

HANSARD

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COMMITTEE

ON

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS

Wednesday, March 9, 2011

COMMITTEE ROOM 1

**Department of Education
Program Spending**

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WITNESSES

Department of Education

Ms. Rosalind Penfound, Deputy Minister
Mr. Frank Dunn, Chief Operating Officer, Corporate Services Branch
Mr. Alan Lowe, Senior Executive Director, Public Schools



House of Assembly
Nova Scotia

HALIFAX, WEDNESDAY, MARCH 9, 2011

STANDING COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC ACCOUNTS

9:00 A.M.

CHAIRMAN

Ms. Diana Whalen

VICE-CHAIRMAN

Mr. Howard Epstein

MADAM CHAIRMAN: I'd like to call our meeting to order, I think we have our quorum and it's nine o'clock right now. To begin with, a welcome to our guests. Our witnesses today are from the Department of Education and our program on the agenda is education program spending.

To begin, as we usually do, we'll introduce ourselves and then move to the opening statements from the deputy minister, so could we begin with Mr. Porter.

[The committee members introduced themselves.]

MADAM CHAIRMAN: I'll ask you to introduce your people with you as well, if you would, Ms. Penfound.

MS. ROSALIND PENFOUND: Thank you, good morning. I'm Rosalind Penfound, Deputy Minister of Education. I have with me Frank Dunn, the Chief Operating Officer for the Department of Education and Dr. Alan Lowe, who is the Senior Executive Director of Public Schools. In the back row here for moral support is Don Glover, he is the Director of Special Education.

Thank you to the committee for the invitation to present here today. We welcome the opportunity to speak this morning about the important work we have ahead of us. Education is a priority for government and underpins two of government's key commitments - growing the economy and jobs. It is also the cornerstone for personal fulfillment of and the social growth of our children.

At the same time, our department and the school boards must live within their means. Education, like all government departments, has a role to play in helping to balance the books. Government spends \$1.1 billion on our public education system. To sustain for the long term, we must be smart with our resources, match our limited resources with the needs and number of students. Like the rest of the world, we are living in a time of fiscal restraint, a significant enough challenge in and of itself, but we are also challenged by demographics. We have a system designed for a much bigger school population, the boomers and the children of the boom generation.

Enrolments have dropped every year since 1971. Today, about 128,000 students are in our system - almost 30,000 fewer students than a decade ago. The trend will continue for at least another decade; almost 7,000 fewer in the next three years and 15,000 fewer by 2020. Yet over the last 10 years investments in education increased by 43 per cent, or \$320 million. We hired more teachers, more consultants, more teacher assistants and more core professionals. Administration grew along with those investments by about 30 per cent, even as enrolments dropped by 18 per cent. As well, negotiated wage increases contributed to the increased spending.

Programs and resources added have been positive but increases of these magnitudes set against the ongoing and steady collapse in enrolment is not sustainable. The department and boards recognize we have to better align the system with the number of students and do so in a way that will not, or at least will limit, unwanted impacts on student learning.

The road to getting there has been, and I suspect will continue to be, bumpy. These are challenging times. Decisions we make must be realistic and position students in the province for success. We recognize that to get there we need to have a key priority for DOE and boards and our other partners in building a shared vision of education in the 21st Century. We are engaged now in a visioning exercise with our partners, which include the Nova Scotia School Boards Association, Nova Scotia Teachers Union, Home and School Association and other partners.

Also, we are getting advice from Dr. Ben Levin, who is the Canada Research Chair in Education Leadership at the U of T and he tells us that he will focus in his report on five key areas. Reducing failure in the system - not just failing a grade but failure to achieve desired outcomes and reach your potential. He also will focus on improving daily teacher practices, recognizing that we have excellent teachers in the system but the key to students' success is being sure that they are as effective as possible. Better use of

facilities will be another area that we expect him to comment on, as well as expanding learning outside formal school offerings and building public support for a strong, sustainable system.

We hope to have this report by the end of the month. We will use it as we plan for the future, in consultation with our partners and the public. This will start us on a path towards a school system that is more effective in meeting the needs of a declining school population.

The future is closing in on us quickly and we need to ensure that funding goes where it is needed most. We need to examine expanding use of on-line video conferencing and distance education, streamlining course options and better use of school infrastructure, just to name a few.

We are working closely with boards to make sure that at the end of the day, we make the best decisions for students and for public education within the current fiscal climate. School boards continue to do good work and deliver high-quality education to our youth, as do our many dedicated teachers and employees who are committed to our kids and their learning success. The Department of Education is here to help with those current challenges.

The minister provided boards with their budget targets for 2011, an overall reduction of 1.65 per cent provincially. Providing these targets in February gave boards the ability to plan. Like all other departments, like all other publicly funded agencies, like every Nova Scotia family, like all of us, they will also have to manage their inflationary pressures and absorb them.

Boards were given parameters aimed at protecting the most vulnerable in our system, special needs funding, O2, et cetera. We asked boards to find savings as much as possible through attrition. We know these are challenges, the department is going through the very same exercise. Over the coming weeks and months, we are going to continue to talk, discuss options and work together to find realistic solutions to address the fiscal reality of the province and protect the classroom.

We have an excellent relationship with school board staff, and we'll work together in the best interests of the children of this province. With that, I'll end, and we are happy to take your questions.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Thank you, Ms. Penfound, I appreciate that. As is our custom here we have the 20-minute rounds and we'll begin with the Liberal caucus for the next 20 minutes. Mr. McNeil.

HON. STEPHEN MCNEIL: Thank you, deputy and our guests coming in. It's great to see you in your new role. I had an opportunity to work with you in your . . .

MS. PENFOUND: It has just been a ton of fun.

MR. MCNEIL: Yes. You mentioned in your opening at one point, 6 per cent reduction, that number is being floated around. When you add in the fact that government negotiated the number of collective bargaining increases in salaries, what is the real number that these school boards will have to absorb?

MS. PENFOUND: I think that's a fair comment. Certainly, we have told boards as other public agencies they have to absorb those pressures. The 1.65 per cent is an average over boards, so it will vary from board to board and, of course, the pressures will be different from board to board because they have different funding streams. In conversation with boards we have had them estimate it is probably more in the 3 per cent to 4 per cent range when you factor in those costs that must be absorbed.

MR. MCNEIL: Which board is going to be hit with the largest number? Will it be here in HRM or will you see that across . . .

MS. PENFOUND: I think we have the percentages by board, Frank.

MR. FRANK DUNN: One of the things we did with the 1.65 per cent, that's a provincial average. We capped the maximum reduction that any one board would take this year, just shy of 2.5 per cent. The Halifax board is somewhere around 1 per cent, the French board is at zero.

MR. MCNEIL: You had also mentioned in your opening and you referred to Dr. Ben Levin and that you would be waiting for Dr. Levin to come forward with - I think his report is due at the end of this month. You also mentioned that you were going through an exercise with school boards, the NSSBA, to find efficiencies to see if you can improve outcomes for students. Was that correct?

MS. PENFOUND: Yes, we started last Fall working with the Nova Scotia School Boards Association on what we've been calling a visioning exercise. It has very much been a discussion around not what's happening today, although we can't dismiss that, we have to understand the current context, but more thinking about what does the education system need to look at in five years, in 10 years, what do our students need to succeed in the 21st Century?

I would characterize it as kind of a big think exercise, what is the plan for the future, what is education going to look like in the future, what are the demands on the students to meet the 21st Century. We think that Dr. Ben Levin's report - and we discussed this and we've actually had him meet with that visioning group - will be a key part of that. Those things together will be a jumping off spot for planning for the future.

We expect Ben Levin to give us some hallmarks of what a good system would look like, things that we should focus on. He won't give us the formula to do this, do that in terms of managing our budget or what our day-to-day decisions are, but say here are some of the key things that you need to focus on to be sure that given your realities about demographics and your realities about geography and your realities about money, here are the things that I think you should focus on. We think we can then use that in this visioning committee and engage the public in a discussion about what does that mean for us, what does it tell us we need to do, what should we be targeting to look like in five years, in 10 years or whatever.

MR. MCNEIL: The history of this government has been to reach out to consultants to hire them to give them a direction on where they want to go and then by and large they fall in behind, whether it's Tim O'Neill, Dr. John Ross, the list goes on. Your department has hired Dr. Ben Levin and without hearing from him and without hearing from that, the department has made a decision to cut the Reading Recovery program. I'm curious why you would have gone out in front of Dr. Levin to make that announcement when the minister was in in early January?

MS. PENFOUND: I guess maybe that begs an explanation of the process in terms of how we got to where we are on the budget. We began a process in the Fall with school boards where we asked them to look at a funding scenario. We told them right from the beginning that this was designed so that we could have a menu of options, we could look at what are the things that we could do if we all recognized there was going to be less money and fewer students, what are the kinds of things that we can collectively do to try to shrink the system a bit, to get some money out, to make sure we're still meeting student needs.

That gave rise to a whole suite of options and a whole number of choices. Those choices boiled down to decisions that government made about where we should go and what we thought were the right choices to make in terms of being sure that we could continue to meet student outcomes. We're pretty confident we can do that.

We know that taking money out of the system is never going to be easy, but we also know that there's not an unlimited pot and we have to find a way to match what we spend with the number of students that we have.

MR. MCNEIL: No one would suggest that there's an unlimited pot and no one would suggest that - all departments are going to have to be part of the solution, as all Nova Scotians are going to be. But what was the foundation for cutting Reading Recovery? Where was the basis for making that decision which, quite frankly, appeared to be out of the blue? It appears to be more of a budget exercise in the sense we identified a little over \$7 million, it looked like a line that we could eliminate. Where's the report, who was the mastermind behind suggesting that the educational outcomes for that program were not worth \$7 million?

MS. PENFOUND: I'll make a few general comments and then I'll ask Dr. Lowe to jump in. We would never say that Reading Recovery is not a quality program. We think it is and there are lots of people who believe it is good, there are lots of children who have benefited from it. We have many children in Nova Scotia who have benefited from that program.

Our concern or our desire is to move away from a program where we pay a licensing fee and we pay money to train people for a copyrighted program - albeit a good one and well accepted by many people - that is targeted at the bottom 20 per cent of Grade 1 students. We feel that we should be looking at a program or developing measures that would affect more children than those bottom 20 per cent of Grade 1, that we should be looking at starting with addressing early intervention for reading issues in Primary and that we should have programs that continue right through to Grade 3.

