

HANSARD

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COMMITTEE

ON

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS

Wednesday, November 30, 2011

LEGISLATIVE CHAMBER

**Department of Education
Formula Grants to School Boards**

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Public Accounts Committee

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[Mr. Gary Burrill replaced Mr. Gary Ramey]
[Hon. Karen Casey replaced Hon. Keith Colwell]

In Attendance:

Mrs. Darlene Henry
Legislative Committee Clerk

Mr. Terry Spicer
Assistant Auditor General

Mr. Gordon Hebb
Chief Legislative Counsel

WITNESSES

Department of Education

Ms. Rosalind Penfound, Deputy Minister
Mr. Frank Dunn, Chief Operating Officer, Corporate Services Branch
Mr. Doug Stewart, Senior Project Executive
Dr. Allan Lowe, Senior Executive Director, Public Schools Branch



House of Assembly
Nova Scotia

HALIFAX, WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 30, 2011

STANDING COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC ACCOUNTS

9:00 A.M.

CHAIRMAN
Ms. Diana Whalen

VICE-CHAIRMAN
Mr. Howard Epstein

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Good morning, members of the Public Accounts Committee. I'm going to call the committee to order as it is just nine o'clock now. We have with us today witnesses from the Department of Education, who will be introduced in a moment, but I'd like to begin with an introduction of the members who are present today. If we could begin with Mr. Burrill.

[The committee members and staff introduced themselves.]

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Thank you very much. Perhaps with that I'll turn it over to Ms. Penfound to let us know any opening statements that you may have.

MS. ROSALIND PENFOUND: Thank you very much, Madam Chairman. I have with me today Frank Dunn, the Chief Operating Officer for the Department of Education. On my far right is Dr. Allan Lowe, who is the Senior Executive Director of Public Schools, and to my immediate right is Doug Stewart, who is a lone senior project executive working with the Department of Education.

Thank you very much for the invitation to present to Public Accounts. We welcome the opportunity to speak this morning about the important work underway to maintain the quality of our public school system while living within our means.

It's all about balancing priorities with resources. Education is a priority of government and our investment is significant. The department is investing - government is investing - \$1.1 billion on public education this year. That is \$3.6 million a day or \$10,372 for every student. These are challenging times. To sustain for the long term we must be smart with those resources. It's a lot of money, but we have a lot of things to do with that money.

Our challenge is to match our limited resources with the needs and numbers of students. We are also challenged by demographics, so it's not just about the number of students. It's also about where those students are and how we can best serve them.

We have a system designed for a much bigger school population - the boomers and the children of the boom generation. You've heard the numbers before, but they bear repeating, just to illustrate what we're up against. Enrolments have dropped every year since 1971. Today we have just under 125,000 students in our system, almost 30,000 fewer students than we had a decade ago - very, very significant, considering that we only started with 150,000-some, so if you lose 30,000 that's a huge chunk of students. This trend will continue for at least another decade, we predict. We can look now and see who is in Primary and who is in Grade 6 and who is in Grade 9, and you can predict where you are going to be with your junior high population and your high school population.

The department and boards recognized that we have to better align the system with the number of students, and do so in a way that will protect student learning. Despite these enrolment challenges and fiscal pressures, boards in the province have managed to maintain student-to-teacher ratios and average class sizes at historic lows. The teacher-to-student ratio, for example, is 1 to 12.9. Ten years ago it was 1 to 16.5, so that's a significant drop in a 10-year period.

The average class size, which is perhaps of more interest to most people, in elementary is now 21.4 students, in junior high it's 20.7 students, and in senior high it's 20.4. I would stress that those are averages. There will be classes that are larger and there will be classes that are smaller. Today, compared with 2001-02 - and I think this is an interesting way to think about it - there are, on average, three fewer kids in each high school class, five fewer kids in each junior high class, and about two fewer kids in each elementary class. These are averages, of course.

Also in the last year we've added a new early reading support program called Succeeding in Reading. We've expanded SchoolsPlus to every region. Our ITIM system for education, called In-School, has expanded and will be in every school in Nova Scotia by this Fall. We're taking a lead role in dealing with a worrying societal problem, and that is bullying - in particular, cyber-bullying.

The decisions we make on all these fronts must be realistic and position the students in the province for success. You'll know that Dr. Ben Levin, the Canada Research

Chair in Educational Leadership and Policy at University of Toronto, gave us some valuable advice this Spring. We engaged him to do what I guess we would describe as a “big think piece,” in other words, not to give us all the solutions, but to say - knowing what he knows and what we could tell him about our population, about our demographic, about our geography, about our fiscal challenges - what he thought we should focus on moving forward. He suggested five areas: reducing failure in the system, improving daily teaching practices, making better use of our facilities, expanding learning outside formal school offerings, and building public support for public education.

We’re using his report and input from the public; in fact, we had about 1,000 people who gave us input. We had 20-some actual written responses from stakeholders - quite detailed in many cases - from our education partners to develop a plan that will guide us over the next few years. The Premier launched a kids & learning first consultation on the web and we had significant response to that as well. All of those things will help to inform where we go and we expect government will share its plan with Nova Scotians soon. This plan will start us on a path towards a school system that’s more effective in meeting the needs of a declining school population.

We need to examine the expanding use of on-line learning, video conferencing and distance education, particularly when you consider our geography and demographic. Helping teachers be more effective in the classroom and better use of instructional time are just a few of the things that we will be focusing on.

School boards continue to do good work and deliver high-quality education to our youth under very tight budgets. I think boards have done a great job managing under the current funding. They rose to the challenge that was placed before them; they protected the classroom and looked for savings and administration first. We have an excellent working relationship with school board staff and will work together in the best interests of children of the province as we move into the future. We should thank the dedicated teachers and employees who are committed to our kids and their learning success as they are the key to delivering on government’s agenda.

The school board funding formula - and I understand that’s one of the reasons you wanted to speak with us today was to look at that - we are currently in the process of reviewing what is referred to as the Hogg formula. It served the system well for many years, but it’s getting old. It was first introduced about 14 years ago and was revamped into, I guess, what we’d call Hogg II, in the early 2000s.

Boards told us - all of them - that we needed to have a look at this. They all told us that for some reason they felt the formula didn’t work for them or should be adjusted or needed to be reconsidered. We are working to be sure that the formula best reflects the changing cost-drivers that those boards are experiencing. It’s important to regularly review a formula like this to ensure it’s fair, it’s up-to-date and accurately reflects the actual costs

of the programs and services for students and families, and that it accurately reflects the number of students that we're trying to serve.

No final decisions on that, and we can speak more about that. I'm sure you'll have questions. It's very much an iterative process, back and forth with the boards. We continue to consult with them. If we move to a new model - because no decisions have been made - it's very clear from the boards and from our own thinking, that there needs to be a significant transition period. You can't flip a switch and move to a new funding allocation model, especially in the times that we are facing in terms of fiscal challenges.

Last year's budget targets were released early to school boards, February 8th, the earliest they had ever been released. It's usually much later in the year, usually the end of March. We hope very much to have those targets out even earlier this year to help boards plan as well as they possibly can as they prepare to move into the next school year. Again, we have an excellent working relationship with school board staff and we'll continue to work with them to achieve the best possible balance in the budgets that they strike.

With that, I'll stop and we're happy to take any questions you may have for us.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: We appreciate that. We've been joined as well by Mr. MacMaster, welcome. For the first 20 minutes of the questioning, I'll turn it over to Ms. Casey for the Liberal caucus.

HON. KAREN CASEY: Thank you for the introductory comments, they covered some of the areas that I wanted to address and so it's a good lead-in to where I wanted to go. Perhaps we could start with your final comments regarding the review of the Hogg formula. Yesterday in the House I acknowledged that I thought it was good timing that we needed to do that. I'm certainly aware of many of the concerns that were expressed over the number of years about the fairness and how things had changed and whether boards were still feeling that it was responding to the changing needs and so the review is timely.

I have followed a bit of the review, the high level and the detailed presentations that have been made to boards and their responses. One of the questions that I asked yesterday - and I think you have answered it today - is will any of the recommendations or changes to the Hogg formula have an impact on the 2012-13 funding? I didn't get an answer to that question. I would take from your comment that perhaps not, but I will let you answer that. Will any of the changes that come about as a result of this review impact the funding for 2012-13?

MS. PENFOUND: Thank you very much. Last year, when the budget targets went out to boards, we used the Hogg formula, which remains in place today and that's an allocation formula, as you would know. It doesn't say how much money there is, not how big the pie is, but it says when you understand how big the pie is, how does it get allocated among boards? It has a large number of elements in there that take into account programs

and how many teachers you need to deliver the program; it takes into account the kind of square feet a board has to manage; it takes into account, in some fashion, transportation costs and a wide range of things.

The budget last year - the number - was put through the Hogg formula and it would spit out how that would impact every board. Government made a decision that no board should lose more than 1.5 per cent of the provincial average. I guess you could say that there was a rider put on it that said even though boards are experiencing significant fluctuations in enrolment and if you just let the formula work its way through, it would impact some boards much more significantly than others. To manage that, the rider was put on that it would only be 1.5 per cent of the average.

The other things that factored in - and I'm getting to your specific question - were that the budget was built last year on attrition, so looking at how many teachers usually retire in the system and it's a number that floats in the 350 to 450 range. So looking at how much money is allocated, does it look like enough teachers will leave the system by natural processes that will allow boards to contract without laying off permanent teachers? The other thing was to tag the amount of the reduction to the enrolment decline but recognizing that students all don't come out in a big lump. If you lose 100 kids, they don't come out in four neat, little classrooms, they come out a kid here, a kid there, a student here, three there, so you can't take it all out. So it was matched to about 75 per cent of the enrolment decline.

