

# Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

## Oral Questions



**December 16, 2021**

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[*Translation*]

### IMMUNIZATION

**Mr. Melanson** (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[*Original*]

Mr. Speaker, I looked this morning on the website of the National Advisory Committee on Immunization, and it is still recommending a six-month interval for the third dose, the booster shot, for people who received the Pfizer and Moderna vaccines. Yesterday, there was an announcement from the government of Ontario that it decided that people aged 18 or older in its province, starting on Monday, will have to wait only three months to get the booster shots.

The Minister of Health said that Public Health was doing some analyses and looking at different things. Can the minister inform the population of New Brunswick as to whether part of that analysis is to potentially move from a six-month interval to a three-month interval, as Ontario has decided to do?

**Hon. Mrs. Shephard** (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Health, PC): Mr. Speaker, I appreciate this question. It is very timely, because last night, I actually sat on a federal-provincial-territorial call with my colleagues from across the country and Dr. Tam did address this. According to its recommendations, NACI is still recommending a six-month interval. It is true that when receiving the booster dose between the five-month and six-month interval, the efficacy is much higher and is retained longer.

At this time, we will be staying with our protocols that we set in place, with the six-month interval. Those who had their appointments in June and who are aged 50 and over can book their appointments this month. Those who had their second doses in June can book their third-dose appointments, their booster doses, in December. We are going to be continuing on this line, Mr. Speaker.

**Mr. Melanson** (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Thank you for the clarification, Mr. Speaker.

We know that when the vaccines became available, the government at that time offered and used the AstraZeneca vaccine for teachers. Teachers would be eligible now because it is beyond 21 days to get the booster shots, if I understand this well.

Mr. Speaker, it becomes even more important to have more accessibility to walk-in clinics, vaccination clinics, and immunizers in order to make sure that teachers who go back to the classroom—they are there now, and they will be there after Christmas, as we understand—get their booster shots. Last night at the Brookside Mall, there were about 300 to 400

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people in line outside. That is good. They want to get booster shots. The problem is that there is not enough accessibility. Can the minister give us an update on accessibility?

**Hon. Mrs. Shephard** (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Health, PC): Mr. Speaker, again, I appreciate this.

I will confirm that yesterday, we put 6 567 third doses into arms. We have booster walk-in clinics taking place in St. Stephen today and in Saint John today and tomorrow. More clinics are coming. We are looking at the plan. We actually have about 51 000 doses that we need to get into arms before the end of this month. We are on schedule to do that.

Again, until these clinics are confirmed with the resources in place and the locations... We will be bringing them out as quickly as we can. Mass clinics are going to be the way to go. It is how we can get the majority of people vaccinated in a very quick and efficient manner. We appreciate everyone who is showing up for these, knowing that if you got your second dose in June, you can get your third dose this month. We want to see you at these mass clinics. Thank you.

**Mr. Melanson** (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, I hope the minister is aware that people who want to get their third doses now and that children, actually, from 5 to 11 years old, who need to get their first doses are trying to book them and are getting appointments for late January. For teachers, for example, that is going to be quite late. School will return after Christmas, based on the announcement yesterday.

Accessibility to vaccination clinics needs to be the utmost priority of the government right now. Across the province—I did look on your website—there are some clinics, but, my gosh, we need more. Over the Christmas holidays, people will have more time, in a way, to be able to go and get their first shots, their second shots, or their booster shots. Minister, can you please make sure that we get more accessibility to vaccination clinics for this province?

**Mr. Speaker** (Hon. Mr. Oliver): Time.

**Hon. Mrs. Shephard** (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Health, PC): I can assure the Leader of the Opposition that we most certainly are, Mr. Speaker. Today, 4 000 50-plus boosters have already been booked for administration. There are 400 booked for today for those under the age of 12 to get their shots, plus the walk-ins. We are increasing capacity like we never increased it before and expanding it to so many, many age groups. I think, knowing that we are doing pediatric shots and knowing that we have 50-plus shots—our highest demographic in this province—and knowing that we are going to be able to get through them by the end of the month, it is of vital importance that this process continue.

I just want to say that when it comes to utilizing every resource, I want to take the opportunity to let you know that two locations in the Saint John region—the Saint John

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Sexual Health Centre and Horizon's Charlotte County Collaborative Wellness Centre—are going to be closed today to realign that staff for one day just to put needles into arms. This is going to happen all over the province.