One of our most significant measures is, how are kids doing in Grade 3? I've heard people say and it stuck with me that up until about Grade 3, kids are learning to read, but by Grade 3 you are reading to learn, so if you haven't got reading nailed by Grade 3, it's a significant issue. We believe that although Reading Recovery has served us very well in many instances, we think that we should have a broader approach that deals with more children over those first four years of their primary education, as opposed to focusing on an individual pull-out program that deals with children one-on-one; we think there are other ways to go about it. With your permission I would ask Dr. Lowe to jump in because he will have more information on this.

MR. ALAN LOWE: I wanted to focus a little bit on last year's results from the Grade 3 early literacy assessments done by the province. Last year, 7,244 students in total wrote that evaluation. In that cohort, 1,476 had received Reading Recovery in 2007-08. Not all of them were able to write the assessment - 156 between the Reading Recovery experience and the assessment had been put on individual program plans and then were exempted from writing the assessment.

Of the ones who had taken Reading Recovery, 1,318 wrote the early elementary exam evaluation assessment. The total who were successful was 563. Forty-three per cent were successful, 57 per cent were not successful - this was on silent reading I should point out.

When you look at the students in total who were not successful and take out those who had been in Reading Recovery, we still have 1,128 students who were not successful in that assessment, which is the early stages of reading. That's a great concern to us. We have the 43 per cent who had Reading Recovery who had been more successful in that and that's a great testament to the strength of the program. However, we had 57 per cent who were not and added to that, we had another 1,000 students who were unsuccessful. That's a great concern for us.

Now what are the factors exactly that led . . .

MR. MCNEIL: Can I just talk to you about it - and I'll go to the deputy. I appreciate your numbers. One of the things that is not being articulated well here is this is the bottom 20 per cent of the student population when it comes to literacy, some of whom have come into that program without, quite frankly, having the ability to hold a book properly.

Your numbers are based on those students who have reached the level of 16 per cent, I believe it is, by the time they get to leaving Grade 1. It doesn't take into account the child who, quite frankly, when they were originally tested, was at zero and has ended up at reaching the level of 12, which is a huge growth, a huge difference for that child and many children throughout that program.

What is interesting - and the things that you are identifying, boards have identified already. For example, the Chignecto board has had an add-on program that has moved in and taken - it's not a replacement for Reading Recovery, as a matter of fact they will quite openly tell you it is an addition to Reading Recovery, it is a supplement to that program. The South Shore board is doing the same thing. Not only are they doing it prior to Reading Recovery but they are also extending it beyond Grade 3 into Grade 4, to help some of those early readers who are having challenges.

The Reading Recovery is working with the lowest part of our population, the bottom 20 per cent. We are now talking about potentially getting rid of that program without a replacement. It would have made sense that someone would have gone through these numbers and come up and said you know is not satisfactory to us and that's your right as a department and right as government to say that. But to go out and scrap a program that is dealing with the most vulnerable children with literacy in our school population, without a replacement, without some way to be able to say to parents or to students or to people who sit in the Nova Scotia Legislature, here is a better value for money because that's what it is all about, according to what this exercise is going through, and in the meantime we're also going to improve educational outcomes.

There has to be somewhere inside of the department that someone has said, we've got a program that gives better outcomes. I would hope that it's the Minister of Finance and the Finance Department's job to really battle about money; it is your department's job to do about educational outcomes and improve the education for our children. I would hope that the changes being made are about educational outcomes. I would ask the deputy minister, what will be the new program come September 1st that will give better outcomes for the student population of the Province of Nova Scotia, or are the parents whose children are going into Grade 1 this year just out of luck?

MS. PENFOUND: Parents of children going into Grade 1 are absolutely not out of luck. When government announced that they would discontinue Reading Recovery,

part of the announcement was that it will be replaced with a program that we felt would be more equitable and would reach more students.

MR. MCNEIL: What is that program?

MS. PENFOUND: It's not a defined program, in terms of - we are not going out and buying a program off the shelf. We have very active work underway right now with school boards, we absolutely intend to have in place by September early intervention reading resources for children from Primary to Grade 3. Some of the hallmarks of that would be that it would not be an individual pullout program - again, Dr. Lowe can jump in and help me here - that it would engage reading specialists with classroom teachers. Our belief is that we can do that and be more equitable across the system and reach more students effectively.

MR. MCNEIL: You're saying equitable, you mean you're talking about money.

MS. PENFOUND: No, I'm talking about more children, reaching more children.

MR. MCNEIL: Where, within the department, was there a report or study done that says that the one-on-program does not provide the best results? Do you have some studies, someone who you could . . .

MS. PENFOUND: We regularly measure, and as Dr. Lowe mentioned, we have the results from our last Grade 3 outing and Alan, you have some information there about the last assessment of Reading Recovery results.

MR. LOWE: Yes, if I go through the Reading Recovery results by board, the successfully discontinuing rate in the table that I have here, in 2009-10 for one board was 30 per cent, for another board it was 57 per cent, for another it was 55 per cent, for another it was 75.8 per cent and 51 per cent and 56 per cent.

MR. MCNEIL: Can I just ask you that 55 per cent, that's a child reaching the maximum? That's coming to that grade level of reading, right?

MR. LOWE: Yes.

MR. MCNEIL: Where in your stats does it refer to the child who was at zero and is at 11 now, as opposed to 16, where is that reflected in the second round of your figures? It's not, right?

MR. LOWE: No.

MR. MCNEIL: Right. So you're basing this program on a number which is reaching the maximum of efficiency in reading from a child who started out at zero,

without the ability, in some cases, having seen a book or holding a book, which is not an exaggeration, and has improved from there to where they are almost, quite frankly, reaching the level but they're not there, so they don't show up in that stat so we consider that a failure.

MR. LOWE: It's a matter for concern.

MR. MCNEIL: It sure is but when you look at that growth in that child over that period of time, how can we define that as a failure and where - and if we made the decision, if the department has made the decision or government has made the decision to get rid of Reading Recovery, it is incumbent on the people in charge of the public education system in the Province of Nova Scotia to have something to replace it with.

Here is the challenge that Nova Scotia students and parents have, now their children who are having literacy challenges, the government tells them that the program that they feel has been providing them good results, boards are telling us they've been getting good results and they look at not just the initial number been getting good results, government says it is no longer good enough, we are going to replace it with a program and no one can tell them what that program is.

We are now into March, and school boards are making decisions. Their budget is eaten up. The budget that gets announced tomorrow or next week - I'd like it to be tomorrow but I guess it's not quite tomorrow - when we go back in the House next month, there's contractual obligations that school boards are going to have to meet until at least August 1st and yet we can't tell them what that program is going to be.

I'm looking for some direction from the deputy on this. This does not look like something that was talking about education outcomes, this looks like a budget exercise of the Department of Finance. This does not look like something that the Department of Education is doing.

I would ask the deputy, has there been - which boards - or if this didn't come from the department, in terms of cancelling this program, which board and superintendent advised the department they weren't happy with Reading Recovery?

MS. PENFOUND: I couldn't tell you that any of those superintendents told us that they were not happy with Reading Recovery. I wouldn't for a minute want to say that those students that you are speaking about have not been well served but we are about trying to get the best value for money and serving the most number of students. We feel we can do that with a program that is not a one-on-one pullout, that is focused more on intervention in the classroom, using resources that we have in schools. We have 300-and some teachers who have been involved in Reading Recovery. We have a lot of resources and we think we can apply that.

MR. MCNEIL: You feel that but what is that based on? I guess that's what people are struggling with. You have this Reading Recovery program, which there is a cost to it and there is a cost to your new program. You're not suggesting that, there is a cost to that.

To say that we're going to just be able to take it out and we're going to be able to improve outcomes, without being able to tell the student population, parents, school boards and community what your program is - how do you know what the outcomes are going to be if you don't even know what the program is?

MS. PENFOUND: We know, and I think again I can ask Dr. Lowe to jump in, we know the hallmarks, what research tells us what the most important factors are that lead to good outcomes for children. Now you may want to jump in on the work that is being done and what we intend to be doing in September.

MR. LOWE: We are meeting with the literacy experts from the board. What has happened over the last few years is that because we had Reading Recovery, we have a large number of teachers who are training in Reading Recovery, which is absolutely the best training you can get, being an expert in literacy and how children learn.

In the program itself, teachers who are doing Reading Recovery are required to return to the classroom after five years, so we have people who are training in Reading Recovery who are now in the classrooms and I'm told from people at the boards that virtually in every school in Nova Scotia we have these experts in the school.

What our program is being designed to do is to tap into that expertise so that the experts in the schools can be freed up to work with children in small groups and individually and work with the classroom teacher at the same time, not a pullout program. The skills and strategies that these people have learned over the years to add to their experience, they will be modelling for teachers and they will actually have teachers carrying out some of the strategies while they are still in the classroom.

This is the growing of capacity based on the expertise that we have invested in over these last years. I think it's a logical next step to the Reading Recovery assets that we have built up in the province.

MR. MCNEIL: What's the cost of your new program?

MS. PENFOUND: The amount of money that we had previously in the budget was \$7 million. We will be reducing that amount by about \$2 million, in terms of the actual dollar amount that we spent on Reading Recovery. However, we will also be working with boards to apply resources that are already resident in our resource teachers and other specialists in the schools, so we anticipate that there will actually be much more than \$5 million applied when we gather those resources together.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Thank you, your time is up for this round so we'll have another chance in a little while. We'll go now to Mr. d'Entremont for the Progressive Conservative caucus.

HON. CHRISTOPHER D'ENTREMONT: Thank you very much, Madam Chairman. I am just going to ask a few questions and then pass it on to the MLA for Hants West.

Just a quick explanation of my family. I have an eight-year-old who, as he went through Grade 1, did participate in the Reading Recovery program. My child had trouble reading and actually still has a bit of trouble reading but is far ahead of where he would have been had he not received this training, this work with him during his time in Grade 1. He is in the French program so this is not only Reading Recovery, but this is Reading Recovery readapted for the francophone school system, so it is a full extension of that.

I can say that over his time he went from a - I believe it was a six that he could read at, that he did get to the 16 in the allotted period of time. So he is much better off today, now that he is in Grade 3 reading along, than he was at that time, or had he not been able to receive that kind of program.

The concern I have is that we keep talking about a budget exercise, we keep talking about a program that we're paying a licensing fee to a company, I believe in New Zealand, yet we're not really talking about what that new program is going to be in September. I understand what maybe some of that work is going to be but if I understand the training that the school teachers need to go through, the schools need to have, the kids need to have, to have that ready for September, I don't know how that timeline is going to work. You need to be ready now to have something ready for September. From what I'm hearing from the questioning from the Liberal Leader is, really, you're not quite sure yet. How are you going to use those assets?

So really what is this discussion over? How much money or how much has the Minister of Finance asked you to cut and how much is this one little program worth that gives so much to our children?