The hope is that this year, if we complete this process with school boards and we reach an idea of okay, we've now heard from them and we understand what their concerns are, we can change the formula and adjust it to better reflect what their concerns are and to be sure that the formula, as well as possible, reflects how they incur their costs and where their expenses are. For example, there wasn't really a transportation formula in before and we know that's a huge factor. For a board like the Strait, they keep telling us don't forget we have 6 per cent of the students and 20 per cent of the land base, so to have an effective formula in there that allows you to look at transportation.

The hope is, if we get to that point where we think the formula is in good shape and government is prepared to approve it and then we've built in those concerns that boards have, that we could use it to allocate funding to school boards. But we fully anticipate the government will probably instruct us to again put one of those riders on to be sure that we have a significant transition period so that if any board is experiencing a more than reasonable swing in its funding, they would not be harder hit than whatever that rider would dictate, whether it's 1.5 per cent of the provincial average. I hope I've answered your question.

MS. CASEY: I think the answer is yes, but in reference to your earlier comment about transition, that there would be some transition period, if I could try to rephrase. If all the things come together with the Hogg review and a new formula or adjustments within the existing formula are agreed upon, then it could be used as the mechanism to determine

the distribution of funds in 2012-13. Recognizing that if the government does decide to do that, the department will be asking that there be some provision so that the impact would not be detrimental to boards if, in fact, they are going to be experiencing a change as a result of this formula, and that would be your transition component?

MS. PENFOUND: Yes, if I could, you're right, but I would add to that if I may. Whether we had a new Hogg formula or not, if government was asking boards to take less money next year and to do that, I think government, as it did last year, would likely, very seriously, consider the need to have some kind of a governor on there to be sure no board was taking significantly more of a reduction than others. So whether you had the old formula or new formula, I think we would probably be looking at that and recommending that to government. It would be the same in that respect, whether we had the new formula or the old formula. In terms of transition, if government wants to balance the book by 2013-14 and continues to ask boards to absorb their cost of living increases and contribute to the back to balance process, that will take a couple of years and there will be this rider on it in terms of reduction.

If we get to that point - and this is me just speculating in terms of how we might get there - after that date, even if we got to a date when we said okay boards don't need to absorb the cost of living anymore and we're back to balance, we're in an even situation, there would still need to be a period, I would think, of two, three or four years to transition into the full application of the Hogg formula because the impact of enrolment decline and the impact that that has on transportation and facilities, and all those things, is something that can't happen overnight. So there would be a governor in the period when we're in reduction mode and even after that there would have to be several years before the new formula was fully implemented. So there would have to be transitional funding built in to get to that point where it was a full effect.

MS. CASEY: I thank you. My next question has to do with the famous graph that everybody is seeing that looks at declining enrolment and costs of education going up. I think a lot of us understand that the cost increases to education are not directly related to the enrolment but rather to the specific needs that we're trying to meet in the classrooms. Although I can say here I believe that it's misleading to show that, because we know that the composition of classes has changed, we know that the challenges that teachers are facing are great and we know that the needs of the students continue to grow. We also know that a lot of the programs that were put in place to provide supports for those students in our classrooms are costly.

So my question is, putting that graph aside, is there an acknowledgement at the department that it is going to cost more to meet the needs of the inclusive population which we now have in our schools and which we have had, and which we have tried to accommodate with specific programs, many of them being short-term, one-on-one intervention, some of them long-term, but they are very costly? Where is the department

with acknowledging that even though the enrolment is declining, the needs of students and the cost to support them is not declining?

MS. PENFOUND: I guess the short answer is yes we would acknowledge that but to expand on that a little more, the budget for the Department of Education, last year, was \$1.1 billion. Most of that money goes to boards as determined by the formula but once they get that money boards determine how to spend it, so they look at what is the best use of the money that we have. With regard to special education there's \$125 million in that funding that goes out and we require boards to spend on special education. Now they also add in money of their own, so government and the department at least protect that much money and say at least this much must be spent and you can decide, with your other funding, where you allocate your spending, which they do.

We hear regularly from the school boards and from the NSTU about exactly what you have mentioned, that class composition is, indeed, different and there is no denying that. I think the inclusive policies at the department and government over the years have acknowledged that and recognize that we have children with very significant needs in our classrooms and in our schools. I know personally of children in hospital beds, who are in school; I know children with multiple challenges who are in school and are supported through a variety of measures. The department staff work hard to help school boards do that.

In terms of the X graph it has probably been one of the most debated illustrations of the comparison between students and money. Historically if you look where we were in 2002-03, the per-student funding was \$6,200, now the per-student funding is over \$10,000. Yes the class composition has changed but that's a significant increase in funding and many factors went into that funding. Labour negotiations over the years, on a payroll that's \$700 million or \$800 million, when you have negotiated increases in salary, that adds a lot to your bottom line, so all of those things certainly factor in.

I guess what I'd say in conclusion to answer your question is yes, we do acknowledge that classrooms are different, but we also acknowledge that those trends, of students going down and spending going up, are not sustainable.

MS. CASEY: A follow-up question to that, I think it's important and I commend the department for targeting money that boards have to spend on special education, but my concern is with a comment you made, that if boards get that money and they can spend it on special education, but then if they want to spend more - and we know that most boards do put extra money into special education - it has to come from somewhere. So if a board gets their allocation and then they get the \$125 million divided up for their special ed, but they have additional needs that can't be met with their allocation through the formula, they have to go to some of their other funding. If they go there, it's kind of a "rob Peter to pay Paul."

With the government cutting board funding by, I think it was some \$30 million last year, and having to assume the escalating costs of wages and benefits and those things, and then they are finding that they have more of these students with special needs and they are determined that they are going to try to meet those needs, where can they get that money if the allocation from the department is not increasing for special education?

MS. PENFOUND: I guess first I would put on the record that the reduction last year in budgets to school boards was \$17.5 million, not some \$30 million. Of course they were asked, like all government departments and areas and DHAs, to absorb their cost of living increases, but the reduction was \$17.5 million.

As part of this exercise of reviewing the Hogg formula, we're looking at these very things and talking to boards about how the money is allocated, what we should be doing, how we should be tweaking that formula to be sure that we best reflect how they spend their money.

There was a report done in the early 2000s that came up with the recommended ratios for things like resource teachers, speech-language pathologists, psychologists, and teacher assistants. It recommended certain ratios across the school population, and those were built into the funding formula, so built into that \$125 million was the determination of, okay, this is about how much, based on those ratios, you should be spending on psychologists or whatever.

Those ratios were updated in 2007, and I should say that the ratios were not just determined by department staff. It was a broad committee that included stakeholders from the special education community, from some of our special education specialists in school boards, and the number they came up with is what has been used to run the formula. So we're having a good look at that, and we're hearing from boards about how it works.

Boards will receive their money, and they are in the best position to determine how to allocate what they have. I acknowledge your comment. It's certainly a discussion that we are having, as recently as a few days ago, because it's an iterative process with the boards. So we're working on that.

MS. CASEY: I appreciate that. I noticed in the responses back from the boards that the special education funding is one of the areas that they felt was too low, so I'm encouraged to hear that the discussion is ongoing.

I would like to go back, though, to a comment that was made about the funding cuts. I think perhaps the 30 that I was talking about was a combination of the reduction in funding, as well as boards having to pick up the other costs that had been covered in the past and had not - I know boards were saying, if we go back to the original 22 per cent, which I believe is the goal that this government has set - and it will be there, it's just how you're going to get there. Unfortunately, people lose sight of that when you come back out

and say, well, it's only a 2 per cent reduction, but in order for boards to maintain their status quo, it's much more than 2 per cent. Multiply that by three and in some boards you're getting close to 22 per cent.

When we say it has only been a reduction in funding to boards of 2 per cent - and I'm using that as an average; it may not be the average, but it's close to it - boards have to pick up those other costs, which to maintain the status quo alone, for some boards it was about 3 per cent. I guess my question to you is, recognizing that boards are now having to cover more costs than they had before, recognizing that they're getting reduction in the funding from what they had before, recognizing that the needs of those special education students are there and increasing and growing, I'm concerned that the department is asking boards to find that somewhere. Boards are running out of somewhere to go to find that money. I'm hoping that when boards express that to you, that the allocation for special education will reflect the needs that they bring to the table. We do have the inclusion policy.

We know - and I can give you examples of some schools, and I know Dr. Lowe would have these as well - where some high schools have 40-plus students who are identified as having special needs within the classroom and every one of those requires additional supports. The number is not going away. Although the enrolment, overall, may be declining, the number of students who are requiring special interventions is increasing. We're doing a better job of identifying and I think that has helped to drive that number up. My concern is that boards will be strapped. They will have to find their money somewhere, and without direction from the department as to where they can go for that extra money - because some of it is targeted, 80-plus per cent is teachers' salaries, they can't touch that. I'm not telling you folks anything you don't know, but I am saying that boards are limited with where they can go to find that extra money to help with special education, so I'm pleased to hear that comment.

I will go back to a comment that was made about balancing the books of the province. When you look at the investment that any government should be making in education in good times and, in particular, in bad economic times, what economists are saying is the last place you would look for reductions would be in education. I'm wondering, as a team, when you talk about imposing reductions on school boards at a time when the economy is not in good shape, how does that match? Even though we need to stimulate the economy, we're cutting one of the most crucial departments, which will contribute to the growth in the economy - that being education.

MS. PENFOUND: I'm not so sure that this isn't a conversation that you should have or will have with the minister. However, I'm happy to offer a few comments. First, on the 22 per cent, that number has dogged us for quite awhile and I know you know that. When we first sat down with school boards, over a year ago now, to talk about the fact that government would be working its way back to balance and education would be expected to help to bear the burden of doing that and to find a way to work on it, we met with the staff

at a working level and said, okay, if we had to do significant change in the system, what are the kinds of things that we would consider, if we had to look at these numbers?