**Mr. Speaker** (Hon. Mr. Oliver): Time.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Melanson** (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, my questions are not aimed at questioning the fact that certain walk-in clinics exist and also that appointments are being made. The problem is that the appointments are not until six weeks or approximately two months from now. That is far too long. The reason is that there are not enough walk-in clinics, and there is not enough access to vaccination clinics.

I think the provincial government's top priority—its top priority—should be to ensure that there are more clinics, even during the holidays, when people will have far more time to attend them. So, Mr. Speaker, yes, there are appointments, but they are too far in the future, in a context when teachers could go to the clinics earlier and everyone could attend them. I would like to have a far more concrete plan in terms of access to vaccination clinics.

[*Original*]

**Hon. Mrs. Shephard** (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Health, PC): I am going to try to address this question in two stages. First of all, we absolutely understand the need to expand on these clinics, and that is what we are doing. But, to the Leader of the Opposition's point, we want educators and their families as well as our medical professionals and their families to be able to be vaccinated. We need to protect this group of very valuable resource people in our communities. Notices will be going out to those individuals, I hope, today, so that we can get them coordinated.

But, as for those who have booked appointments, I already know several people and I am sure members in this House also know several people who have booked appointments but have now gone to walk-in clinics. They will cancel their appointments and free them up for other people, who are going to be available to have their boosters in January. This is a rolling, rolling... Every single day, things are going to be added to these clinics, making them available. People need to watch for them. If they go to a walk-in, they need to cancel their appointment.

**Mr. Speaker** (Hon. Mr. Oliver): Time, minister.

**Mr. Melanson** (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I just want to ask the minister a question regarding her reference to a positive case in the Miramichi. In her response to me yesterday, she said that at the Miramichi Hoop Classic basketball tournament, there were some cases or there was a case. I just want to understand whether

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she had the wrong information or just misspoke. The understanding we have about that particular situation is that it was an individual who was under 12 years old and unvaccinated. It was not an individual who was 12 years old or older and fully vaccinated. I hope that the information that has been provided to us by the minister is actually accurate. Maybe she can bring clarification.

**Hon. Mrs. Shephard** (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Health, PC): I appreciate that, Mr. Speaker. Public Health does its contract tracing, and it always posts public exposures. That is what I spoke to yesterday. We are seeing public exposures at several spots, and I gave some examples. Not to call anyone out, it is imperative that we... They asked for information, Mr. Speaker. We brought information to let them know why decisions are made when they are made, with the assistance of Public Health.

Public exposures happen all over this province, and you can look and see how many significant ones there are. But since our case counts are so extensive for children, younger people, we have had to take the measures that we have taken, and nobody likes it. We are assessing. We have reached out to Sport New Brunswick. We are going to be having conversations over the holidays to put good plans in place for the coming new year. Depending on our circumstances, the assessments will be done.

[*Translation*]

### PARAMEDICS

**Mr. Melanson** (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, last spring, with great fanfare and for the benefit of our paramedics, the government announced that this group of professionals would be reclassified. However, when that was done, paramedics were extremely clear about the aim of this move: They wanted better wages and better working conditions.

Here we are now, approximately eight months later—in late 2021—and, as far as I know, there are still no negotiations or even a collective agreement with our paramedics. There are still high hopes, but the reality is this: Nothing is happening with this government as regards our paramedics.

Like the paramedics, I would like to know this: Would it be possible to have a public update about what is happening with the collective agreement for this group of health care professionals?

[*Original*]

**Hon. Mr. Steeves** (Moncton Northwest, Minister of Finance and Treasury Board, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Thank you to the member across the way for the question. Talks do continue on that. I had a meeting about it the day before yesterday, Tuesday, or whatever day that was. It was Tuesday. The talks continue, member, through the chair. The

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sticking point is with long-term disability. We are trying to find a long-term disability plan that works best for the paramedics. The reclassification continues. The talks continue, and as soon as we get that worked out...

[Translation]

That is it.

[Original]

Then it should be good.

**Mr. Melanson** (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): From what I understand from the minister's response, the salaries, the wages, are all settled. That is resolved, and there are no more discussions or negotiations in terms of salaries. The only particular issue that is outstanding is the long-term disability plan for the paramedics. I think that is what you said. Everything else is resolved.

So, what I am understanding from the minister here today is that, through negotiations and discussions, everything is resolved other than the long-term disability program for our paramedics. Is that clearly what you just said here, minister?

**Hon. Mr. Steeves** (Moncton Northwest, Minister of Finance and Treasury Board, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the member opposite. No, that is not what I said at all. What I said was that we are working on the long-term disability plan.