MS. PENFOUND: Well as I mentioned in the previous question, there was roughly \$7 million in targeted funding that went to school boards. That amount has been reduced by about \$2 million. But again, we don't say that it is just \$5 million that will be applied to reading early intervention. We know that there are resources out there in schools that will be mobilized, including our resource teachers, and we are confident that within a month we are going to have boards know exactly how we will be deploying resources and be tooled up and ready to go.

I've met your children and I'm sure they continue to do well. I understand and am pleased to hear that your son benefitted from Reading Recovery. I guess what I would say

is, I think your son could also have benefitted from a program where he wasn't pulled out of his class, didn't perhaps miss math or phys ed because was off for an hour doing reading but was doing a reading program in the class, with perhaps a small group of other students, with his teacher assisted by a reading coach, so that collectively we were applying resources in a way that benefitted more children and that he would have achieved the same kind of success and, in fact, more children would have been able to participate and benefit from that kind of success.

MR. D'ENTREMONT: Well I have to disagree with you there. If I qualified the amount of work that he received one-on-one with the teacher - that was the service that he required. To know Alec - he's a wonderful eight-year-old now but to know him, he is interested in everything that is going on around him, from the colour of the T-shirt of the kid next to him to the hockey game that happened last night to the games that they are going to be playing on the school grounds, so his concentration in the classroom is almost nominal when it comes to reading.

I did have an opportunity to accompany him to a couple of his sessions, where we're seeing him through the screen and to see the concentration that he needed, without any other interventions, was incredible. He actually had to grab his head and look down at that piece of paper as the teacher was going through the words with him, trying to get him to the end of that sentence. To think that he could do that in a classroom, I don't agree with that.

MS. PENFOUND: I want to clarify that we're not saying that there would never be a time when a student wouldn't need individual attention and might need some pullout time. Our commitment, though, is that we will have a program that is focused more on making sure classroom teachers can do the best they can to support children in reading and that that can be achieved largely in small groups, where more children will benefit, but there absolutely will be cases where there will be children who will need to have time alone with the teacher but we think we can address more children than the bottom 20 per cent of Grade 1. It is the bottom 20 per cent of Grade 1 in each school, so it doesn't necessarily mean that the bottom 20 per cent of Grade 1s across the province are in the program.

It may be that in a particular school that the cohort of children is actually reading at a fairly high level, so the bottom 20 per cent in that school may not actually equate or add up to the bottom 20 per cent for the whole system. Those are things that we are considering as well.

MR. D'ENTREMONT: My final question before I pass it over to my colleague. Is it possible - I mean, we understand the training that goes into the teachers in order to get them Reading Recovery ready and by the sound of it you are going to hopefully use some of those teachers but, at the same time, can you get them trained up in time to be ready

for September, if there's going to be a change in that program? Reading Recovery is very specific on how it reacts and works for the children.

MS. PENFOUND: It's my understanding again - Alan may have some specifics - that we have about 300 teachers who have been trained in Reading Recovery and they don't stay doing Reading Recovery forever. They do Reading Recovery for three, four, five years and they move back into the classroom. Reading Recovery, because it's a copyrighted program, has certain approaches and certain materials and methodologies that are unique to that program.

However, the underpinnings of that program are based in good evidence and good practice that are not copyright to the Reading Recovery program, they are principles that underlie any reasonable solid approach to reading. So we know that we have those 300 teachers who are in our system right now and who we have confirmed we have them in every elementary school, teachers who have been trained in Reading Recovery and we also have a good number of resource teachers, many of whom have gotten master's degrees in areas that would support their ability to be involved in this program as well. Anything you want to add on that, Alan?

MR. LOWE: No, just to add that in the schools the levels of reading have been established for a number of years, which is the foundation for a gradual increase in skills in student learning at the beginning stages.

The other thing I would emphasize is that we also wanted to extend it to Primary. Going back to what Mr. McNeil said, the students who come in without having had a rich background in language, if they don't have a rich background in oral language and a structure that goes along with that, reading becomes almost impossible. So one of the emphases in our program will have a strong component to it, so that students will build up more experience in oral language, see the connection between that and, quite honestly, speech pathology is an important aspect of this as well.

We have people with speech pathology in the chronological awareness, particularly with students who come from a background of having difficulty with that. We're hoping that having the sustained intervention beginning at Primary, having the teachers knowing what to look for, how to use running records not only to find out the levels that students should be at, but also using those running records to find out what's going on with the processing that the student is going through and where particular things have to be focused on in a concentrated way, also identifying those students who absolutely need to be individual when they're doing this work and concentrating.

Having said all of that, we have lots of resources already in the schools. The Reading Recovery-trained teachers know how intervention programs work, they know how the identification process works and classroom teachers are also skilled in those identification techniques as well.

One of my concerns when I started to talk about last year's assessment was, I don't know what happened between where Reading Recovery students were successfully discontinued and the beginning of Grade 3, whether the structure in the Grade 2 class that they were in didn't provide sufficient supports for them to maintain and it is evolutionary. In their oral reports they have developed in the oral level, transferring that to silent reading which is an independent exercise seems to be a difficulty and that's one thing that we're going to be focusing on.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Mr. Porter.

MR. CHUCK PORTER: Thank you to all of you for being here today, I have a few questions. In your opening comments, deputy, you made the comments about priority for government, personal success and growth of our children, job creation, but yet we're hearing about jobs gone through attrition. To my knowledge we haven't sent anything home to ask parents or surveyed them in any way, nor the students or their families. I don't know how many times I keep hearing the words, I think, I think, maybe, maybe not, I don't know. Can you tell us what you do know? That is what I'd really like to know, where are we going?

I want the parents at home today and I want the students who are concerned and I want the teachers who are concerned, I want you to tell them at this late stage in the game as we prepare for next year - and Mr. McNeil was right and I talked to my principals and teachers in their schools, I've been to board meetings, nobody knows where we're going. We've been through what you referred to, deputy, as a visionary exercise starting off at 22 per cent, scaring the heck out of not only boards, but families and everybody who was listening to this and the media do their thing with it, of course, and put their spin on it, that just creates more havoc.

Now all of a sudden we're at, well, we're not sure where we're at, I think, in all honesty. We've reached a number I hear 1.6 and then I hear 3 per cent to 4 per cent, I really don't know if anybody knows where we're at for sure. I don't think the boards have a comfort level that they know where they're going, as a matter of fact I know that they don't. I'm interested in what do you know at the department, can you tell us that? The second part of that is a very simple yes or no, is all I really want - did Reading Recovery work for the students who were involved in it?

MS. PENFOUND: I'll take your second question last because the "what I know" could take a really long time.

MR. PORTER: I don't mind if you do take a long time, it shouldn't take that long.

MS. PENFOUND: Reading Recovery clearly worked for many students who are in it, but as the numbers that Dr. Lowe indicated, by the time they get to Grade 3 the results show that a good number of those students who were in it are not where we want

them to be in Grade 3. That isn't necessarily the fault of Reading Recovery, we think for those students who were in Reading Recovery many of them achieved success and came out the other end and we're, I guess, to me it sounds like an oxymoron, successfully discontinued, but they ended the program having achieved the level. As Mr. McNeil points out, many children also maybe didn't reach that top level, but improved. What we're focused on is, what can we do to be sure that children who we intervene with in Primary and Grade 1, that we maintain strong support for them to reach the level that is needed in Grade 3.

To your first question which I take to be mostly focused on the budget numbers, attrition and those things, the scenario that we went through in the Fall, as other departments were working with their partners out there, it was never intended to be a public exercise. We didn't flout a 22 per cent number and the percentage would be different board by board. Having said that, I'm not surprised that boards would be dealing with this and they are elected bodies and they have a constituency and a mandate, so I'm not surprised at all that that would become a matter of public debate. That process, as I mentioned, was designed to challenge everybody to say look, we're dealing with a serious fiscal problem here. What are the kinds of things that we could look at that we could address to find our way through this?

We ended up looking at a situation in government considering if we were going to look at, what would natural attrition do in terms of the system, I guess, again, focusing on the fact that we have way less students, 30,000 less students in the last 10 years, another 7,000 less in the next three years. We have to have a way to have our spending begin to line up with the number of students that we have.

Looking at that and saying, what are the kinds of things that we should be doing to figure out what is the right place to land for this year's budget, we looked at what does natural attrition tell us will happen? How many people in terms of employees of the board and people who offer service to students, what will happen in terms of the number of people who will leave by natural process? Our data - and we track this every year - would show that between 350 and 400 teachers will retire in Nova Scotia and that there will probably also be another and there probably will also be another 3 per cent to 4 per cent attrition in non-teaching staff, so that would be bus drivers, secretaries and teacher assistants and all that group.

Now we know you can't capture all of those. You can't assume that every time a teacher retires you can't replace them. There will be the French physics teacher that you have to replace - a teacher is not a teacher is not a teacher, you can't just move people into slots. We do know that we will probably be able to capture, we think, 80 per cent or 90 per cent of those.

So based on that and the desire to not have people lose their jobs, find a way that we could match up the declining enrolment, the fiscal imperative to start to shrink what

we spend and try to get what we spend to match up with the number of students we have and how natural attrition could help us get there. Those are the factors that were used to build the scenario that is now out there for boards to work on.

As I'm sure you wouldn't be surprised to hear, we meet regularly with school boards. I meet with the superintendents personally about every four to six weeks, our financial people work and meet regularly with the CFOs from the boards and are working our way through the approaches that boards will use. Obviously, each board will have their own circumstance, enrolment is occurring differently in each board, that's why the percentage is not the same for every board because we've tried to match up, within a variance, the reductions the boards would be making based on the enrolment decline that they will be looking at.

Every board is unique. I hear the superintendent in the Strait Regional School Board say that he deals with 20 per cent of the geography and 6 per cent of the students, so that's a particular challenge for him. He has a small number of students dispersed over a very large area, but still has to provide service to those students. All of those factors - our fiscal reality, our geography in terms of how long kids are on buses, the number of students we have in the system, the number of teachers and other employees who will leave by way of natural attrition - are all factors that went in to building that number.

Will it be easy? Of course it won't be. School boards have for many, many years now been used to having increases every year and that money has been put to good use, but we absolutely have to find a way for that track that shows students going down and spending going up to become more in line.

MR. PORTER: All the decisions - it's interesting. At the provincial level the department makes a decision, okay, this is what the figures will be and at the end of the day we're going to make these changes, we're going to make cuts if that's what's required and then it's downloaded on to each board to make the decisions as to where. What assistance is given to the board?