We as a department never said we're looking at 22 per cent. That was a number that was calculated by some boards, and I won't dispute or argue that for some of them that was their perception of what it was, but we did not put out there that we would be trying to reduce 22 per cent out of the system, just as a starting point.

I guess I'd just reiterate that the budget we planned, and what we expect government will do over the next few years, is to base its budget on attrition, and to also be sure that we align money that comes out of the system with the number of students who are declining. Just as last year - or the current year we're in - the money that came out of the system was not reflective of 100 per cent of enrolment decline; it was 75 per cent, acknowledging that you can't do that, you can't take it all out at once and you can't match it totally with declining enrolment.

I guess I go back to my original point - or one of the points I've made is - it's important to look at enrolment decline to factor that in, because if we are allocating money based on students who aren't there, in some instances that means we're not allocating money appropriately for students who are there, which I think is consistent with your point. In the long haul, that X-graph, that trending, is not sustainable.

I'm sure the minister would answer, or other elected officials, but I think in terms of where it relates to the economy, I think the concern is that if we don't get the province's books back in order everything will be in jeopardy. So I'll leave it at that.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Thank you, Ms. Penfound. I'm going to turn it over to the Progressive Conservatives and it will be Mr. MacMaster for 20 minutes, or to share your time.

MR. ALLAN MACMASTER: Madam Chairman, I will share my time, I do just have a couple of questions this morning. The area that I represent, which includes the Strait area - and we know what's going on with the NewPage paper mill right now - we've had a significant decline in enrolment the last 20 years; in fact, the school I went to no longer exists in Judique, and we may see that trend continue. If we do, does the funding formula now take into account some protection for recognizing that school boards can't control the decreasing number of children? They do have these buildings which are now larger than they need to be, so how does the funding formula take that into account to recognize that school boards have to deal with that cost and don't really have control over it?

MS. PENFOUND: That, as you can imagine, is a hot topic in all of our meetings that we have with school boards, and most particularly in those boards like the Strait that are experiencing the most significant of enrolment declines. The current formula has a mechanism in it that allocates funding for small schools. So in the current formula, a school

that's 100 students or less, the formula provides \$150,000 for that school. It's a recognition that there are certain inefficiencies in running a small school, so the formula should acknowledge that. The way it's set up now is it's a school with 100 students or less, no matter where that school is. If that school happens to be in downtown Dartmouth or in some suburban area in metro or Sydney, the \$150,000 goes to that school.

What we have been hearing from school boards is that that might not be the most effective way to allocate funding, that we should be more concerned with not necessarily the exact size of the school, but the location and the level of the school. For example, if a school is isolated - in other words, it doesn't matter if there are 20 kids, you're going to have to have a school there because those students can't be on the bus as long as it would take them to get to the next school - that school needs to be supported, that's something the board can't control. They can't control whether there's a school there or not.

As well, we've heard from boards that 100 isn't the right number. You may have, for example, a high school that has 220 kids, that's a small school for a high school. To be able to offer a complete program, to have the options there for those students, you have to have more than the normal, the number of students times the program would chew out so many FTEs. You have to add some money in to be sure that they can offer a reasonable program to those students.

So we've been hearing about those things from boards in terms of how to best structure the formula and to allocate money to take into account those challenges that boards have with respect to schools that they absolutely must operate and to be sure that we're not using an arbitrary, it's 100 kids and that cuts it off, because the challenges may be different for different schools.

I actually may pass this to my friend, Doug Stewart, who may comment a little more because he and Frank have been the guys who have been working with the boards and hearing their concerns. He may be able to comment on some of the considerations and things that we're working our way through as we discuss the question that you've raised.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Mr. Stewart.

MR. DOUG STEWART: Sure. If we take the issue of small schools and the proposed changes that we took out for consultation with the boards, we attempted to define isolation in terms of how far apart schools are and then we defined "small" in terms of the type of schools. For an elementary school we use 20 students per grade; a junior school we use 40 students per grade; and a high school, 50 students per grade. That wasn't our initial starting point, but in consultation with the boards, small got a little bigger reflecting the challenges that they have in delivering programs.

They also pointed out that in addition to the space costs which you mentioned, you have teaching costs. When you have a small school it gets difficult to have enough teachers

under the normal formula to provide a full range of programming. The proposed changes add additional teachers: to small elementary schools you get a teacher; a small junior high school you get a teacher; and then for high schools, depending on the size of the school, from 500 students down, you get an additional one, two, or three teachers.

As you would be aware - and I'll reference your riding because you're obviously most familiar with that - there's a mixture of P3 and board-owned schools in your riding. The P3 schools are currently funded in a different process, so the additional teacher FTEs, if applicable, like Dalbrae Academy, would kick in under the new formula but the space for a P3 is already protected, at least through the period of the lease. If we look at the other schools in your riding, Pleasant Bay for example qualifies as small and isolated - no great surprise there. The one in Belle Cote, Northeast Highland, I think it's called, because of the catchment area configurations and such that would also qualify. Whycocomagh is similar because the catchment area is isolated.

In those cases the proposed changes fund the entire square footage of the building. The old formula used the figure of 105 square feet for an elementary student, 130 for a junior high student, and 140 for a high school student. When we went back and looked at that and looked at the size of schools that are built to meet the new standards and things it turned out it was more around 140 square feet per student regardless of the type. We've increased the number of square feet per student in the formula; however, in many cases in some of these isolated schools that you're talking about still didn't meet the full square footage of the building.

As you pointed out, and as the boards pointed out to us, we don't get to heat three-quarters of the building, we have to heat the whole building. The proposed changes to the formula would then take - so if you had 100 kids at 140 square feet, that's 14,000 square feet but the building is 20,000 square feet, the formula would then add the additional 6,000 square feet so the board was whole, if I could use that term, for that small isolated school. Does that help?

MR. MACMASTER: Okay, I think that sounds like it might recognize - I think that's what the goal is of the change. To put it in perspective, I spoke with a teacher at one of our schools and I asked her how many children in the classroom would be affected if NewPage disappeared and all the jobs with it, in and outside of the mill. She said about 50 per cent of the students have a parent who is working in the forestry sector, which is quite significant. Have you considered removing the fixed cost from the formula and just looking at the variable cost for the formula? In other words, based on the number of students you need X number of teachers and whatnot, and just take the fixed cost for the building out of the equation all together and fund them separately. Maybe with the changes you're essentially accomplishing the same goal, I'll let you comment.

MS. PENFOUND: I'll comment and then Mr. Stewart may add something. I think it's important to understand how the Hogg formula, the current one, takes into account

enrolment decline. We have had some school boards where the decline has been significant and I guess what you're alluding to is the fear that it may, indeed, increase for the Strait board given the economic circumstances there. The way the formula works is it's a five year rolling average, so no board would lose more than two per cent than what the enrolment decline would dedicate. In any given year, say your enrolment dropped by four per cent, you'd never lose any more than what two per cent would have had you lose.

But it's a rolling average so eventually it catches up, it actually is a mechanism that helps boards transition. We actually heard from those boards with the most significant enrolment decline, please don't touch that, we think that's a really important thing to protect us, and so that is something that I would say is highly unlikely to change in the formula in terms of making sure there is that protection for boards, that they do not suffer financially in a precipitous way should their enrolment drop off more significantly than any other board.

In terms of the fixed costs I'll turn it back to Mr. Stewart who can comment on the discussions that have been ongoing in that front.

MR. STEWART: I guess what we have tried to do is in those cases where the board doesn't control, so that the small isolated piece that we were talking about, if in your hypothetical example half the students disappeared in the school, and it's a small isolated school, then we've made this board whole, I guess is the term I would use, for the funding for that school whether it has 300 students, 200 students, 100 students, it was in a place that it has to be then we detach that, in essence, from the formula from the enrolment pieces.

MR. MACMASTER: Okay, thank you. A question unrelated to that. What kind of investments has the department made with respect to young people who might be falling through the cracks? This would people who just may not be having a lot of success at school and eventually may drop out of school. What support is there for those people, how have you been trying to stop that from happening?

MS. PENFOUND: I'll offer a few general comments and then I'm sure Dr. Lowe can chime in. I think it's important to recognize that students who disengage can be at any achievement level. You can have children who are academically very capable of achieving at high levels or you can have students who have challenges and may never achieve at that high level. At each of those spots in the spectrum, and in the middle, you can have students who, for some reason or other, are not achieving and are disengaging.

We have a number of things on the go that help to address that. We have the International Baccalaureate Program. It is offered in every board, and Dr. Lowe has information about exactly where and what that program looks like, and our students are achieving extremely well, so some of those students are having different opportunities than they might otherwise have.

We also have skilled trades programs that are offered around the province, and we're hoping to increase those, because not everybody should be thinking that they necessarily have to go to university. Skilled trades are fabulous opportunities, particularly now that we have the shipbuilding contract. We need more people who are engaging in those trades as good jobs - good for them and good for the province.

We have the Options and Opportunities program, which is specifically designed to catch kids who might well drop out of school, and keep them in school in smaller groups, and have them positioned to be able to move on to community college or whatever their career choice is.

The other thing I would mention, and then I'll turn to Dr. Lowe, who may be able to comment more specifically on how O2 works, for example, because it's one of the flagship things - we're also moving this year into having SchoolsPlus programs happening in all of our school boards. That is a mechanism to be sure that we have - I guess on a number of fronts, using school space, so it's a way that we can have other professionals who offer services to students and communities located in schools. We can have collaborative efforts going on with other government departments and agencies that can apply their combined resources to help students and families that are in need and bring more people to the school and have more resources in the school for students.

If a child is having contact with the justice system or with our social services, or is having academic issues, or has medical issues, that child could be out of the classroom a lot, seeking those services. If we can find a way to bring those kinds of services to the school, to have a collaborative approach about how to manage that, I think that will help as well.