I am not going to comment on everything else in the contract. I am absolutely not going to comment on everything else in the contract. I told you that meetings are ongoing. Discussions are ongoing, and the long-term disability plan is something that we are having a hard time putting together. Anyway, we will get that done. The reclassification was at their request, and we will follow through on it and do what this government does best, which is solving problems for all New Brunswickers.

## OFFICIAL LANGUAGES

**Mr. Melanson** (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, yesterday a very important report was made public. The report on the revisions to the *Official Languages Act*, which is a very important piece of legislation for our province, has been made public. We, as the Liberal Party and as the official opposition, see very positive recommendations in it. We know that there have been a lot of positive reactions to those recommendations from around the province.

This morning, one of the commissioners, Madam Justice Finn, was on the radio saying that she has met with the Premier on this report. Yesterday, the Premier said that he had not

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read it, but that does not really matter. What really matters is that the report is out. It is public. There are some really good recommendations. We want to hear from the Premier regarding the clear position of the government. Are you going to accept all these recommendations?

**Hon. Mr. Higgs** (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, I received the full report yesterday or the day before. It was just within the past few days, but I have not read it and all the comments and everything else that goes with it. Through the process, I think that a lot of people met with the commissioners, who received views and input. In any case, I think that the commissioners did a great job. I certainly commend them on doing that and on pulling all this work together and talking to so many people throughout the province to get input.

I, along with everyone in this Legislature, take the *Official Languages Act* very seriously. We want to review it and to take the time to do just that. We know that the bilingual nature of our province is something that we cherish. We know that as a culture, it is something that we want to expand on. We also want to have everyone in the province to be able to learn both languages. My colleague across the aisle was talking about the success of those pilot projects, and I think those are very, very encouraging. I will take the time to get briefed and to review the report in great detail. Then, in the future, I will comment on the next steps.

**Mr. Speaker** (Hon. Mr. Oliver): Time, Premier.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Bourque** (Kent South, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In light of the comments made by the Leader of the Opposition and the Premier, I, too, want to thank the commissioners for the report on the review of the *Official Languages Act*. This report is very comprehensive and positive. We appreciate the commitment of these commissioners to this important process.

This is a very comprehensive report, with excellent recommendations. The Premier says he wants to revise it, and that is fine. That being said, there are two recommendations that I would particularly like to bring up because they, especially, have caught our attention. They deal with the establishment of a Legislative Assembly standing committee on official languages and the establishment of a government department of official languages. I would like to know if the Premier can show some openness to these recommendations. Better yet, could we move forward so that these recommendations can be implemented?

[*Original*]

**Hon. Mr. Higgs** (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, as a correction, I said that I want to review the report in detail, not to revise it. I just want to reflect and to correct that, of the member's statement. That is our



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intent. We will certainly review the report in great detail to understand the recommendations and the implications and what they look like and how they further our capabilities in this province.

I stand by what I just said in terms of congratulating the commissioners. I also want to point out that they delivered the report on time. I remember, going back to when they were first appointed, there was a lot of criticism—that they could not do it, that it would not get done in a year, and that they were late getting started. There was all that stuff. They delivered it on time, and I would say that it was several weeks early, because they had until the end of the month. I guess when people focus on getting their job done and they have the commitment to do so, as we saw from both these commissioners, they do just that.

So I am looking forward to the details. I am looking forward to understanding all the implications and how they will move us forward, and I will take the time to do just that. Thank you.

**Mr. Bourque** (Kent South, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I appreciate the Premier's words. I do hope that he will not take too much time. I am happy to see that the commissioners submitted the report on time. I am hoping that the Premier will also not take too much time in reviewing it and that he will move things forward.

Also, as a follow-up, the review commissioners as well as the current Commissioner of Official Languages have identified the lack of communication and the lack of promotion of the purpose and the benefits of the *Official Languages Act*. The structures that they recommend will help, but the commissioners also indicate that more effort must be put into promoting the Act. In addition to making investments in new structures, the ones that we have been discussing, is the Premier also prepared to make the investments required to ensure that this Act, which is unique within Canada's provinces and territories, is widely and effectively promoted? Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

**Hon. Mr. Higgs** (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, I think that we are also waiting, too, for the report on education, which will come forward sometime in the new year, in January. I think that it is a combination of looking at both.