I know in the Annapolis Valley board we have a great board there, a good superintendent and so on, but they're struggling, there's no question. So here we have the decision being made at one level, but we're passing it all on down to the board level to eat the decision and to basically take responsibility for making that decision. It seems to me that this is the way of the government passing the buck. You can clarify that if I'm wrong, but that's certainly the perception and the reality of the world out there. Again, no involvement - it's just done and that's that and suck it up basically is where it is.

MS. PENFOUND: I guess to reiterate, we meet with boards regularly and I think school board superintendents very much feel they are part of the senior management team for the public school system in Nova Scotia. We have an excellent working relationship with them. Do they like this? Of course they don't. Of course they would rather have

there be more money, I mean, wouldn't we all, there's no doubt about that. Frank meets with the CFOs regularly, Alan meets with the program people, we do that kind of stuff all the time. We provide analysis to them; we've gone over the attrition figures - I think it would be wrong to characterize it as us throwing a number at them.

Obviously, government has the responsibility to make its final decisions about what the budget number will be. One of the things that we have done this year which is highly unusual and out of the norm is for school boards to have their targets now. The norm would be that we would know when Budget Day was and perhaps a day before we would call them in and say here is what your number is likely to be on an embargoed basis and they would then have to plan from there.

We heard loud and clear from them in the Fall that if there were going to be budget numbers that were less than what they might like, they needed time to be able to figure out how to make those decisions. So we worked through several months with that, we heard them and understood that they need those numbers ahead and, as well, when government gave them their targets, government gave them some direction on where we felt they should go.

We indicated, and I think many people have been expressing in the media and elsewhere that they wanted boards to look at administration first and we've given them the directive that they should do that. We've asked them to look at reducing the number of consultants in the system and that has been very consistent with what we've heard from people - focus the resources that you have on children in the classroom and direct service for students.

We've worked with them and we've provided direction in terms of where we think they can go. We are hearing back from them that of course some of this stuff is not easy but we are absolutely confident that this can be done, that this amount of money can come out of the system and that we can do it in a way that is not going to negatively affect student outcomes.

MR. PORTER: At the end of the day it doesn't matter what you say. It doesn't matter where you cut the money, whether it is through administration, whether it is through a bus route, whether it is through closing a school, whether it is through reducing teachers. The student is the one who will still feel the impact.

How much time do I have left, Madam Chairman, is that about it?

MADAM CHAIRMAN: You have less than a minute.

MR. PORTER: Okay, I'll save the balance of my questions because I have more for the second round. Thank you.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Thank you very much, Mr. Porter. We'll turn the questioning over to the NDP caucus and Mr. MacKinnon.

MR. CLARRIE MACKINNON: Thank you, Madam Chairman. It's great to have the department well represented here this morning. I want to begin by talking about Reading Recovery as well. I think the Chignecto-Central Regional School Board in my region of the province had a pilot on reading enhancement and I think it is probably part of the basis for how we're moving forward here. I think that this reading intervention program, we're being told that it will be more inclusive and more flexible and it will even identify some of the problems before Grade 1.

One of the things that I think we have to keep in mind here is that the Minister of Education is a former Grade 1 teacher who understands this situation very well and is not going to be doing anything that is going to be detrimental to the system in this province.

Having said that, I understand that the changes taking place within the pilot basis are being made with consultation from all boards. Can you elaborate a bit on what is taking place?

MS. PENFOUND: Thank you very much, I'll make it very preliminary and then ask Dr. Lowe to do that. As I mentioned, we pride ourselves on collaborating and having constant exchange back and forth with the boards. Dr. Lowe has been meeting regularly - I think he has met four or five times already and has folks diligently working on the go-forward plan. So Alan, maybe you would like to jump in, in terms of the kinds of things your committee has been doing.

MR. LOWE: Yes, thank you. The committee is made up of representatives from all boards, including CSAP, and the discussion has been very inclusive. Yesterday when they were looking at the different configurations that would be most ideal for students, flexibility was a strong word that came to mind.

In the figures, in Grade 3, overall in the general population we have 24 per cent of our students who are not successful. That's a very large number. We know that the early years are absolutely the most critical years in developing literacy skills. Therefore, everyone has come to the conclusion that we have to make our early elementary teachers in particular, expert in teaching reading. Of course along with that goes writing and oral language. So they have been working very diligently, drawing for sure on the lessons learned from Reading Recovery. Many of the people who are the experts sent by the boards are Reading Recovery-trained people. Certainly the principles that are in Reading Recovery are there.

One of the essential hallmarks of the program has to be constant monitoring and good record keeping - this was a lesson also learned from Reading Recovery - so that as the program unfolds and develops and evolves into the grade levels, there will be records

kept of level improvement, necessity for intervention by specialists in speech pathology and other specialists and keeping a constant record throughout so that it isn't just a Grade 1 program. It begins at the earliest stages, it goes through Grade 1 and it is the same kind of consistent support and approach carried on in Grade 2 and in Grade 3. In Grade 3, from the results and at the end of Grade 2, it seems to be that one of the critical things is moving from the oral stage into the silent reading stage and becoming more independent.

MR. MACKINNON: Madam Chairman, one of the major problems that we have within our system now, looking at a 15 per cent loss in the number of students in the last several years and 20 per cent in the last 10 years, one of the biggest problems around our province is the square footage we have that isn't being utilized in schools, a tremendous amount of space that is not being utilized.

Are there any efforts or have efforts been made to have some community organizations and government departments and agencies actually being involved in using some of that space? Because to close a school, and no one likes to see a school being closed but there is a two-year process and so on - are there possibilities there?

MS. PENFOUND: Absolutely, I couldn't agree more with you in terms of the need to be sure that we utilize the space that is available in schools.

I guess there are a couple of things and my colleagues may be able to add to them. I know that a number of school boards - Annapolis for one - has partnered with the health boards and have health centres in schools where they may have a nurse on site or whatever. That's a very positive thing, a great way to have that space utilized and bring service to children.

We also have SchoolsPlus up and running in four boards. It's a great program and is designed around the idea that a school can be more than a place for education. It can be a centre for the community and it can be a centre where students get service they need, not just from their teacher and about education.

For example, if you have a child who needs the resources or somehow connects to the justice system or is somehow connected to the Community Services system, it's way better for that child to be able to connect with those folks, receive the service they need in the school, than it is for them to be pulled out and have to drive somewhere else and go to an appointment and spend a day. It also provides an ability for those professionals, whether they be Justice people, social workers, educators, psychologists, for them to collaborate about a child. We all have a role in helping this child succeed and what better way to do that than to have all those people in the same place where that child is, to be able to provide that service.

Those sites are up and running in four school boards and we hope very soon to announce sites in the remaining four school boards, so that we have those hub sites. It

won't be every school, it won't be in every place but this will be something that we think is a very key factor. It has worked in other provinces, I think Saskatchewan is where it has been piloted and is very successful, so we think that is one really important factor and one way that we can have schools be a much better resource.

In addition to thinking about bringing more resources to the school to serve students, we also think it's important to look at a school as a resource for the community, so to make the school a place where the whole community can access it and use it for a variety of purposes. We know that happens lots already, in terms of groups meeting in schools and folks using gyms and we know in the past there have been issues about access. There was an issue about insurance and that was dealt with a few years ago to be sure that that wasn't an impediment to people using the school. We hope soon as well to be able to put in place some supports to ensure that other barriers - like the cost of a janitor or security or those kinds of things - are not barriers to community groups being able to use schools.

We are very confident and agree that it is very important for our school space, especially when we have extra space, that that is well available to the community and that we have resources coming to the school to serve students as well as we can.

MR. MACKINNON: Thank you. I spent eight years on the former Colchester-East Hants school board and most of that was at the vice-chair level. I've had an interest in education for many years.

One of the things I remember as chair of a building study committee, was going through all 49 schools in the system, basically from basement to attic, when there were such things in some schools, and looking at the building needs, the upgrading needs, replacement needs, repair needs and so on. Can you perhaps go into the process for determining where and how money is spent in those areas?

MS. PENFOUND: Yes, I'd be happy to. As you can image, it is a very complex situation to deal with. Much of our school stock was built back in the 1950s, for people like us to go to school, so we have a number of schools that are old, that are aging the way we are, so that creates significant demands for us and for the system in terms of money. We have schools that need to be replaced, we have some that need to be repaired.

In terms of how that process works, as you just mentioned, school boards are constantly monitoring their school stock. They ask questions like, what are the conditions of our schools, what are our needs, what needs to be repaired, what do we think should be replaced, what do we think should be consolidated? They go through that process all the time and some of them engage in a very formal way - you remember the last couple of years, Halifax engaged in a process called Imagine Our Schools. So they do it in a very big, formal way and involve the public.

School boards are asked every several years by the department, what are their needs. What are your requests in terms of what we build, what are your needs in terms of what needs to be repaired or all to be replaced? That process, of course, results in a fairly large list so there's always a long list of requests. What happens is that list comes into the department where we have something called the School Capital Construction Committee, and it is not made up of just education people, it has folks in the Department of Finance, the Department of Transportation and Infrastructure Renewal, and Education.

Those folks take that list and all those priorities and all those requests and they actually go out to the boards, they visit with board staff, they meet with the elected board from time to time, they go and inspect buildings, they do a significant analysis of what has come forward from boards, in terms of trying to figure out what is out there. They then put together a priority list, based on the condition of buildings and what is happening in the area, and say okay, here is what we think needs to be done next time around, when we start looking at a capital budget.

As you can appreciate, some of these projects stretch over one, two, three, four fiscal years, so there will always be things in the pipe. So you get this new list of things and how they are prioritized and that list goes forward to government to say here is what the request is, our committee has said these are all reasonable things to do. The next stage is government has to, in any given year, look at what is available for school capital construction and for school additions and alterations as part of the Tangible Capital Assets process. That process involves not just money for education but for health and for jails and everything else.

In any given year, there will be a Tangible Capital Assets allocation that is set aside against school construction. So that amount of money that is available is then applied to that priority list. What happens is, it doesn't mean that things drop off the list if they have been approved and are there as needed, it may mean that they get pushed out to next year. So you are always managing against what the priority list is and what the money is that is available in any given year.

That process continues and it is constant and obviously in between, things come up. You will get a school board calling up and saying oh my gosh, this just happened - we just found mold, we just did this, we just realized this is unsafe. In Cape Breton we had one where there was subsidence - something dropped out of the bottom of the school - and you have to figure out where those kids go, are we going to have to build something new, are we going to accommodate them elsewhere?

It's very much tied to the formal government budgeting process, in terms of money and the analyses that school boards do and it has to be and necessarily must be fluid as you deal with requests that come up from time to time.

MR. MACKINNON: Thank you very much, Madam Chairman. We teach children to share and I'm not doing a very good job here this morning so I turn it over to my colleague from Halifax Chebucto.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Thank you. Mr. Epstein.