Also, a year or two ago, Howard Windsor chaired a panel that looked at absenteeism and looked at the kinds of things that we should be doing to be encouraging kids to stay in school. That task force made a number of recommendations, most of which government supported, so we're working on those as well.

I would ask Dr. Lowe to comment, maybe particularly about the O2 program, because it probably is one of the more significant things.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Dr. Lowe.

DR. ALLAN LOWE: Yes, thank you. The Options and Opportunities program is designed for students who may be pursuing courses that would lead into community college and to skilled trades and other kinds of enterprises. Along with that, I should say that beyond the O2 program there has also been a vast expansion of the co-op programs throughout the province. School boards have been working very hard for even those isolated schools, to set up opportunities where they can go into real-life working situations and see what the world is there and what opportunities might be there for them.

In the O2 program it has been extremely successful. If you've ever heard the students who are in the program give their testimony of how it has affected their lives, it really is a life-changing experience for many of them. Working closely with their teacher and advisor, they are encouraged to do an inventory of the skills they have, to identify where they need to develop more skills in the particular interest in the trade that they might have. Instead of just going and taking remedial math, they understand that the math that they are learning is the kind of math that they'll need if they're going to go into carpentry or something like that, and the motivation factor is extremely high. Students begin to take more responsibility for the direction they are going in. Parents report that students who they found difficult to wake up in the morning to get them to go to school are eager and ready to go.

If you go to the graduation, the students in the O2 program form a very strong bond with each other, and it really is very motivational to see that kind of thing happening. The O2 program currently is in 48 high schools throughout the province and it's in every board.

What we're looking at is to see what kinds - the boards have asked us to look at the elements in the O2 program that have been most successful and to see what parts of those we might be able to bring into junior high. In that regard, I'm working with the program directors in the school boards, looking at the Grade 9 program, to see how we can take the elements where students begin to look at themselves, look at the skills they've acquired, look to what they might be interested in, to explore different things in careers and that kind of thing, and then to take responsibility for going after those skills that they need.

We're looking, for example, in the South Shore board, in Queens, at project-based learning with high technology. It has been, in the initial stages, extremely interesting to watch the change in the atmosphere in the school that is being reported to me. The students are motivated, they're excited; they really see that this can lead somewhere. So that's the kind of thing that we're exploring there, along with all the other things that the deputy has mentioned.

MR. MACMASTER: That's great to hear and it must be very rewarding for teachers who are involved with those students to see them motivated and wanting to learn, so that's good to hear.

I just have one last question. We talked a little bit before - I heard you mention that the cost per student is about \$10,000 now. Most of that is from salaries and that's often the case with a lot of things. What portion of the cost would be - I suppose the average person likes to think, well, let's try to get all of the dollars into the classroom where it's directly impacting the students, but we recognize there has to be some central management of the system; there have to be supports from the centre to help the teachers in the classroom. What percentage would you say - of the Department of Education budget - is sort of in Halifax, in the department itself, supporting all the teachers and the schools throughout the province?

MS. PENFOUND: I guess just a couple of comments while my friend, Mr. Dunn, scoots around and finds that number, because I know we have it, but a couple of comments relevant to your question. Last year when we put the budget targets out to boards, we gave specific instructions to them in terms of where they should look when they did the reductions. We asked them to reduce significantly - or to look first at the number of consultants they had in head office and to look at the amount of administration they had. We asked them to do it and to reach certain targets over three years. Most of them went at it even harder than we might have predicted, went there first in the first year, and that's exactly what we had hoped they would do to stay away from classrooms.

Having said that, I think it's fair to say that those of us in the Department of Education recognize that in the education system in Nova Scotia, those of us who sit at Brunswick Place are the furthest thing there is from the classroom, so that whatever we're asking school boards to do, we need to be looking very hard at what we're doing as a department to be sure that we are appropriately supporting them, but that money is flowing insofar as is humanly possible to school boards to apply to students in terms of direct support.

Frank, I'll turn it over to you to perhaps answer it more specifically.

MR. FRANK DUNN: Thank you. If you refer to the Estimates Book, for the Department of Education there's a line item under Programs and Services, which is Public Schools. That's the Public Schools Branch within the department, which essentially is . . .

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Mr. Dunn, could you straighten your microphone because they can't find your voice.

MR. DUNN: Sure. That's essentially the administrative wing of the department. For 2011-12, Public Schools was about \$34.4 million. On a total to the public education system, which is about \$1.1 million, it works out to about 3 per cent. Another thing to keep in mind in that \$34.4 million, there's about \$10 million in grants that goes back to the school boards, so purely from an administrative perspective it would be less than the \$34.4 million.

MR. MACMASTER: Okay, thank you, Madam Chairman. I'd like to turn it over to my colleague for the remainder - I don't think we have much time left.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Your time is gone actually, so you'll have to wait for the second round, Mr. Porter.

We'll begin with Mr. Whynott. That's 20 minutes for the NDP caucus.

MR. MAT WHYNOTT: Thank you very much, Madam Chairman, and thank you for being here today. I guess I want to start off by saying a few things in regard to some of

your opening comments, Ms. Penfound. One of the things you mentioned was that it kind of made you think when you said that every year since 1971 our enrolment in schools has been going down. Is that correct? That's what you said? So obviously money has appreciated over that time, but at the same time there have been more programs added, more curriculum added to the schools, and I think for a positive way forward.

First I want to touch on - you mentioned in your comments that targets for last year's budget were given the earliest that it has ever happened. What was the feedback that you received from the school boards on that?

MS. PENFOUND: I think they were pleased. Earlier in the Fall we had gone through this exercise of the what-ifs, what could we look at, and that raised a significant amount of anxiety and resulted in the 22 per cent number flying around. They stressed with us - particularly if they were facing significant change - that they needed those targets early, and I think February 8th was - they would have liked to have had them even earlier, but I think they recognized that February 8th was a significant change from previous practice, and they were pleased with that. I mean to look at how they do their staffing and what they would have to do from a program perspective to meet those targets was not insignificant. So for them to have, in effect, at least two extra months was a significant advantage for them, I would say.

MR. WHYNOTT: That is good to hear. I would assume that since those budget targets were put in place, from February 8, 2011, the department has been working with each individual board to work toward this coming year's budget. Would that be correct?

MS. PENFOUND: Absolutely. We have a very robust system and protocol in place for how we work with the school boards. As the deputy minister, I meet about every six weeks with the school board superintendents, along with the senior staff. We co-chair those meetings, so it isn't just me setting the agenda. They choose one of their members to be the co-chair, and we work together on the agenda and what we should be talking about. It very much becomes a shopping list of things on their mind, in terms of what they're dealing with and issues that have come up, and how we should collectively approach some of the issues.

We work on regular, mundane stuff that people really don't care about outside that room, but are part of how you make the system work and have updates on various things. Frank, as the chief operating officer, and his staff meet quite regularly with the CFOs from the school boards, so we continue to work with them on a monthly, if not weekly, basis, sometimes even a daily basis, as they work their way through the year, and we are always back and forth in terms of information. The school year starts and you can predict what the enrolment is, but you don't know until the kids show up.

So just working our way through all of that - what do the classrooms look like, how many kids are there, what are the issues going on in that particular school? We're doing

that all the time, and of course we have the normal stuff that never goes away, which is people who call and say, I don't like where the bus stop is. We always say those are the decisions that are made at the board level, but we help the boards as much as we can when issues like that come up. We have a very good working relationship with the staff.

Now that's not to say they like everything we tell them or that they are happy when we say the budget is being reduced, but I would characterize our relationship with them as very cordial, very professional, and very collaborative.

MR. WHYNOTT: Again, looking forward, do you think those budget targets will be met early again this year?

MS. PENFOUND: We are extremely hopeful that we will be out with targets even earlier than last year. If we had our wish, we'd be out before Christmas. There are some things that have to happen to make that come to pass, but our desire is to have it become common practice that boards have their targets well before the end of the fiscal year, so they can do their planning.

MR. WHYNOTT: I think what's important to recognize is that it doesn't matter if you're in the education sector or the health care sector, all of the other agencies and boards that make up government are part of this process to ensure that we live within our means, getting our province back to balance, which is something, quite frankly, that's being done in a progressive way to ensure that you don't cut too quick which would hurt the system overall and which is something that I think other governments in the past have done, quite frankly, too quickly. Cutting too hard, too fast, is not appropriate and rolling back wages is not appropriate. So those are the things that I think we're seeing that will ensure a solid footing going forward after our government's budget is balanced.

I have a question in regard to capital construction. You know, we do see that X graph, as you said, it can be debated fully; it is certainly an eye-opener. But I would argue, too, that places out in the suburban areas of the Halifax Regional School Board are probably seeing increases in students because of new subdivisions going up and all the rest of it. What's the process for capital construction and how does it fit into the budget that is allocated? My understanding is that the province eventually will put out an ask to the school boards and then that ask is evaluated at the department level and then allocations will come for potential new schools, or amalgamation, and all the rest of it.

Can you - I know that's probably a long answer, but maybe you can try to make it a little concise in a nice little package and see what we go from.

MS. PENFOUND: That's what we're all about - nice little packages. I guess as a comment and thinking about the particular area that you represent, we know that every board in Nova Scotia, save the CSAP, is experiencing a declining enrolment. Even Halifax is experiencing it but there are some pockets and you happen to represent one of them

where the population is increasing and that puts different demands on the schools in that area.

You're right in terms of how you briefly characterized how the process works. Each year government determines what its tangible capital asset budget will be for all of its potential capital asset needs - so transportation, hospitals, education, and all of those things.

Mr. Dunn, in his previous incarnation of the Department of Finance and Treasury Board was a significant part of that process, so I may toss it to him in a minute, but you're right in terms of what we do. Traditionally, every year or two, we go out to school boards and we say, what are your needs? What do you see on the horizon? For example, in Halifax, they are constantly working with HRM; they're looking at Statistics Canada; they're looking at community accounts; and they're looking at what's happening with the population, where is it going, where do we predict we're going to be, what are we going to need five years from now, 10 years from now in terms of those high school students or those junior high students?