As I have often said—and I know that the Minister of Education is reviewing that and the success that is coming out of the pilot project that we talked about earlier—we need to find a way for all our kids to come out of school speaking both official languages, at least in a conversational style so that we can have better communication capabilities throughout our province. Mr. Speaker, having a system that, for 50 years, has not been able to achieve that is certainly a concern. It is a big concern. I am sure that I share with all my colleagues here that it is a reality that we have to fix. I am hopeful.

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You know, we will get the second report. We will look at that, and we will combine it with the promotion of our bilingual nature in our province and how we thrive to just get better all the time. We will come up with a path forward that gets better results for all. Thank you.

### RACISM

**Mr. G. Arseneault** (Campbellton-Dalhousie, L): Mr. Speaker, in the absence of undertaking an inquiry into the deaths of Chantel Moore and Rodney Levi, the government announced in September the appointment of the Commissioner on Systemic Racism, and she began her work in October. The announcement outlined the objectives of her work in general terms, including the groups with whom she would consult. She is to document the experiences of these groups and individuals and to come up with recommendations for government on the development of a provincial strategy and an action plan on systemic racism.

Can the Minister of Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour share details of the commissioner's full mandate? If not, can he expand on the specific areas where systemic racism occurs that the commissioner is to consider in her assessment?

**Hon. Ms. Dunn** (Saint John Harbour, Minister responsible for Economic Development and Small Business, Minister responsible for Opportunities NB, Minister responsible for Immigration, Minister of Aboriginal Affairs, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the member opposite, thank you for this very important question. The mandate of the commissioner is actually to study the implications of systemic racism and also to report back to the government with respect to what those implications are as well as what her recommendations are. She does actually have until next fall to complete that report, and we are looking forward to receiving it. We will share the information with you when it becomes available. Thank you.

[Translation]

### OFFICIAL LANGUAGES

**Mr. K. Arseneau** (Kent North, G): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I will get back to the issue of the *Report of the 2021 Review of the Official Languages Act of New Brunswick*. I also want to thank commissioners Finn and McLaughlin for their excellent work.

One of the proposals in this report is the creation of a standing committee on official languages. The report states:

*The establishment of a Standing Committee on Official Languages of the Legislative Assembly. This committee will be a legitimate forum for elected officials to engage in frank and constructive discussions on the official languages situation in New Brunswick.*



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I could not agree more. The Premier did not just find out about this yesterday, because we have been talking about it here in the House for two and a half years, Mr. Speaker. Today, I would like to know whether the Premier can make a clear commitment to move a motion that would create a standing committee on official languages at the Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick.

[Original]

**Hon. Mr. Higgs** (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, as I have answered here previously today, the report is something that we are reviewing now, with our having just received it. We will do so, and we will look at all the recommendations—I am not going to single out any particular one—so as to understand the benefits and the pros and cons of what we can move forward on. As I just said, this connects with the whole education policy and how we can improve our capabilities in both systems in terms of producing bilingual graduates to meet the needs of a province that is on the move, a province that is growing.

But as for adopting here, in the House, a particular recommendation ahead of another one, I am not prepared to do that today, and it would not be fair. It would not be fair to the commissioners for me to pick and choose, with my not having had the time to read it in depth with regard to the implications, what will work, and how it might work. So I think that it is only prudent to understand the full depth of the report and the full depth of the recommendations. Thank you.

[Translation]

**Mr. K. Arseneau** (Kent North, G): This is just stalling. We have been talking about creating this kind of committee for two and a half years now.

The Premier mentioned the second report, which will deal with the issue of education. I want to thank commissioners Finn and McLaughlin, who clearly understood that this component of the review does not come under the *Official Languages Act*. So, I want to thank them for waiting and separating the two reports.

Mr. Speaker, my second question is about another part of the report tabled yesterday, namely the issue of language of work. We know that, in New Brunswick, it is very hard to work in your own language within the civil service. I want to know how the Premier interprets this. Does he think that civil servants, those New Brunswickers who work in the civil service, have the right to work in their own language in this province?

[Original]

**Mr. Speaker** (Hon. Mr. Oliver): Time.

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**Hon. Mr. Higgs** (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, I do not think that it is about... My interpretation, as such, at this stage, is that it is about how we create a system that is fair and equitable for all. That is why I go back to the education system. After 50 years, we should be graduating, without exception, bilingual students in this province. And that does not mean that you are a linguistic major. It means that you are able to converse in both languages. That is a fundamental, so unless we figure out how to fix that, we will be talking forever about these issues in our province.