MR. HOWARD EPSTEIN: I'm wondering if we could review a little bit of the history of the school system over the last 40 years. It is some highlights I'm looking for and I'm prompted to ask about this because of the comments you made about demographics in your original remarks. I think you suggested that 1971 was the peak year for enrolment and that what we're looking at is, at this point, a 40-year decline in enrolments. I think you also projected another 10 years to go before it is stabilized, so it seems clear that we're looking at a long-range fact situation that has to be engaged with.

I'm wondering if you can tell us some of the ways in which the department has dealt with this ongoing decline in demographics over the 40 years?

MS. PENFOUND: Sure, I can make some comments. Having been there now for 14 months, I can at least tell you what we have been doing in the last 14 months and I can also tell you some of the history that I understand from folks in the department.

I think we probably all grew up in a time when there was a school in every small community in lots of places; I know the high school that I went to had 230 kids in it. If you wanted to be on a sports team you could be on a sports team; if you wanted to be on the Student Council, you could be on the Student Council. Clearly some of those things have changed.

In terms of what we've done in the department to try and manage how those declining student numbers dictate or tell us what we have to do, in terms of budgeting - in fact it just amazes me that I am actually going to try and talk about this - the Hogg formula, which is this formula that Bill Hogg, a former Deputy Minister of Finance, worked on five or six years ago to come up with how we allocate money to school boards. That formula, although I couldn't tell you all the intricacies of how it works, I can tell you that Bill Hogg put into that formula various things, so that money is flowed out to boards, taking into account a bunch of things. For example, it takes into account that the Strait Regional School Board has 20 per cent of the geography and six per cent of the students, so they need more in terms of transportation. They have to transport children much farther distances than anybody else, so things like that.

Also in that formula it takes into account teachers' salaries and as teachers retire and you take in a younger teacher, money is netted out in terms of what you're paying. As well, built into that formula are factors with regard to small schools, so there's a recognition that if you have a really small school that you have to operate and it's too far from anything else and you can't change that school because you can't put a kid on a bus

for two years, that kind of stuff, that means the board is forced to run a school that might be more efficient than the true numbers will tell you it should be, but they need to do that. So there are factors like that that are put into place.

We also have in that formula something that takes into account student enrolment. In fact we've heard a lot of people say, well, doesn't the formula already take money out because of student enrolment? Clearly it does but there's a cap in that formula that says if your enrolment declines more than 2 per cent, you can never lose more than 2 per cent would dictate, but there are many boards over the last several years that have lost more than 2 per cent. So that enrolment, that extra above 2 per cent has never been caught. So that failure to be able to take into account the declining enrolment beyond 2 per cent has resulted in us not taking money out that perhaps the declining enrolment would dictate.

MR. EPSTEIN: Can I offer you what seems to me to have been the impact of declining enrolments over the years and see if you think I have it right. My impression is that the system responded by trying to improve itself. It tried to improve itself with things like better student/teacher ratios and by improving retention rates and other outcome measures and by putting in place special programs. The system would have seen it as an opportunity to improve the quality but at some point in there - and probably it was around the time that Bill Hogg was sent off to do his work - it became clear that I think the problem wasn't just one of distributing the money amongst the school boards but also a recognition that demographics had become something of a problem with respect to the number of dollars we were spending.

It seems to me we have been in that mode really ever since then and given that the demographics haven't turned around, it strikes me that the exercise we are in right now shouldn't necessarily have been a surprise to anyone. That's my impression of kind of a broad overview of 40 years of history so far. Is that a fair assessment or have I missed something major in there? Would the department summarize the history differently?

MS. PENFOUND: No, I think you are absolutely right. If you look at the number of things that have been added in, the work that has been done on improving curriculum, all of those things, I think you're absolutely right. There has been a lot invested in the system and invested well and really good things happening, but I think you're right in terms of saying that we can't forsake that, that's really important, but now that we've experienced this long period of time - and you're right. I think when Bill Hogg came along, part of the goal was to try to be sure that all of these factors are now taken into account.

MR. EPSTEIN: One of the things I wonder about then, of course, is the extent to which we have achieved improvements in the system starting at 1971 - I guess it's a convenient date, given it was the peak enrolment time. I'm wondering, can you tell us a bit about the kinds of outcome measures that the department can generate and does generate to tell us about the quality of what we're getting for the money that we spend?

MADAM CHAIRMAN: You have just a minute left in this round.

MR. EPSTEIN: Well, we can come back to it.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Because that's a big question.

MR. EPSTEIN: I know.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: If you can, shortly.

MR. LOWE: Monitoring student achievement is central to what we're doing and making decisions based on evidence. Some of the important assessments are Grades 3, 6 and 9, literacy assessments in particular; also, similarly in math, we're introducing a Grade 8 assessment. It's my particular hope that with the Grade 8 assessment, when the students are in Grade 9, they'll be able to sit down and analyze the results themselves so that they can understand what kinds of conclusions people draw about them.

We've all gone to school and you just kind of go through the system and that kind of thing. I think it's at Grade 9 where students have the ability to become more reflective, they begin to think more about what they're going to be doing in life, they're going to be forced to make choices and course selections when they go to high school. They're looking beyond high school, whether they're going to go to community college and so on. That's why I would like to have them more involved in understanding what these assessments are and what skills they may be lacking.

We found this particularly valuable in the O2, the Options and Opportunities program, where we actually engaged the students to reflect on where they wanted to go, what skills they have, what skills they're lacking and what they're really going to have to work on if they want to carry through in the Options and Opportunities where they have a guaranteed seat in the community college if they're successful. It's that kind of use of assessment, not only in the big scale of the Department of Education but it being used at the school level. Our assessments in Nova Scotia are designed by teachers, they're field tested in the schools, the marking sessions are done by teachers, and they report back to us that very often this is the best in-service they've ever had because they collaborate . . .

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Mr. Lowe, I'm going to have to interrupt.

MR. LOWE: . . . with each other and understand what the standards are.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Thank you, Mr. Lowe. I'm sorry I had to interrupt you, but I know in the second round you can delve into that further.

MR. LOWE: And we'll get back to this.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: I'd like to turn it over for the final round, we have 14 minutes in each of the questioning. I'll turn it over to Mr. McNeil.

MR. MCNEIL: Thank you, Madam Chairman. As being part of that cohort of the 1970-71 stretch, I don't think it's as simple as looking at what has changed in terms of saying just because we've had a declining student population over the last 40 years that cutting the budget should add up. There have been significant changes, there are many children in the classroom today who would not have been in the classroom in 1971. Those children require supports and the demands on the classroom teacher are much different. Quite frankly, your department has created a bureaucracy where the school administrators are spending more time filling out paperwork than they are actually being administrators.

When I was a student in Bridgetown, our principal and vice-principal were active members of the faculty and not only were they administering that school, they were teaching. Now they spend more time chasing paper so that we can gather research and results to formulate policy on how we're going to go forward. Many of the issues that you talked about boards are dealing with.

I've been elected since 2003 and very shortly after being elected two schools in my riding closed, two more are on the chopping block, all based on demographics. The elected school boards across this province are responding, they understand the challenges. They actually, I think, were looking forward to having an honest conversation about public education and parents and Nova Scotians have legitimate questions. Why are regional school board offices so large? What's the department doing? Those are all legitimate questions, ones that I thought we would have been debating.

Why do you need 21 credits to graduate from high school, when did that happen, who decided that? You have a myriad of math options now in Grade 12 when at one point you had two, why? All of those were legitimate questions. Instead we're looking at cutting a program for literacy of the most vulnerable segment of our student population, the bottom 20 per cent, and there doesn't seem to be any research behind that.

The Reading Recovery program has been researched on every continent, I'm sure, and it always comes back to that this program has been the best one to deliver results. One of the key components to it is the one-on-one. I'm wondering, of all the myriad of research that you're getting from the principals across this province, who would have suggested to you that the one-on-one component of an intensive Reading Recovery program, whether it is this one or another form, isn't the way to go?

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Mr. Lowe.

MR. LOWE: There's no denying that one-on-one is the ideal in many things in education. Unfortunately it's also a very expensive alternative.

MR. MCNEIL: I'm going to stop you right there. I apologize for this, but I'm going to stop you. Your job is not to be doing the Department of Finance's job, your job is to be delivering the best quality outcomes for educators. It's up to Cabinet then to sit around and determine they're going to cut that program because they're going to make that decision.

Your job and the job of the Department of Education and the Minister of Education is to fight at the Cabinet Table and around government tables to defend the interests of our students. If the best results are delivered at one-on-one, why are we going down that track and getting rid of it? That's what the parents and community members are asking themselves.

To an earlier question you talked about the collaboration that was going on with school boards. There are school boards across this province that want to keep Reading Recovery because they know it's delivering positive results in educational outcome for their students and the department is saying no. I'm curious, is it the minister saying no or is it the department saying no?

MS. PENFOUND: These decisions around what these budget targets are and what the parameters are within which boards must work have been determined by government.

MR. MCNEIL: Then let's be clear about this, it is the Minister of Education who is telling school boards across this province, you have an effective program that is working but we're going to cancel it. We're going to replace it with a program that we don't know what it's going to look like yet. We do not know what the educational outcomes are going to be and any parent with a child going into Grade 1, that family needs to just say, trust me because I'm the Minister of Education and I taught Grade 1, that's not good enough for Nova Scotians.

Reading Recovery has been researched on every continent with positive results. The key component is one-on-one. The Chignecto board, down the South Shore, other boards have recognized there are still members of the student population that are being left behind, what can we do? The Chignecto board has done a tremendous job of doing an add-on to Reading Recovery, the South Shore is doing the same thing. Other boards are responding to the needs of the student population because, quite frankly, they understand it better than any of us, they're living with it every day. Why would the minister all of a sudden cut a program with no research, no foundation, talking about replacing it with a program that doesn't exist? Why do you believe your minister would do that?

MS. PENFOUND: This may well be a debate, Mr. McNeil, that you will have with the minister in the estimates debates. We've answered in terms of the information that we have, the work that we're doing and, again, if there's a specific question you have we'd be happy to answer it, but the debate around the minister's thinking and government's decision is one you'll have . . .

MR. MCNEIL: Here's the question. The question is, Reading Recovery has been cancelled not because it doesn't deliver outcomes, it's because it's a philosophical difference at the Cabinet Table and the minister, that's what this is about. She's not replacing it with a program that you say can deliver better outcomes, so if it's not about outcomes it's a philosophical difference of the minister, that's what I'm trying to figure out. Is it just the minister who said listen, we're not going to look at the outcomes, we don't have a program to replace it, I just don't believe in that program so we're getting rid of it, is that what you're saying to me because that's what it sounds like to me?