They've put together what you might want to call their wish list; it's a list of their predicted needs, and sometimes it stretches out quite far. So they would put that list together and they would submit it to the department. That's just particular to their board but, of course, all boards are putting lists together. So we as the department would coordinate with the Department of Transportation and Infrastructure Renewal - because they would have a representative - and the Department of Finance and others to look at, okay, how do we figure out how to merge all those, how do we get the priorities in place?

I do some significant work and we have a group of people, architects and engineers, who work on these things to figure out, looking at the age of the school, the condition of the school, what are the transportation routes like to get to that school, what is the board telling us about whether or not they want to combine that school, are they going to now change that to a Grade 9 to Grade 12, instead of a Grade 10 to Grade 12 - those kinds of things - and try to come up with a merged list that says this is where the money needs to be spent to best meet the needs of the boards and the province?

So that happens but, of course, every year, even though you can be doing a forward-looking plan and saying wouldn't it be nice that three years from now, five years from now, we're building this or this, or this school; each year government has to determine how much money it can allocate for its tangible capital asset needs. So the overlay on those priorities is that you would have to take the amount of money you have and figure out, well, how do we allocate that and how do we address those priorities that are in place?

Some are for new school construction. But some of the most significant things we do are additions and alterations to schools that are out there that prolong their life. If you

can spend \$2 million or \$3 million to prolong the life of a school for 10 or 20 years, that's money really well spent. So it's a fairly complex process back and forth with school boards, and within the boards they have their own processes in terms of how they came up with their particular needs. Frank, you may want to comment on the process a little more.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Mr. Dunn.

MR. DUNN: The deputy did a good job in replying to your question. One thing I would add is that once the TC allocation is allocated to the Department of Education, the process doesn't end there. That's simply the money. There is a branch within the department - the Facilities Management Branch - which then works with the school boards, with the community, and with elected members in the Legislature to ensure that either the new school or the A&A is completed within budget, to the best of our ability. It's much more difficult than it would seem, because these projects are generally not one year. They are multi-year. If you overspend or underspend in a particular year, it has impacts in future years. It's an ongoing process.

MR. WHYNOTT: Okay, one last question for you, Ms. Penfound. I'm glad you mentioned the cyber-bullying and bullying task force and the work that they're doing. I'm lucky enough to be involved in that whole process, and I'm glad I was appointed to the task force.

Just a quick question: I've been able to travel the province a little bit in this regard, talking with students and teachers. It is a pretty significant issue for them, in particular the cyber-bullying piece and how we as a province can move forward on this. I find it interesting that there were approximately 5,000 people who actually got involved through focus groups, through the on-line survey, or through letters and e-mails. That's pretty significant, which I think is telling on how important the issue is. My question is, is there any sense of when that final report will come to the minister?

MS. PENFOUND: This has been a very eye-opening thing for everyone involved. Unfortunately, the issue came to the fore earlier in the year because of some very disheartening and sad circumstances, where students committed suicide - perhaps for a number of reasons, but indications that bullying through the Internet played a role in some of those circumstances.

As you know because you're on the task force, Professor Wayne MacKay at the Law School was asked to chair the task force. He is a noted expert in education law in Canada and has done consulting work for other provinces on a variety of issues. We were extremely pleased that someone like him would basically volunteer - we're paying him, but we're not paying him very much - and he stuck his hand up, saying he would be interested in doing this. Again, we were pleased, but almost shocked at how many people came forward and how many people from across the continent and around the world wanted to chime in on this issue, had something to add, wanted to describe the issue, wanted to

suggest solutions. Actually it was quite heartening, but also concerning, because we realized just how big an issue it was.

We at Education have been happy to be leading this in terms of setting it up so that the task force could do its work, but have also been a bit concerned that some people might consider this an education issue. It's an education issue in terms of people needing to be educated about it, but this is not a problem that's going to be solved all by itself at the school level. We can't expect our principals and teachers to solve an issue that can happen at home when a child is sitting at the computer at ten o'clock at night in their bedroom. Interpol can't figure out how to harness the Internet, so how are we going to do it? We're not going to be able to regulate that.

What has become increasingly clear through the work of the task force is that this is really a societal and a community issue. It has really expanded with the understanding of just how broad it is.

To your question, the original plan was to have the task force report by the end of December. It became increasingly clear over the last couple of months that given the amount of input, given how big this issue is, given the import of the issue and how important it is to be sure a complete job is done, and in discussions with Professor MacKay, it is likely that soon that date for receiving the report will be extended by a couple of months. We're looking - soon, I think - at determining that with him and I would think quite likely that we'll be looking at the end of February for his report to come in. The last thing we want is for him to feel rushed. He needs to be able to really understand - given the large volume of input and how broad this issue is - that he feels he has had adequate time to appropriately address the issue. I expect in the next week or two we'll confirm that date and we'll put out to the public that we're looking at a little longer time.

MR. WHYNOTT: What I find encouraging is that when I sit at that table, there are so many different groups - be it government people, private citizens, private companies, non-profit groups - trying to advise and put forward ideas and all the rest of it. The other thing is being open to the public for some of the working-group sessions with the presentations from the various stakeholders, I think it's great. Anyway, I'm going to pass things over to Mr. MacKinnon.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: You have two minutes and a bit, Mr. MacKinnon.

MR. CLARRIE MACKINNON: Thank you very much, Madam Chairman. I'm glad Mr. Whynott mentioned the cyber-bullying issue. As a follow-up, I was going to ask a question in relation to the leadership that Wayne MacKay has been showing. I don't really think I have time for a question, but Wayne comes from a family that has shown community and business leadership for many years and I'm just so delighted that he's involved there. His dad was the Warden of Pictou County back in the late 1960s and I

served with him on council in the early 1970s, and the late Alex MacKay was a great person as well.

Perhaps, when we come back, I'd like to talk about a couple of issues in relation to the sky is falling in relation to education. We heard so much last year about Reading Recovery being replaced by Succeeding in Reading program. If you would, perhaps, give us a couple of quick comments, maybe in the second round, if I do have a little bit of time. This new program is being well received and Ron Marks, one of the school board members in the Chignecto-Central Regional School Board recently was commenting in The News, the daily paper in New Glasgow where he said: Teachers and parents report very good success with this intensive reading help.

That seems to be what we're hearing about this new program and Ron Marks doesn't give out compliments very easily, I must say. How is it being received? You may not have time to answer.

MS. PENFOUND: It has been received very well. I'm glad you made all those Pictou County connections to Professor MacKay and Ron Marks. You're right that Ron doesn't give those comments out lightly.

The program has been received very well. It is early days - year one - but we are hearing from basically all quarters that teachers and students seem to be doing well. Of course, we won't know for a year or two exactly the results, but at this point we feel it's achieving its objective in terms of meeting more students and engaging classroom teachers more in helping students who have reading challenges. I'll leave it there but we'll be happy to discuss it more.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: For the last round we'll have 16-minute rounds. That will take us almost to the hour and I'll begin with Ms. Casey for the Liberal Party.

MS. CASEY: If I could just go back and make a comment about something that Dr. Lowe said when he was speaking about O2. I was pleased to hear that you're looking at perhaps moving some of the curriculum for O2 into junior high, perhaps Grade 9. At least that's being discussed and I commend you for that.

We know that it was designed to provide an incentive and allow students to be engaged in the learning process, when otherwise they may have found things not too relevant in the curriculum. Sometimes in junior high - I know we introduced it as Grade 10, 11 and 12, but sometimes we've lost some of these kids before they get out of the junior high years so I was encouraged to hear that.

It does cause me, again, to go back to a program that is more costly; will the costs that are incurred if that program is extended be considered when the overall funding to boards is looked at? I go back to my earlier comments that many of these new programs

which are designed for more engagement by students, and to meet more of their special needs, are costly and yet funding to boards is going down. So I'm encouraged to think that the junior high population is being addressed and perhaps the beneficiary of something similar to, or an extension of, O2. Also, on the other hand, it enhances my anxiety that it will be costly and where will the funds come from for that?

I want to go back to the follow-up to a question that my colleague, the member for Inverness was talking about, and that was isolated schools. We all know that the geography of our province can't change, where people live doesn't generally change, so you have to provide accommodations for schools in those communities. I'm looking at some of the proposed changes and I know one that was talked about was the definition of an isolated school. I recognize that the small school and the isolated school are different and they need to be defined.

In the document that I have, which is your document, it defines isolated as travel time between schools of similar type. Could somebody expand on that definition, "travel time" and "schools of similar type"?

MS. PENFOUND: I'm going to ask Mr. Stewart, since he has been the guy doing most of the work on the schools and transportation issues.

MR. STEWART: By similar school, or similar type I guess, the reference is elementary to elementary, middle school to middle school, and high school to high school.

MS. CASEY: Grade level?

MR. STEWART: Basically, yes. And in cases, as you would be aware, we have a mixture like P to 4, P to 6, P to 8, P to 9 and P to 12 schools, when we evaluated the distance we used the - like in a P to 12 we would be using the elementary component, the nearest elementary school rather than the high school component. We kind of went to the most restrictive clause or the one most likely to make the school isolated, I guess.

The time refers to the travel time between schools, so in terms of distance it's about a 20-kilometre radius, roughly - I mean it depends on the type of road and that type of thing for the 30-minute time frame between schools.

Initially, when we first spoke with boards, we had just used that cut-and-dried, it was 30 minutes or it wasn't, but certainly the boards, in consultation, pointed out that not all of the world is nice, round spheres; in some cases you've got some strange catchment areas, so we did make some revisions based on the catchment areas of schools. So the board consultations that we just finished this month - yes, it's still November, this month - we used the definition plus some allowances for catchment areas, and boards have provided some additional feedback beyond that, which of course, we'll consider.

