentation, then we can deal with our priorities if we have the list in prior to that, for whenever we do pick the next meeting. Just an idea.

Chair: Yeah, if Sam's available.

Mr. Gallant: And when will we meet? In two weeks, a week?

Chair: That's coming up on our agenda when we – all right, so we are work plan –

Mr. Aylward: And I might add, too, Chair –

Chair: James.

Mr. Aylward: Thank you, Chair.

Not every meeting has to be one specific topic. Like, for instance, I had brought up psycho-educational assessments, and Minister Hudson had brought up social promotion. Those two subjects could very well be covered in one meeting, that sort of thing.

Chair: Yeah. Okay.

Ole?

Mr. Hammarlund: So if you're going to bring in Sam Sanderson, which is an excellent suggestion, should we bring in somebody from Holland College as well, get almost like a little bit of a panel feeling to it?

Chair: We could look at –

Mr. Aylward: It's a possibility.

Chair: – at that.

I know I heard from the different ideas; there was one specifically on the Holland College skills program and how we can beef that up; and then, James, what you had said about –

Mr. Aylward: (Indistinct)

Chair: – the PVI, refocus on that. So it might be – we can maybe see their availability and see. Yeah, okay.

Yes, Ernie.

Mr. Hudson: Just on that, Chair, I think too, when we do hear from these individuals, but if we can get their suggestions, opinions, on how it can be brought, as I'd mentioned, with regard to, you know, guidance counselors in the high school system as far as promoting and making aware, making students aware of where job opportunities are, what – and obviously Minister Aylward has raised a very valid point, that in order to attract qualified candidates into any trade, there has to be wages there that are going to attract those individuals; but I think that that is part and parcel of it, is to get that information to the students, and to find the very best way to get that to them.

Chair: Yeah, thank you.

Mr. Hudson: So that they do know, irregardless of whether they're going on to university or trades, but what prerequisites that they are going to require in order to get into any individual field.

Chair: Yeah.

Mr. Hudson: Thank you.

Chair: Thank you.

So next up, we've got the review of correspondence.

Does anybody have any correspondence yet?

So up next, we're on the discussion of scheduling. I believe our time that we've got set aside right now is Tuesday afternoons at this time, at 1:30. Does that work for everyone?

Coming up next we'll figure out how often we're going to meet, if that's going to be weekly, bi-weekly. Ryan had suggested that we keep the three-hour window, then that way we may not always need it, but at least it's there if we do. So those are some decisions that we can make. So Tuesday afternoons is okay –

Mr. Mitchell: Fine with me.

Chair: – for everyone?

Mr. Aylward: (Indistinct) Tuesday afternoons going from what time to what time?

Chair: Right now I think it's 1:30 to 4:30.

Mr. Aylward: (Indistinct)

Chair: Again, they may not always be necessary to go until 4:30, but it's there if we do need it.

And it's been suggested we look at an early September begin to our meetings. Is everyone good with that? I know September 3rd is the first Tuesday. Public Accounts is starting the following week or maybe that week.

Clerk Assistant: The day after.

Chair: The day after.

Clerk Assistant: The fourth.

Chair: The fourth, okay.

Does anyone have –

An Hon. Member: (Indistinct)

Chair: September 3rd would be the first.

Ole?

Mr. Hammarlund: Is there any way we can deal with the priorities and stuff, like, before that, so we kind of –

Chair: I think so.

Mr. Hammarlund: – off to a running start or –

Mr. Aylward: Yeah, we can do that electronically.

Chair: Yeah, we can do that by email.

Mr. Hammarlund: Yeah, yeah.

Chair: We can do that.

Mr. Aylward: Chair?

Chair: Yes.

Mr. Aylward: We're not available. Cabinet's not available, or Cabinet members are not available on the 3rd.

Chair: Okay.

Mr. Aylward: We have, right now, a tour scheduled.

Chair: Would we then move it to the following Tuesday?

Mr. Aylward: Or do you want to start earlier? Start a week earlier, before the end of August?

Mr. Mitchell: (Indistinct) what's the date?

Chair: The 27th would be the Tuesday.

Mr. Mitchell: I'll say fine.

Chair: Yeah?

Mr. Mitchell: (Indistinct)

Mr. Hudson: I'm fine with a week earlier.

Chair: Okay.

Ole? Does the 27th work for you as well?

I would say that may – I don't know if in our first meeting we'll have the presenters or if we will –

Clerk Assistant: Well, I could reach out to – it sounds like the construction association and Holland College – and see if they can come on August 27th?

Mr. Mitchell: (Indistinct)

Clerk Assistant: And if they can, great; if not, I'll inform the committee of that.

Chair: Okay.

Clerk Assistant: And we can proceed with another date or –

Chair: And maybe if they're not available on the 27th, maybe you could throw out the 10th and see –

Clerk Assistant: Sure.

Mr. Mitchell: Yeah.

Chair: – see if that works.

Clerk Assistant: Yeah.

Chair: Yeah, okay.

So our start date will depend on their availability?

Clerk Assistant: Sure.

Chair: Sounds good.

Is there anything else? And are we interested in meeting weekly, biweekly? What are everyone's feelings on that? Do we want to see how it looks once we get our –

Mr. Mitchell: Yeah, let's start on the 27th. So we already know 27th and 10th. We know we got two going. By the 10th, then we'll know do we need, you know, based on the amount of work that will be left, maybe biweekly will work, maybe it won't. When you lump the, I'll say, that'll take care of a lot of the post-secondary stuff. You know, maybe the deputy minister or director or somebody of education comes that could handle four items maybe. We'll have a better handle on it maybe on the 10th, but we know those two dates now.

Chair: Yeah, that sounds good to me.

Is everybody okay with that for now to start? Are you okay with that Ryan?

Clerk Assistant: Yeah.

Mr. Mitchell: And if the construction association and Holland College are available for the 27th, we can decide at that time who to schedule for the 10th.

It may be the department of education people. Everybody will be back to school then too, so it may work out well.

Chair: Yeah, sounds good.

Is there any new business yet? No?

Mr. Aylward: Just out of curiosity –

Chair: Yes, James?

Mr. Aylward: Thanks, Chair.

Are we still sticking with normal rules of standing committees and the Legislative Assembly with regards to dress code?

Clerk Assistant: Do you want me to take that?

Chair: Sure.

Clerk Assistant: Yes, normal rules of the Legislative Assembly, as committees would apply, including dress code.

Mr. Aylward: Okay.

Clerk Assistant: Rules and conventions, I should say.

An Hon. Member: (Indistinct)

Chair: Could I ask for someone to move the motion to adjourn?

Mr. Gallant: So moved.

Chair: Sonny Gallant.

Shall it carry? Carried.

Thank you very much.

Mr. Gallant: Good job, Chair.

The Committee adjourned