MS. PENFOUND: No. What we're saying to you is that government has made a decision and although Reading Recovery is a good program and many students have had great outcomes, our plan is that we will use the money that has been dedicated to that to have a more equitable program to meet more students' needs and achieve better outcomes across a broader range of students.

MR. MCNEIL: I have had an opportunity to travel and talk to an awful lot of educators and Nova Scotians, some of whom are Reading Recovery specialists, they have been trained, and I have yet to find one of them who would suggest that removing from the one-on-one will provide you better outcomes than they are presently receiving now.

You mentioned about relying on the specialists and the people who have been trained and their expertise, if they're telling you that the one-on-one is the key component, that a broad-based approach will not deliver the outcomes, why would you think otherwise?

MS. PENFOUND: You may want to jump in, Alan. Go ahead in terms of your discussions with them.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Mr. Lowe.

MR. LOWE: There's no question that there are some children who will still require one-on-one, but it's also true that there are children who can be put in small groups when they particularly have similar difficulties in accessing print. There is a conviction that this is possible and is doable in the school system.

MR. MCNEIL: I think boards - Chignecto is one, and I keep using it and referring to it because, quite frankly, it's the one the minister used - recognized that and it's why it created add-ons to the Reading Recovery program. It was not replacing Reading Recovery; it was in addition to.

Having recognized that there will be members of our student population who require the one-on-one, why would the department then not allow individual school boards to make the choice to say, I want to keep Reading Recovery and I want to deliver that program through Reading Recovery, and will continue as they've done in Chignecto

and they're doing it on the South Shore and there are other parts of the province creating additional programs to deal with that student population that you're talking about? Why would the department not allow them to keep that Reading Recovery program?

MS. PENFOUND: The licence for Reading Recovery is bought provincially, the training is funded provincially, and the decision has been made by government that we'll move to a more expansive program from Primary to Grade 3 that does not involve the use of the copyrighted Reading Recovery program.

MR. MCNEIL: So you go back to that, but this new program that we don't know what it looks like, we don't even know what the budget is going to be, so how do we know it's even cheaper?

MS. PENFOUND: We know what money we have available. We have \$5 million and we also know that we have significant additional resources in schools that have not in the past been applied to those Reading Recovery students. We have resource teachers, we have many teachers who are trained in Reading Recovery who are now not delivering Reading Recovery, so all of those resources we intend to marshal so that we will be able to apply them as effectively as possible to meet a broader range of students' needs.

MR. MCNEIL: One of the interesting things was at a public meeting I was at on the South Shore recently, there was a classroom teacher who actually was a Grade 1 teacher but she was not a Reading Recovery specialist. She could not say enough glowing things about the program and how much it had improved her classroom and improved the outcomes for her children and how it had impacted on her when she was watching the one-on-one educational experience that that student had and how it impacted on her own ability to teach and how it changed her own philosophy around teaching.

She wasn't even in the program, it was based on the relationship she had with the Reading Recovery specialist, as well as seeing with her own eyes the impact it had been having on the children who were in her classroom and how, when that child was taken out of the classroom and given that intensive Reading Recovery program, the change that happened to that child and the impact it had in the classroom - behavioural issues were disappearing, a more involved classroom, one that was creating, quite frankly, a very, very healthy learning environment.

How do you say to that teacher, we're going to eliminate that program that had such a positive impact not only on that particular student, but on your entire classroom and the learning experience they were getting? How do we say, we're going to get rid of that, we don't value that, the value is based on, well, we're just looking at the program, not at the impact it has had over the entire system and the entire classroom?

MS. PENFOUND: I think what we would say to that teacher is that she's absolutely right, that one of the most important things with any reading intervention

program is that it's not just about the relationship between the individual child and the individual reading resource person, but it has everything to do with the classroom teacher. In fact, some of the things that have been discussed, and we've had some pretty freewheeling discussions with Dr. Ben Levin on some of these things and one of the things that he has said to us is that he feels that pulling children out of the classroom may not be the most effective way to deal with this.

His view is that it has to be a very, very strong partnership, along the lines of the teacher you were speaking about, between the reading resource person and the classroom teacher. His view is that you could have some things, by way of example - he's not dictating doing this, he's just commenting that, for example - if you had a reading coach in the school who worked with the classroom teacher and using empirical evidence and all the identification factors that we have and they identify that in a class of 21 kids there are five children that you don't think are on the level and really need help, instead of saying, okay those five children, when their turn comes, because it will not be all at the same time, they will get pulled out and they'll get 16 to 20 weeks or whatever it is and the next kid will get pulled out, that what should happen is that the reading resource person should be working with the classroom teacher saying these are the kids that need the attention.

The resource teacher should be coming into the classroom working with those children in small groups, sometimes one-on-one and they should be actually helping to coach the teacher so that the teacher becomes a more effective tool to be able to provide reading resource help for those students, it very much should be a partnership.

MR. MCNEIL: That's exactly how Reading Recovery is working, that child is coming . . .

MS. PENFOUND: Except the children are being pulled out of the classroom as opposed to happening in the class.

MR. MCNEIL: Absolutely, so that the educator standing in front of the majority of the students is given the ability to teach those students while the child who is needing that intensive treatment, or whatever you want to call it, is getting that and then coming back into the classroom. There is a constant interaction between teachers and Reading Recovery specialists across this. To suggest that it is all happening in isolation is unfair and it's not a good characterization of the program and how it's being dealt with in boards across the province.

I can appreciate if people have challenges with this program and they think they can do it better. I think there's an obligation though on the part of the department, if they believe they can do it better they have to tell Nova Scotians what that better is, what does it look like. We talk about treating a broader spectrum of students for less money - talk

about stuff not adding up, that would be one of them. School boards have responded, student population, schools have responded.

To one of your remarks earlier which I couldn't agree with more, each area is unique and each school is unique. Each area has to have the ability to respond to the needs of their students in the best way that they know how and with the best evidence that is in front of them. I can tell you that definitely down the South Shore and in other parts of this province they believe the best way they can respond to their student population at the Grade 1 level in terms of literacy is using Reading Recovery and then allowing them as a board to create those additional programs that you're talking about, that are already happening and responding to the needs of those students.

I want to go back to this, this is dealing with 20 per cent of our student population, the bottom 20 per cent. Your new program has to be able to respond to those same students in the same way to deliver either the outcomes equal to or better than. If I was a parent of one of those children today I would be nervous because you're unable to tell me that and that's what is concerning people.

If Reading Recovery is to go then tell us the one you have that will give us better educational outcomes and you can't and that's what is frustrating. You're getting rid of a program that has been researched, not just in this country, all across North America and in Europe. This program has been developed, been researched and has been delivered to our student population for 15 years. We're going to take it away and tell the student population and the parents of those children who need our support, we don't have a program, but we think we can do it better, it's just nonsensical.

It's my hope that out of this meeting here today and parents who are responding to you, that someone will speak to the minister and at least step back until we have a program that we can then debate and say, yes, the educational outcomes will be better or not. Thank you, Madam Chairman.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Thank you, Mr. MacNeil. There's no time for a response to that but you do get a response at the end and I'll move right away to Mr. Porter, for the Progressive Conservative caucus.

MR. PORTER: You know I've sat in meetings, I've seen the slides put on the wall by the boards and basically they are not bad, they are saying students are staying in school longer because we're doing the right things in Nova Scotia, better outcomes are being achieved. Of course good education means things into the future - good health care, all of these things that go along with that - good mental status, good physical status and so on.

We know that there has been an increase in the number of students who are staying in school and that has to be based on the early beginnings of where we're

learning, whether that is through the day care process, whether our children are at home or whether that is through elementary and on through. Students are part of that, obviously our educators are a huge piece of that and encouraging them. Our model is obviously a good model as well.

There was a comment made about monitoring student achievements, decisions based on evidence. Are you measuring this particular case based on provincial outcomes or the Reading Recovery standards for making this decision, or do you know because it appears maybe you don't know, you said government is doing it. So again, I'm curious as to what we know and what we don't know.

MS. PENFOUND: There are two things at play and I'll start them and then turn it over to Dr. Lowe. Clearly one of the measures is how are kids doing who come out the other end of Reading Recovery, how many are successfully discontinued. That is clearly one part of what we know. The other very significant piece is the measurement we do in Grade 3, in terms of where are kids in Grade 3 and what do we know about how kids are doing in Grade 3 who were in Reading Recovery and how are kids doing in Grade 3 who weren't in Reading Recovery.

MR. PORTER: So just quickly then - sorry to interrupt - is that all part of the Reading Recovery measurement standard? Yes or no? I've only got 14 minutes so I want to go through it quickly. I want to give you a chance to explain, but if you can summarize it or just briefly give the points to it.

MR. LOWE: Our Grade 3 assessment is not based on the copyright program.

MR. PORTER: So it based on the provincial piece of a measurement, is it? So they are quite different, are they not?

MR. LOWE: The elements of reading and achieving reading levels are similar.

MR. PORTER: Which one is higher, the provincial or the R and R outcome?

MR. LOWE: I can't tell you.

MR. PORTER: The R and R outcome, from what I am told, is higher. So here we have a program that we know works, but yet we're going to - well, we're talking about something else here, we're talking about taking this program away and, at the same time, deputy, I think you suggested there was currently \$7 million being invested in Reading Recovery, was that the figure you gave?

MS. PENFOUND: There is \$7 million of targeted funding that goes to Reading Recovery.

MR. PORTER: And then you talked about \$5 million, can you just clarify for me what that is.

MS. PENFOUND: The reduction is from \$7 million to about \$5 million.

MR. PORTER: So we're reducing \$2 million to create something that we're not quite sure of, or what it will actually end up being at the end of the day. We're not even sure where we're going when it comes right down to it, from what I'm hearing, because we don't have a program and, if we do, you're not telling us what that program is, which again takes us back to Dr. Levin and we keep hearing why do we bother hiring or investing anything in Dr. Levin if we're not going to take any of his advice into consideration.

But then again, this is a very contradictory issue this morning because I hear you say one thing and then I hear you say something else. Maybe I am mis-hearing something, but I'm hearing you say - a few minutes ago you said there's a report, well, there is no report but yet you are in conversation with Dr. Levin, so some of this opinion is coming from there, for direction for government and for the department?

MS. PENFOUND: We expect a formal report from Dr. Levin by the end of the month. Having said that, we've had numerous conversations with him. He has been gathering information about what happens in Nova Scotia and what programs we have, all that kind of stuff which we would, of course, hope he would do. So we have had some pretty freewheeling discussions with him about options.

MR. PORTER: So you're taking his input then to make decisions.

MS. PENFOUND: Part of the package, yes.