MS. CASEY: Thank you. The catchment area is obviously a big concern because we know that it can be 30 minutes from school A to school B but sometimes students are on a bus 25 to 30 minutes before they ever get to their school. So I'm wondering, in your discussions with boards, if that has been raised and if in fact that will change the definition of isolated.

MR. STEWART: Certainly that was raised by the boards in consultation. If I could use an example, your neighbour there has a school in Belle Cote that's just over 30 minutes from the one in Inverness. Technically that wouldn't meet the definition for the high school but because the catchment area goes far up past Cheticamp, for example, we would have included that school, so some adjustments were made.

MS. CASEY: Thank you. If I could follow up on that, will boards be asked to identify the schools that they believe would not meet that definition? Am I clear on my question?

MR. STEWART: I think so. When we met with the boards we gave them a list of schools that we thought met the criteria in their board and we certainly asked them to get back to us if there were schools that they felt were not included in that list, if that's your question.

MS. CASEY: I guess as a follow-up to that, how much of that information is available to the public? The reason I'm saying that is because I know when little bits of information get out it can, obviously, raise the anxiety level of the parents, and I don't think we want to needlessly do that. Where are we with public discussion, input, understanding and knowledge of this process that you're going through?

MS. PENFOUND: From the beginning, with this process, we've tried to be sure that it was open and transparent. We didn't want anybody thinking that we were cooking up something that people wouldn't understand and imposing it. So from the very beginning, as we started initially, the way the process worked was Doug and Frank went around and met with senior board staff and said, given your experience what do you think about the formula? What things should change? What things need to be attended to? They met with Bill Hogg and said, Bill, what were you thinking? What was your intention? Now that you know how this played out, has this worked the way you thought it would? Did it have the impact you thought it would?

Then the minister met with school board chairs and superintendents and provided a presentation, it's likely the deck that you have, or similar to that, in terms of what our intention was, what we thought the issues were. Then Doug and Frank went back out and met, sometimes for four or five hours, with board staff and worked their way through all particular issues. The three of us did a little road show and went around to all of the full elected boards and made presentations and got their input. We've always said that all of this information is open for discussion with anyone. I know that a number of boards, at

their open public meetings, have raised the Hogg formula and have discussed the issues that they feel are important. We've certainly put no restrictions on that discussion.

Now are we going out and saying here's the list of schools that might fit in the isolated category? No, because it's a work in process. Just like we want to keep people informed we also don't want them to be anxious about something that isn't a reality yet. So we are leaving it to boards to have whatever discussion they wish in public but we are a ways from – and I don't think we would say that we are going to come up with a hard and fast rule on this. We want to be sure that we hear from boards and that they are the ones that can best say - you know what? We don't have any choice about keeping this school open so we'd really like you to consider it, and that's where we'll be.

MS. CASEY: A question regarding funding, my understanding - but I could be corrected on this - that the funding to support class-size caps has been removed. Can you be specific on that?

MS. PENFOUND: Yes I can. Class-size caps have not been removed, they've been altered. The class-size caps that have been in place for quite a while worked like this - and when I get this wrong Dr. Lowe will help me - Primary to Grade 3 the classes were capped at 25 students, that was raised to 27. The cap of 28 for Grade 4 was removed and this was quite some time ago. There was a cap of 20 that has been in place for awhile and has now moved to 22 for any class that has Primary in it; so it's a full Primary class or it's a P-1 split - or a P-1-2-3, because there are some small schools that have that - which is now capped at 22.

The proviso on that though, I think it's important to note, is that there will be circumstances where even with the cap in place, and everybody recognizing they'd like to have small classes, that one student over the cap would place the school in the position where they needed to do a split class. Some schools and some communities would prefer that not to happen. The way that policy is set up is if a school board finds itself in that situation and the school says, oh my gosh, now we've got 27 and it puts us over whatever the number is, that with the advice of the school advisory committee, they can make a decision to increase that class beyond the cap. So there's very much a discussion with the school administration and with the community about what's appropriate in that particular circumstance.

What we do know though is that average class sizes have continued to drop over the last few years. So the cap is still there; it has been made a little more elastic to allow boards and schools to adjust by up to two and, again, with the school advisory committee, to move beyond the existing cap when necessary. Dr. Lowe, have I basically got that right?

DR. LOWE: Yes.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Did you want to add anything to that, Dr. Lowe? You don't have to.

DR. LOWE: Basically just to make sure that it was picked up, the cap of 20 is when it's a combined class.

MS. CASEY: Like Primary-1.

DR. LOWE: Any combined class with Primary children.

MS. CASEY: I guess I'm not sure if I worded my question correctly or not, or clearly, but I think what I hear you saying is that the class-size caps are still in place with the exception of a few changes. My question was the funding to support class-size caps.

MS. PENFOUND: It's my understanding - I think I'm correct, Frank - that the class-size caps, as they existed last year, before they were made a little more elastic, cost about \$20 million. By putting those caps on it meant that boards were required to spend about \$20 million on staffing for those classes. We have not removed the funding per se, but by allowing that elasticity, it means that boards will need to spend less. If they end up being able to have a class that is now two students bigger than it was before and not being forced into creating another class, it's a tool that gives them the ability to be more efficient in terms of how they operate their schools.

MS. CASEY: My follow-up is, is that targeted money for class-size caps? Do they have to spend it on that?

MS. PENFOUND: No, I don't believe it is. Am I right, Frank?

MR. DUNN: I'm just looking here - it's not.

MS. CASEY: So if the money is not targeted then, I think what I hear you saying is, with the co-operation of an advisory council and a school we could have classes in our schools that exceed the class cap?

MS. PENFOUND: Yes, that's possible.

MS. CASEY: We do. I guess where I'm going with this is, is it the responsibility of the board to monitor that or is the department monitoring that - classes that go beyond the recommended cap?

MS. PENFOUND: I guess I would say it's a shared responsibility. School boards know what the policy is. They are the ones who monitor in a school what's happening and whether those class sizes have been exceeded and whether they followed the policy in terms of exceeding it. As school starts in the Fall and those classes get populated, the

department gets information through the various processes we have about where they are. We've had, for example, a couple of occasions where we've had contact from somebody saying, why is the class size larger than what I thought the cap said? We would follow up with the school board and have them assure us that, in fact, they followed the policy, and if it is larger, that they've gone through the appropriate process to get there.

MS. CASEY: Perhaps I can just make a statement. We have heard at our caucus - and I'm sure all caucuses have had presentations from the education partners - and the message we're getting from all five of those partners is really contradictory to what has been stated in that the cuts in funding to education will not affect the classroom. We've heard that statement made. Yet those five partners sit with us and they say the cuts to funding are having an effect on the classrooms and the delivery of programs to students. Those partners, as you know, are the Nova Scotia School Boards Association, the Association of Nova Scotia Administrators, the Nova Scotia Teachers Union, Canadian Parents for French, and the Home and School Association.

So it's a little contradictory and I think confusing when the five education partners of whom you've spoken, and I know you work with, are saying these cuts are having a negative impact on students in our classrooms, and yet we're not hearing that from staff. So I guess my question is, are the cuts that are being imposed on boards having a negative impact on classes of kids in our province right now?

MADAM CHAIRMAN: We don't really have time for that answer in this round, but maybe you could include that in your final summation. That would be good. Mr. Porter.

MR. CHUCK PORTER: Thank you, Madam Chairman, and thanks to the committee for being here with us this morning. I have just a few questions, a comment or two to start off. As most of you would be aware, I represent Hants West. In that area I have eight elementary schools, one middle school, and one high school.

I also want to put on the record, given recent ongoing, that I have what I consider to be a great board. They work very well together and they work very well with us as MLAs. I don't know how many do it around the province, but I know that the MLAs in the Annapolis Valley School Board will come together a couple of times a year and meet with that board and work through issues, get updates, and so on and so forth. So the relationship there is very good and things seem to be working very well there. I guess I would hope that the department would have nothing less to say than that things are good there and have been for some years.

My first question I want to get to is around the ratios of teachers and students. If I heard you correctly earlier, Ms. Penfound, it was 1 to 12.9?

MS. PENFOUND: Yes.

MR. PORTER: And prior to that it was . . . ?

MS. PENFOUND: We have it somewhere here if you can bear with us for a moment.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: In your opening statement you said 1 to 16.5.

MR. PORTER: All right. Is that what it is?

MADAM CHAIRMAN: That was in your opening statement.

MS. PENFOUND: Whatever I said.

MR. PORTER: So it certainly has gone down.

MS. PENFOUND: Yes.

MR. PORTER: So I guess when I hear the ratios and you talk about students and having visited schools, and knowing a lot of the kids, from my kids still being in school, and families and so on, and you work with them - what impact does the ratio have on the outcome of the student? Do you know that? Has the department studied this thing to death and said, look, it needs to be this, this is the impact if it's not? Is there something there?

MS. PENFOUND: I'll make a few general comments and I think Dr. Lowe will be able to chime in. First, a comment about what student-teacher ratio is, because I think often we in the public confuse student-teacher ratio with class size, and that's an ongoing discussion. Student-teacher ratio is the relationship between the number of students in a school or in a board and the number of professional teachers who teach and support students.

So I guess to state it plainly, it's everybody who has got a teacher's licence in a board against the number of students that there are. Some would say, well, isn't that misleading, because people think it's class size? I would comment, however, that that measure has been used for decades. It's used across the country. It's reported on by Statistics Canada. It is one of the measures, not one to be taken in isolation, because it's important as well to have a discussion about what does that look like, what does that translate to in terms of students in the classroom, and how big are those classrooms? So I think it's important to understand that.