In the element of many things that we are trying to accomplish is fixing things for the long haul so New Brunswick has a future of improving and always getting better and building our communities closer together by dealing with issues that, yes, are sensitive but that need to be fixed so that we do have—we do have—a system that really works for everyone. I do think that the two are connected, and I am very excited to say that we can fix this and that together we can have a bilingual province that we are all extremely proud of, Mr. Speaker.

**Mr. Speaker** (Hon. Mr. Oliver): Time, Premier.

## CYBERSECURITY

**Mr. Austin** (Fredericton-Grand Lake, Leader, PA): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The provincial government had temporarily deactivated some online services as a preventative measure due to a new global online security threat called Log4j. We have been told that there is no indication that provincial government services have been impacted and that government staff are working to access and mitigate any risk to provincial government websites and applications. Of course, we know what happened in Newfoundland and Labrador last month when it underwent an IT system outage due to an unprecedented cyberattack. As a matter of fact, one expert called it the worst cyberattack in Canadian history.

My question is for the minister responsible for cybersecurity. With cyberattacks on the rise, what is being done to ensure that the province's IT system is secure enough to protect it from those who engage in these types of criminal activities?

**Hon. Mr. Steeves** (Moncton Northwest, Minister of Finance and Treasury Board, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the member and leader of his party for the question. Yes, Newfoundland is in a real fix right now. I was talking to the Finance Minister from Newfoundland about that earlier this week.

Right now, Finance and Treasury Board and Service New Brunswick continuously monitor threats through a dedicated security operations centre staffed with highly trained cybersecurity professionals who receive ongoing skills training. We are investing \$10 million per year right now in technology to protect GNB assets and to protect the information of the government of New Brunswick and, ultimately, the information of the citizens of New Brunswick, right?



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We have regular threat risk assessments, cybersecurity awareness, and mandatory cyber training for public servants in cutting-edge technology. It is all part of the daily work that we are doing to make GNB safe and to make the information for the citizens safe as well.

### RACISM

**Mr. G. Arseneault** (Campbellton-Dalhousie, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My first question was on clarifying the mandate of the commissioner. I will continue on that line.

*[Translation]*

Mr. Speaker, I understand the importance of assessing areas like health care, education, social development, employment, and criminal justice. So, I suppose each government department with responsibility for these areas will be reviewed and assessed by the commissioner and her team.

*[Original]*

Can the minister tell us whether these departments as well as the central agencies of government, namely, the Executive Council Office, Finance and Treasury Board, and the Premier's Office, would also come under the mandate of the commissioner—straight answer?

**Hon. Ms. Dunn** (Saint John Harbour, Minister responsible for Economic Development and Small Business, Minister responsible for Opportunities NB, Minister responsible for Immigration, Minister of Aboriginal Affairs, PC): Thank you to the member opposite for the question. Mr. Speaker, we are going to be looking across all sectors of the government to identify what the implications of systemic racism are, what the level of systemic racism is within our legislative policies, what we can do to actually look at it and fix it, and what the recommendations moving forward are with respect to all those government departments across Social Development, Health, Education, and Justice and Public Safety. Thank you.

*[Translation]*

### PARAMEDICS

**Mr. Melanson** (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, with regard to the situation of our paramedics, the minister changed his mind between his first and second answers, but the fact remains: It has been eight months since the transfer took place, and these health care professionals were under the impression that, by agreeing to this change... Clearly, this announcement was made before the last election in order to get these people's support, but I do not know whether the government got it or not.

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That being said, there is a collective agreement that will expire soon, and this government always drags its heels with regard to the various collective agreements. When it has its back to the wall, then it gets moving and reacts. Finally, it addresses the situation.

Given that our paramedics are hopeful about receiving a significant wage increase and decent working conditions, can the minister tell us when this situation will be resolved?

*[Original]*

**Mr. Speaker** (Hon. Mr. Oliver): Time.

**Hon. Mr. Steeves** (Moncton Northwest, Minister of Finance and Treasury Board, PC): Do we have an exact date when it is going to be solved? No, we do not have an exact date. We continue to work on the situation with the paramedics. We continue with that. The first step was to get the reclassification done. That is done, but we have to get the contract signed. We continue to work on the contract. Is it going to be done before Christmas? I do not know.

Right now, we are dealing with the pandemic, and we are dealing with a lot of other things that are on the go as well. There are a lot of things on the go. All of them are important. And we will continue to work with the paramedics and get that reclassification done. Thank you, member.

**Mr. Speaker** (Hon. Mr. Oliver): The time for question period is over.