MR. PORTER: Even though there's no formalized report out yet, you're still as a department . . .

MS. PENFOUND: But it will be along soon.

MR. PORTER: So we have some idea of what to expect in the report, then, it would be fair to say.

Again we go back to this issue of teachers. You mentioned a few minutes ago about resources maybe not being allocated, as good as they could be. I just know from Windsor Elementary I'll use as an example because my children have all gone through there and I still have one there - great staff, just like we have in every school in this province. They are all unique, there is no problem to that, but we seem to be more concerned over the years about FTEs or PTEs, or call it what you want, there is sharing

between schools. I don't know if that's a good use of our resources, maybe on somebody's financial page maybe it is.

In an outcome achievement measure I doubt that it is. We're sharing all kinds of resources that way and the students, again, are the ones who are losing at the end of the day, they are not getting a full this or a full that. I can tell you from Recovery Resource teachers, whatever you want to call them, every teacher in that school is utilized fully, in my opinion, and I think I could speak to all of the schools in my area when I visit them and I do visit with them and I meet with staff and visit students, it certainly appears to me as though they are underutilized, there's not enough to go around with what we have in each of these schools, we already have that issue.

So here we are talking about attrition, cutting back, but, more importantly, we don't know what the outcome will be and we don't know what the end value will be. We're talking about \$2 million to kill a program, for lack of a better word, that we know - the numbers say - is working well. I guess we'll have to wait and see what the outcome of that real number is and it will be hard to define whether it is of any value or not.

Here we have teachers as well in Reading Recovery who are trained. They have trained, we have so many of them. Over the years though, these teachers are going to cease to exist. What happens when the programs - they're obviously not going to be kept up to speed on this particular Reading Recovery program, how will the quality of the programs and the learning outcomes suffer if teachers are no longer trained in these specific areas?

We all know, there are I don't know how many reports out, that say that special needs of our students in our schools is going up, not down. So how do you respond to that?

MS. PENFOUND: Obviously our teachers come through rigorous training, they get their Bachelor of Education degree and most of them have an undergrad degree. Teachers who move into resource positions are, for the most part, teachers who have master's degrees. I think it is fair to say that most of our teachers have an absolutely fabulous foundational piece and there's regular professional development that occurs for all teachers.

Clearly those teachers who have gone through the Reading Recovery training, that's a fabulous piece of professional development. It's not the only way that you can train teachers. I think we would, as we do all the time, collaborate with the NSTU at one of those professional development opportunities, how can we best ensure that teachers, whatever they are doing, are appropriately trained.

Just because the Reading Recovery training may not be the route that is taken, it doesn't mean that there won't be professional development and that we won't be trying,

as we always do, to ensure that whatever a teacher's assignment is, they have the best possible training that they would need to deliver that program.

MR. PORTER: I guess you're saying a teacher is a teacher is a teacher, when they'll tell you that's not the case.

MS. PENFOUND: That's not what I'm saying.

MR. PORTER: Okay, that's just how I took it, from what you delivered, was that - and I agree, we have all great teachers, they have their basic training and they're well educated and so on, they understand how things should work but they're not all specific to certain regions. I'll give the example of Reading Recovery; there was a reason that we sent teachers there who were trained, professionally developed, and they continue with that, but that doesn't mean they are all going to be qualified to teach children with a variety of different needs, whether it is reading or whatever it might be, which we know are increasing, as I said a few minutes ago.

It almost appears, though, yes, okay, we'll continue with professional development, they'll have their days and that's all good. I think there's a certain level of that that has to be required, especially when you're out of your own classroom and learning environment; education is continuous learning, there's no question about that. I think there have been changes over the years.

We're almost saying here, if we're willing to take away a program that we know exists for a demographic that's rising, that we're willing to drop our standards somewhat, maybe average or maybe even lower than average standard now because these children, who are in need of these programs, who are now - and we're not sure, but when boards have to make these unfortunate decisions for cutting back, yes, there will be some money going out of administration.

You also have something we haven't mentioned here today, the inflation costs are also over and above the couple of million or so, \$2.5 million or so, that my board, the Annapolis Valley board, as an example, was being asked to cut. They've got another couple of million dollars that they are going to have to cut somewhere, or find, based on just inflation costs and you can't do anything about those - those are the electricity and the heating and all of those things that go along with everyday inflation. That's a huge number.

There have to be cuts somewhere. Are these kids - the question is self-answered, almost - these kids will suffer somewhere if we're going to take away programs. Are we going to lose educational assistants, we know the value of them already, we've seen them. They are the one on one, we know what they are, there has been value, students who have needed that extra time are getting it.

The Reading Recovery program, you talked about Grade 1, it's important in every grade. It doesn't matter what grade you are in school, whether it's Primary or Grade 11, there are kids who need help sometimes all the way through. Some of these children who come in struggling and who have been part of the Reading Recovery - we heard Mr. d'Entremont speak today about how there was some great improvement in his child, that's one example but we know of children who come through this program who are probably going to need assistance all the way up through.

We've seen them, and this is where the EAs come in and they continue to follow along. We don't know that the EAs are even going to exist, it depends on each board. The boards are going to have to make tough decisions, maybe there will be half of them, maybe there will be 90 per cent, I don't know what the number will be. Obviously nobody knows what the number will be because you're not part of that, you're leaving that to the board's decision.

I wonder, are we accepting now, as a government and the people in this province, are we saying that we're willing to accept a lower level of teaching standard and outcome level for our children in this province? That certainly seems to be where we're going by levelling things all out in the description that you've given.

MS. PENFOUND: No, I would not agree with that at all, we absolutely are not prepared to accept a lower level. We have seen in recent years a steady rise in terms of how we achieve on a world stage. In the international results we are high up in the percentage among countries that participate. In Canada we've moved from - I think this is about right, Alan - being at about the bottom third to being in the middle third, kind of half of the pack, which for a province our size is really good and we compare very well to provinces of the same size. We absolutely don't believe that we should or will be compromising the desire to continue to maintain a high-end system where our students achieve as much as they possibly can.

Getting back to the reality that we face, there are fewer and fewer of those students and finding a way, which is what we're about, to make reasonable choices, to reduce what we spend on education, to bring it in line more with the number of students is what our challenge is and the one that we need school boards and the public to engage in terms of helping us meet that challenge.

MR. PORTER: Thank you for clarifying that piece and I thought you would say exactly that and knowing full well we wouldn't want to be accepting, but can you just clarify "fewer and fewer of those students" - what students?

MS. PENFOUND: Pardon me?

MR. PORTER: What students are you referring to when you say "fewer and fewer of those students"?

MS. PENFOUND: I mean fewer and fewer students, generally, overall.

MR. PORTER: Okay, I thought you were targeting a specific group there. So there are more students, we've been successful in the model that we've been following. Can you tell me why then we've been successful over the years? It would seem to me that it's programs that we put in place, especially in the early learning years, would that not seem reasonable?

MS. PENFOUND: No, I don't disagree with you at all that there's a whole suite of programs, a curriculum that's developed and changes as we move along, that all of those things continue to a fluid and flexible system that ensures that students get the best they can, I wouldn't deny that for a moment. I guess the point is that what we have to do is make sure that we maintain those standards, and I couldn't agree more with the comment that you made earlier about how students just don't need support at a particular snapshot. All students need a good, solid system, but there are many students who will need supports from the time they come to school and those supports will differ. I don't think that's inconsistent with our desire to move to a broader-based, early-intervention reading program.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Just one minute left.

MR. PORTER: Thank you. Lastly then, with Dr. Levin - and obviously, even though the report is not out, there has been some consultation and advice taken to and from Dr. Levin - is he confident that this is the model that we should be removing or is he promoting this? Is this his work and/or does he have something that we're not yet aware of, that there's a program that's going to say what you're referring to this morning, is the success for the children who are now in something else - i.e. Reading Recovery - and will continue to be the measured success?

MS. PENFOUND: No, he has not given us advice that we should use Reading Recovery or not use Reading Recovery and we haven't got his report yet. He has offered and we've had general conversations about what he thinks the hallmarks of a good system are.

MR. PORTER: Right, so at the end of the day it's the government sitting around the Cabinet Table that's going to make the final decision that says, Reading Recovery is obviously of no value then to the people or the students or that we can do something better? You're saying that you don't accept any responsibility or, I guess, input, you don't have a say in it and the government obviously has the say, and at the end of the day they will make the decision and I guess they'll have to live with that decision then, we'll have to wait and see?

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Mr. Porter, your time has elapsed, I'm afraid. I'd like to turn the floor over to Mr. Epstein again to continue his line of questioning. You have 14 minutes.

MR. EPSTEIN: Three of us will probably share some of the time, but I'll start off. I do want to pick up where we left off before when I was asking about outcomes and outcome measures, and that was something my colleague, the member for Hants West, actually touched on with you just a moment ago as well.

I think where we had arrived was that Mr. Lowe was telling us a bit about some testing that goes on and you talked about both literacy testing and math testing. What I was interested in was not just the testing, although obviously that's part of it, but what the outcomes are and how we measure. I'd like to hear comments about things that perhaps go a little further than you got the chance to deal with before and how we are measuring ourselves.

I heard you talk about measuring by peers when you talked about Reading Recovery and we've heard comments about interprovincial comparisons and how we've moved up the scale and some international ones. I guess I just want to get a greater feel for what it is we do test for, what the data shows and how Nova Scotia has changed its position, if we have at all, over the last 30 or 40 years, that was the time frame that I posited. So I'm sorry to give you such a broad question, but at least it gives you the opportunity to start to give us some general comments.

MS. PENFOUND: I think Alan is older than me so he should answer the question about the last 40 years.

MR. EPSTEIN: You don't have to commit yourself on that, Mr. Lowe.

MR. LOWE: Prior to what we have in place now we used to have Nova Scotia tests of achievement, I think they were called. They were developed in Princeton, New Jersey and they were general tests of language, mathematics and general knowledge. People drew the conclusion that they were unrelated basically to the curriculum that was being taught in the classroom and that they were based on certain assumptions made in large scales, standardized testing with bell curves and that kind of thing.

Our program when it was developed was based on our curriculum and it's not based on a bell-curve kind of distribution. It's based on the attainment of the students in understanding the outcomes that are clearly spelled out in the curriculum in the different subject areas. In language arts it's the full gamut of the language arts, the written language, comprehension and writing. As I say, these are developed by Nova Scotia teachers working in the classroom, based on their daily experiences of what they see their students doing in the curriculum and what the curriculum outcomes are and being inclusive to hit all areas of the curriculum as spelled out.