As I mentioned in my opening remarks, class sizes have been continuing to drop. With regard to the impact that class size or student-teacher ratio - I guess more importantly class size - has on student achievement, I think I'm correct in saying that, generally speaking, unless you have a significant change in class size - unless you're going from a class of 30 to 12 - a variation of two or three students in a class, or several students in the

class, has not been shown to have a significant impact. It's more about the quality of the teaching and what's going on in the class and not exactly the number of students.

Now Dr. Lowe will have some comments, I'm sure, about what the research says on these points.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Dr. Lowe.

DR. LOWE: Yes, the research over the years has indicated that they could not find a significant correlation between the size of the class and student achievement. Ontario, however, in the last few years, has done more study and the general conclusion is that it's not just the number in the class, it's what happens in the class. The more the class is treated as a unit and you have whole-class teaching, then the student achievement is lower. In those classes - and most of our elementary classes in Nova Scotia would certainly follow the model of working with children in small groups - that you have groupings within the classroom, that has been found to be the most effective in increasing student achievement.

MR. PORTER: Thank you, and part of the reason for asking that question was based totally on that ratio being what it is, most people do, I think, misinterpret that to mean something else.

I guess just a bit of clarity there, when you say all those who have a teaching license, is that including those in administration in the board? Those are your superintendents and others who are there, that calculation even though - I don't want to say they don't have an impact, they certainly have an impact on what goes on with the schools but they're not hands-on. Do we know, deputy, what the hands-on - I'm trying to word this just right - so if there are 50, I'll use easy math, if there are 50 teachers in the Annapolis Valley Regional School Board and that number is 1 to 12.9 or whatever it is, what is the actual number? Do we know that, taking out the administration and others who may hold the teaching licences?

MS. PENFOUND: We do. I think first off, you are right in your assumption that it includes everybody who has a teacher's licence and in most boards that would be right up to and including the superintendents. Oftentimes what people are most interested in are those who interact on a daily basis, face to face with a child, as compared to those who don't.

MR. PORTER: That's principals as well?

MS. PENFOUND: Yes, and I think we should be careful not to assume that those people who don't stand in front of a classroom are not contributing significantly to the education of students, right to the senior staff and many of the consultants in boards are contributing significantly, in terms of how they interact with students; for example, speech-language pathologists, a guidance counsellor, psychologist, all those folks.

With regard to your particular board, the Annapolis Valley Regional School Board, our numbers would indicate that there are 874 classroom teachers - this would be the October 2011 statistics - and there are 99 administrators.

MR. PORTER: Thank you, and I would agree with your comment with regard to those in the schools, the principals, guidance counsellors and such, as, again, having been in those schools on a regular occurrence, you see the work that gets done with the principals, the relationships with students as an example, very much hands-on although they may not be directly in the classroom in front of them, very much hands-on. I appreciate that data as well.

There has been some discussion in the last little while about the move of Grade 6s into the middle school level and then the Grade 9s moving to the high school level. Can you update me on where that is? Is that board-specific, number one, and are we on target for a certain year because I'm hearing that may not quite be all that it was initially?

MS. PENFOUND: There is not a global policy that we're moving towards 9s to 12s in the middle school model. There are some who would argue, and I might be one who would subscribe to this, that Grade 9s might be better served in the high school setting. Right now Grade 9s have a curriculum that's based very much on how Grade 7 and Grade 8 works - there are certain classes, you all take them and that's how it works.

There may be some students, as we've discussed before - and Grade 9 is viewed as a very critical year - that need to be engaged in the O2 type opportunities; that need to have, perhaps, different choices, and those choices might be better served by them being in a high school model. So although we're not moving towards that as a standard, some boards are embracing that and viewing it as an appropriate way to serve their students and to manage their facilities. Of course when you do that, then that trickles down to okay, do you have a 7 and 8 or do you have a 6, 7 and 8?

We do not have a goal out in front of us that we need to have so many middle schools or so many high schools. It's very much as the boards plan their facilities, as they look at their student needs and what they bring forward to us, in terms of what their requests are for additions and alterations or for construction.

MR. PORTER: Just on that, I know there was a plan in our area, or at least what I had heard to be a plan, to move the Grade 6s next year. I have a girl in Grade 7 and a girl in Grade 8 and they'd both be going to the high school at the same time, so within the next couple of years that was planned. But I'm hearing that, for whatever reason, that target may not be realistic at this point.

There are some parents and families who are skeptical of that - which is not surprising to you at all, I'm sure - but I would agree that Grade 9 is a very critical year. Having been there and left school in Grade 9 and then returned later only to learn I should

have stayed, I can tell you, it's just that time frame in a person's life, though, when it seems to be - all those changes, you want to get out, you want to make money, grab a job. It always seems better than getting up and going to school, albeit we know it isn't. I'm not sure why that would have changed at this point, but student population obviously has some bearing here, and it would matter, I would think, only for one year. When you talk about the facilities piece I'm not sure how that fits.

MS. PENFOUND: I can comment. Most high schools in the Annapolis Valley are Grades 9 to 12 - not in your area, but most of them are. Obviously, that board is managing and planning based on that. In terms of what they are particularly thinking for that school and how they're planning, I can't speak to that. It's really a board issue in terms of how they manage that. I do know that that board has been very progressive in terms of how they manage their facilities, not looking at it on a one-off, school-by-school basis, but looking at families of schools, how the transportation factors in, and how they can best use their facilities. If you have a high school that is experiencing declining enrolment, you might think that it's more efficient to manage that school as a Grades 9 to 12, instead of a Grades 10 to 12. So it's part of that kind of discussion, but it's very much driven at the board level.

MR. PORTER: Your comment about family and schools is quite relevant. I know that all of my schools - I'm sure they all are - it's always interesting to go into these schools and hear the principal say, this is your school. He's not referring to just those children. He's referring to those family members who are there in attendance for any number of events. I think of Mike Knowles specifically. I hear that so much, and my kids are there in elementary school: this is the family's school.

Having said that, I have a school now under review, Newport Station District Elementary. The board would like that review to be much shorter so that they can make their decisions based on finances, and they would probably see that come to a close sooner. However, there is the other side of it. People will say thank God there's a process, because things do change.

That first meeting has been had. It was a very good meeting; we have great representation there by way of a mediator. Brian Bishop was there in attendance and so on. It's a touchy area to be involved in, school closing. I think there were three new kids who came for Primary this year, and they're down to the low 80s, I believe is the number, maybe 82 or 83. There are some ideas about changing or opening some other opportunities, maybe a French school, something that our area of Hants West doesn't have. We do see it in other parts of the province, strictly a French school. Is that something that the department would be involved in or would the board decide it on their own?

MS. PENFOUND: I guess I would start by acknowledging that I'm not surprised that Mike Knowles is a very progressive principal. He and I were in the same Phys. Ed. class at Dalhousie in the 1970s. They don't even offer that program anymore, but we went through it together. Your comments about the school review process being a difficult one

for everybody are certainly acknowledged. The process that's in place takes a long time. It's almost two complete school years before a board can make a decision about the future of a school that's under review.

As you would know, the staff prepares identification reports that the board deals with at the end of March. That kicks off that whole-year process that you're now describing, with study committees and impact assessments, so that the board makes a decision by the next March. That means if a decision was made to consolidate a school, close a school, or change how it operates, it would be the following September at the earliest before they could do that. We certainly acknowledge that that's a difficult process, but that the process that's there is one that is there to ensure that the public and families have the utmost opportunity to participate.

In terms of the location of French schools, the CSAP is our only provincial board. The other boards are all regional. They are charged with delivering French first-language education to those constitutionally-entitled families and students, and they do an excellent job. They recently opened their newest school in Porters Lake for elementary school children. They approached us with that when they identified a population of entitled parents and families with an interest in opening a school there. Certainly, if they identify to us a similar need in another area, we would always be prepared to discuss and work with them, whether or not it was an appropriate place. Having said that, it all factors into the TCA budget, what schools are available, all of those things, but we are very much interested in supporting the rights of entitled parents to have their children educated in French as their first language.

MR. PORTER: I think I only have about a minute left so I just want to quickly get to it. There was a capital list of projects - certainly in my area - Hantsport was one of them, Three Mile Plains was another. I think I had submitted something with regard to Windsor Forks School. I know Hants West went through an extensive bit of money being spent to bring that where it is today; thankfully it's new and refreshed. I'm just wondering if those projects are still on line for the years that they were set for or if there have been changes to that capital budget moving forward with the projects.

MS. PENFOUND: I'll make a general comment and then Mr. Dunn may chime in. As I mentioned earlier, there is a whole process with schools bringing forward what their wishes are and each year it depends on the allocation. Government announced its capital plan for education for the coming year just last week and indicated what projects are on tap within the budget. Of course, when you start something it implies you're spending money in the out years so a certain amount of your capital budget is always dedicated to those projects, which have already started.

There is a long list of priorities that we've received from many boards over a significant number of years and we will soon be going out to school boards, asking them to confirm their priorities for us. So projects that aren't started yet, we'll be asking boards,

please confirm what your priorities are. Some of them have been on the books for a long time; enrolments have changed; priorities have changed; the conditions of the schools have changed; so we would be asking them to let us know if the priorities are the same or are there any adjustments. You may wish to add to that, Frank.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: We don't have a great deal of time.

MR. DUNN: I can quickly say, in the Annapolis board, the capital projects that were approved for 2012-13 would be Kings County Academy, which is essentially a finish-up of that school, Aldershot Elementary School, and the Hantsport School.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Thank you, Mr. Dunn. We're going to turn it back over to Mr. MacKinnon for 16 minutes. It will take us right to 10:59 a.m.

MR. MACKINNON: I'm going to share my time so I'm going to have two or three snapper questions and if the answers could be as close to yes or no, it would be really appreciated. The minister's whole thrust in budget time was protect the classroom, protect the students, protect learning, and one of the directives given to boards was that administrative costs should be cut 15 per cent. Did, in fact, all or most boards meet that target?

MS. PENFOUND: Yes, all boards complied with the instructions that we gave them.