Over the years the results have been that our students are doing very well on those tests. When we compare them to the national testing and PIRLS, for example, we're finding that there's a very close correlation between our results and the national results. When we move to the international and the PISA, we're scoring very well indeed. We do an oversample so that we are ranked in the world rankings as a country - Nova Scotia is ranked as a country. Out of, I think, 65 countries, Nova Scotia is 13th. The statistic I like to say is we are, in Canada, which is the highest English-speaking country in the rankings and . . .

MR. EPSTEIN: I have a specific question about the international comparisons. It probably wouldn't tell me very much if we were doing better than Benin and Bangladesh, I'm more interested in comparisons with the United States and the U.K. and . . .

MR. LOWE: We're doing much better than the United States, U.K., Germany, France, Britain.

MR. EPSTEIN: I guess what the question would be is, what are those 65 or are they generally the western countries with a higher level of spending on higher education?

MR. LOWE: Yes.

MR. EPSTEIN: Okay.

MR. LOWE: I can send you the list.

MR. EPSTEIN: Sure, that would be great.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Maybe you could make that available to the whole committee and send it to our clerk, thank you.

MR. LOWE: Yes, will do.

MR. EPSTEIN: You gave us a specific number when you talked about the international comparisons, 13th. On the national scale, can you tell us how we're doing?

MR. LOWE: In the PISA, when they did it by provinces, we moved, as the deputy said, from the bottom third - we were in the bottom third in the provinces in Canada and now we're about mid-pack.

MR. EPSTEIN: This is performance by subject, is that right?

MR. LOWE: Yes.

MR. EPSTEIN: What about graduation numbers?

MS. PENFOUND: I'd have to check on this and we can get this, I think our graduation rate is running around 89 per cent or 90 per cent, which is among the highest in Canada. That's not to say that we don't have problem areas, that would be our provincial global graduation rate. There will be geographic pockets and certainly areas of our student population, for example, African Nova Scotian students, First Nations students, where the graduation rates are not nearly what we want them to be. I think to say and trumpet that our 89 per cent or 90 per cent is fabulous, of course, it's great, but we need to do better in some pockets of our population.

MR. EPSTEIN: Just to go back, I take it that what this represents is an improvement over time, so if we take the 30- or 40-year time horizon that we're looking at, that these numbers have improved over time, is that right?

MR. LOWE: Yes.

MS. PENFOUND: Yes.

MR. EPSTEIN: Just to go back to one point you made about moving away from the Princeton scoring, I wonder, Mr. Lowe, if you actually had a year that you recall when that happened, when we moved away from that. If you don't know in your head perhaps, again, if that could be included in information for the committee, that would be great.

MR. LOWE: Yes, I'll do that. It was sometime in the 1980s.

MR. EPSTEIN: That's good to know, thank you very much. I'll pass to my colleague, the member for Cumberland North.

MR. BRIAN SKABAR: Thanks very much. Did the Hogg formula speak to administration in the schools or is that pretty much up to the school board, the particular boards, to determine how much is spent on instructional services and how much on admin?

MS. PENFOUND: I guess I'll make a general comment and Frank may be able to help. The Hogg formula doesn't dictate where a particular board spends their money. The Hogg formula is a mechanism to allocate funding and it builds in a bunch of factors. I mentioned before that it builds in the number of students, transportation, size of schools, number of schools below certain thresholds. It's a formula that puts a lot of factors in place, that spews out the other end an amount of money that a board would get.

School boards themselves determine how they need to apply that money. There are certain pockets of funding that are targeted when we say you must use this money for this purpose, but generally speaking they must determine what the right administrative structure is to run their board. So they will determine, for example, how many people

they need in operations and that would depend on how many schools you have, how many buses you're running, all those kinds of things. Likewise, they would determine how many people they need in finance, HR, IT, and all of those kinds of things.

We would have the formula that drives how we determine how much money they get, that factors in student population and all of those things. They would, at the board level, have the responsibility for determining how to best apply that money to run the system.

MR. SKABAR: Do we have - and this might not be a fair question, really - any idea what percentage of money is spent on administration compared to instructional services?

MS. PENFOUND: Again, I'll jump in and then Frank can help me out here. The administrative question is a really difficult one in terms of what you count as administration. There's administration in a school: there's a principal, a vice-principal, a secretary, a janitor, and all of those folks and you say, well, those aren't people who provide direct service to a child, but they're in the school. There are staff at the school board level, all the people we would consider the suits, the people who go to work and do the finance work, the HR work, and all of those folks who are not directly interacting with a student. I think we'd all agree that's administration.

Then there's that pocket of people that you'd say, well, they don't sit in front of a child or deal with a child every day, but the work they do is more related to the - instead of running the system, like doing the books and hiring people and doing the HR, they're people whose time and effort is applied toward how you educate children. So they would be the psychologists, they might be speech language pathologists, they would be folks who do that.

In some boards, for example, in a large board they may have big enough schools that they would have a speech language pathologist who would be on the complement in the school as opposed to one of the complement in the board. In a smaller board they probably have some of those resources centrally. When you look at how those numbers sort out and what's administration, it's not just the people in the board office and how you deploy them. You can slice and dice it whatever way you want in terms of saying what's administration or not.

Roughly speaking though, we have told boards that they need to look at reducing administration overall by 15 per cent. They will have to make their own judgment about how that works out and we'll, of course, be monitoring and we'll be advising. If we see them off-line, we'll be addressing that. We have told them, you know what your administration is, we generally know the categories of employees, you need to work on that. We told them, reduce 15 per cent in administration over three years and reduce the number of consultants by . . .

MR. SKABAR: But what is the percentage of administration compared to instructional services, do you know that?

MS. PENFOUND: Do we have that number, Frank?

MR. DUNN: We don't have that number right offhand, but I can tell you that we're talking about governance and I can get you a number. We talk about principals and vice-principals which are administration within the school system, I can get you that number. There's the superintendent offices and regional management, the management for actually running the school board, I can get you that number. So in total I can get you a number, I can tell you that those numbers in total from an FTE position are somewhere around 800 FTEs.

MR. SKABAR: Here's the reason I'm asking. I went to one of the public meetings of the Chignecto-Central Regional School Board, you know, I sat through that for a couple of hours. Then I pulled the audit for 2005 and compared it to the budget for 2010-11. During that time, that six-year period, the amount of money spent on administration went up by 40 per cent and the amount of money for instructional services went up by about 3.5 per cent during that stretch.

This is just from the audit, so whatever their auditor determined as administration compared to instructional services. I know that's an oversimplification on a number of things but it was a little over 25 per cent, 27 per cent, if I recall correctly, almost \$25 million for administration compared to \$92 million for instructional services. Might that be an approximate guesstimate?

MS. PENFOUND: I'm sure if that's what the report said and how they classified those folks, that's probably right in that board.

MR. SKABAR: Okay. Mr. MacKinnon.

MR. MACKINNON: Thank you very much. I realize that I have very limited time and we have talked a lot about the situation involving the Reading Recovery program and you're assuring us that the new approach will be more inclusive and more flexible and it may even identify at a sooner level.

Perhaps in your summary you could talk for a moment about what we're doing, as students advance within our school system, in the areas of writing, which is also very important as well. We have had no opportunity whatsoever to talk about the Options and Opportunities, the O2 program. I'm just wondering if in your summary you might talk about that program just a bit, how much is in the budget for it and what are the results?

MADAM CHAIRMAN: I think your suggestion, Mr. MacKinnon, is that it be in their closing comments?

MR. MACKINNON: Yes.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: I think it would be great to do it that way because our time is short today. We've had some spirited questioning and there has been a lot to discuss. I'd like to thank you, of course, for being here.

Before we go to your closing comments, I just wanted to make a couple of remarks. There has been a request for information and our clerk has a list of several things. It wasn't requested but I'd like to ask that when Mr. Porter asked the question around the different types of evaluation that Mr. Lowe said he was unable to answer, that maybe we'd look to see if there is an answer to that. That's one of the areas we'll flag as well. Our clerk, Darlene Henry, can speak to you about what has come out of the meeting today for further information.

I also wanted to acknowledge today that because we're meeting in the committee room rather than in the Assembly, there are a lot of people who have joined us today who weren't able to come into the room with us here. The second committee room has been full, actually, today with parents and children and other public education advocates who have been following the proceedings from the other room. I just wanted to acknowledge that as well.

I'd like to turn it over to Ms. Penfound for her closing comments.

MS. PENFOUND: Thank you very much, I'll be very brief. Our goal is to put resources where they're needed most and that's on student learning. I'm confident that the funding we're providing to boards will result in realistic budgets. It won't be easy, we know this is hard for everybody, but it will ensure that a strong public school system continues and that we protect what's important in the classroom.

We have to ensure that our considerable investment in education matches the needs and numbers of students and that we are able to serve students, our declining numbers of students, no matter where they live in Nova Scotia, no matter what their personal circumstances or their personal characteristics might be.

The funding targets that we share with boards achieve a reasonable balance between the need for restraint, while providing boards with the means to maintain quality. Providing these funding targets to them early will give them time they need to plan for next September. Our goal is for the boards to find savings as much as possible, through attrition, and we've asked them to direct their efforts primarily at resources not in the classroom; in other words, administration, consultants, those kinds of things.

Student success and quality education come first. We'll continue to work with our partners in education as we move forward. With that I'll end, Madam Chairman, and thank you very much for your time.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Thank you very much again, we do appreciate you being here with your senior staff as well, to join us this morning. Thank you very much.

There is just a little bit of committee business, if I could draw your attention to the few items that were placed before the members today. There is a piece of correspondence back from the Department of Environment, from the new deputy minister whose name is Sara Jane Snook. She was responding to another piece of correspondence that we had received, I think, from the Canadian Oil Heat Association. So that is really just for your information. I think it has given us a fairly clear answer and allowed the department to respond.

Secondly, we have in front of us just the copy of the upcoming meeting dates so that everybody will know. We've had a little bit of a break. The work going on at the Legislature has prevented us from meeting but we're back on schedule now, although we have March break coming up next week, you'll see the upcoming meetings beyond that.

Our subcommittee is going to be meeting today, to get some subsequent meetings, as well, in place. The one thing I'd like to mention for all members of the committee is that the chairman and vice-chairman had agreed that when we set a list of items from our subcommittee, we will be able to canvass all the members by e-mail to see if you approve those items. That really helps our clerk a great deal in scheduling, because we try to schedule when the deputy ministers or the senior officials can come. The sooner she has the approval to do that, the more efficient our committee can be. I'd just like everybody to be aware that there will be an e-mail coming and that's a great help to the committee if you can respond to Darlene Henry.

I think those are all the items of business there today, I think we've covered it all, Darlene. So our subcommittee will be meeting.

With that, we are adjourned. Thanks very much.

[The committee adjourned at 10:57 a.m.]