MR. MACKINNON: There were a number of targeted initiatives that were, in fact, my understanding is they were protected, and included in that was healthy living and I think that's extremely important with the obesity levels that we are dealing with in society at all age levels. Healthy living, I guess, is one area that we should be protecting despite declining enrolment. Was that one of the initiatives that was, in fact, protected?

MS. PENFOUND: Yes, the funding was unchanged.

MR. MACKINNON: A concern that I've had for many years - and this is my last question - is we have a tremendous amount of excess square footage throughout our whole province, throughout every board. What are we doing in relation to schools being used more during the daily school hours and also in the evenings and incorporating, perhaps, daycare, community services, health and wellness or any initiatives that we can possibly use some of that square footage for. Are efforts being made in that regard?

MS. PENFOUND: I sort of feel like I'm on Reach for the Top. I can't say yes or no to this one. There are a couple of things going on, and one of them is the SchoolsPlus programs that I've already mentioned a little earlier, and as well, government will soon be announcing the details of the community use of schools grants program. It will be specifically targeted at helping to remove the barriers that may exist for community groups

in using schools. So if a community group wants to use the school and attracts extra janitorial service, for example, that's something that can be a barrier to the community using the schools. That's only one example but we hope that that will help bring the community more into the school and to use that space for what is essentially a public building.

MR. MACKINNON: I'll turn it over to Mr. Burrill. Thank you very much.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Mr. Burrill.

MR. GARY BURRILL: Thanks. I was wondering if we could go back and follow this area of concern that Ms. Casey was raising with you a few minutes ago, about what the new formula is going to do relative to rural schools. I think it's obvious and clear that it will be an improvement to rather than have a mechanical transfer of \$150,000 per 100-student school, that we have a transfer that's more closely related to actual circumstances of isolation. But the matter of the definition of "isolation" is so critical - and if I understand what you said so far, the definition that has been offered is a 30-minute distance between facilities, and then in subsequent discussion with boards, we have kind of moved to 30 minutes between facilities with some added consideration for peculiar geographic circumstances.

But I wonder what you would make of this suggestion that, in fact, the distance between facilities is itself an inappropriate measure of isolation in small rural schools. For this reason, that by definition the smaller and more rural the school the greater the dispersal of population in the area it serves and the greater the scope, the breadth, the geographical width of its catchment area, so that in order to measure the actual isolation that in definition we need to account for this feature, the outside perimeter of the catchment area, not the distance between facilities.

I'm wondering if you have a comment on the thought that we would be in danger of coming to Hogg II or III, or the new Hogg, for rural isolated schools. We'd be in danger of getting it wrong if we don't take into account at a deep definitional level the circumference of the broad rural catchment area, rather than the distance between facilities.

MS. PENFOUND: I'd be happy to comment. I guess what I'd say is the current formula has got it wrong because the way the formula is set up now, funding goes to a school based on just the number of students. So if you're a school in suburban Halifax with 100 kids where you can walk to two other elementary schools, that school is supported with extra funding under the formula. That means that the money that goes to that school that might not need it, or for which the board has a reasonable choice as it begins to manage its facilities, is not available to be used for other purposes or for other isolated schools.

Doug has used this phrase as we've worked our way through this - I think I'll get it right: it's better to be approximately correct than precisely wrong. I think we say now we

have it kind of precisely wrong. We don't have that money directed at supporting the schools that we understand need that support most, and those are primarily rural schools that boards have no choice because the facility is needed in the community and the kids can't stay on the bus any longer. So I think I'd make that point.

The other point I would make is that we haven't landed on this yet. This is very much an open debate, an open discussion, and it has been very much an iterative process. As we met with full, elected boards, we had some very animated discussion and exchange about this very issue.

In terms of your hypothesis that we might be totally wrong, in terms of using distance - I know the wheels are turning in Doug's head, so I'm going to ask him to offer a few comments on that suggestion.

MR. STEWART: A couple of principles - and the deputy spoke about it - it is better to be approximately correct than precisely wrong. We at the department are funding school boards. Actually, what we are doing is allocating funds to school boards. If you are going to allocate funds to boards, it's reasonable to try to have a consistent set of principles and definitions so that boards are treated equally. The standards within boards are not consistent now - not surprisingly, because they have different levels of funding and they have different needs - so what may be considered a very long bus ride in Halifax may be considered a very reasonable bus ride in the Strait. As the deputy mentioned earlier, they are fond of telling us they have 20 per cent of the geography, and they deal with some real challenges there.

We're trying to get a definition that treats everybody equally, but at the end of the day, this is just allocating funding and the boards will choose what they do or don't do, in terms of meeting their needs.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Ms. Penfound, did you have more to say?

MS. PENFOUND: I'd just add that you pose an interesting question. It will go in the hopper as we work our way through the input that we've gotten from boards and staff, so thank you.

MR. BURRILL: Let me just pursue this a little more. Would you agree that the more rural and isolated a school, the less the distance between facilities is an actual measure of distance as it is experienced in the school?

MS. PENFOUND: I'm not sure. You started with your earlier question about how, just because the school is rural, you have a larger catchment area and the people who come to that school are more dispersed. That may be so, but I don't think it's necessarily so. You could have a very small community that is quite isolated, but the people in that area, that

small number live in fairly close proximity to the school. So I'm not exactly sure about your hypothesis. Doug, you may wish to add something.

MR. STEWART: Yes, I guess I would simply say it really - I think that statement is too general to use, because it very much depends on the configuration of the schools and the geographic area. You can have a large number of rural schools that are all scattered 20 or 25 minutes apart but are centred or you can have them all in a ribbon, in which case it gets much more difficult. So no, I don't think that straight up I can agree. I acknowledge that rural areas have more challenges around getting the students to the school than more urban ones, but I don't think you can really treat them all the same.

MR. BURRILL: I wonder if we could maybe just go back to the things that you were raising when we started, Ms. Penfound, speaking about this general moment, where we are with the formula and with declining enrolment. It strikes me that we have at our fingertips a great amount of statistical precision about these matters you were talking about to begin with - about enrolment trends, about teacher-student ratios, about class size - and that we come to these funding budgetary discussions with these numbers, but a lot of times this leads us to be talking past the people we're talking to, because this is not really what is at issue.

By and large, people who are informed about this accept this. What is often at issue is the question of the intensification of the classroom over a recent number of years, so often if a person - we provide the numbers about enrolment, class size, teacher-student ratio. Then there's the counter-contention of yes, but the number of students in special needs situations, the number of students needing in-class staff supports and so on, has increased.

I've never in this discussion heard this second matter, the intensification and the number of students, the increase in students needing student supports, I've never heard the kind of statistical precision about what has happened in that area over the last decade or five years that we have, for example, about declining enrolment, student-teacher ratios and so on, but really we would need to have - or it would be helpful to have - that kind of statistical precision to pursue this discussion constructively. Are those numbers available in the department?

MS. PENFOUND: We certainly have, through our Student Services Division, a reasonable handle on the number of students with special needs in schools. We have good information about the number of students who are assigned to teacher assistants. We certainly know what numbers of students in schools are being serviced by resource teachers. Have we got that all rolled up into the kind of precision that you're asking about? I would say, no, we probably don't at this point.

We will have, I hope, the ability, soon, to do that. We are now approaching full implementation of our in-school information management system, which will be out to all

schools by the Fall of 2012 and it will allow us the ability to, in real time, more accurately gather data about who our students are, what their needs are, and how they're being serviced. So I think we're well on our way to fully understanding that. For example, we are not sure that we have an accurate picture of how many students are on individual program plans, which is a very significant piece of information.

We have heard concerns expressed to us by the African Nova Scotian community about is there a disproportionate number of African Nova Scotian students on IPPs and we're working towards to being sure that we have a complete understanding of those numbers because it should factor into how we manage our program planning.

MR. BURRILL: Thanks.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: You have a few more questions, Mr. Epstein?

MR. HOWARD EPSTEIN: Deputy, the reason we spend so much time talking about money and education is because we're concerned about the quality of the education that's offered to our children. We're concerned about the outcomes; we're concerned about making sure that education, which is widely seen and valued as really the only reasonable way forward for individuals and families and for our communities, is delivered at an acceptable and good quality level. So I'm wondering if you have any comments for us about outcomes. What's the state of knowledge about outcomes in our school system by national and international measures?

MS. PENFOUND: I would be happy to make a general comment and then ask Dr. Lowe to chime in. I guess it's always entirely appropriate for us to be talking about improving the system. We should always be thinking about that and always be thinking about the system you need to change to meet the changing demands of our students. I think we should, however, be careful not to be an apologist for a system that we don't need to apologize for. We have an excellent system. Internationally we rank very, very high. The Canadian system is wonderful and we are a wonderful part of that system.

We ride around the middle in terms of the Canadian Provinces and if you were to discount the larger provinces with more money and more students, like Ontario and Alberta, we actually do pretty darn well. We have an increasing number of international students who come to Nova Scotia under the Nova Scotia International Student Program to enroll in our high schools, to get their education here, and to experience our culture and our province. We have an increasing number of international schools who are clamouring to offer our Primary to Grade 12 program in places like China, Egypt and Abu Dhabi because it's of such high calibre.

Are there things that we're concerned about? Of course, there are. We think that the results in math are not where they should be. It's quite troubling that some of our students are showing less than desirable outcomes in math and we have some plans to work on that,

but in terms of where we stack up internationally, I'm going to ask Dr. Lowe to, perhaps, have the last word on this.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Dr. Lowe, if you would, we just have a few seconds left so that will be the last word.

DR. LOWE: Okay, thank you, Madam Chairman. Going to the math, you have heard that in the PCAP results that Nova Scotia is slightly below the Canadian average but internationally the Canadian average takes in only 10 countries in the world; there are only nine countries above us in the world, so it's relative. It's a very high standard and in Nova Scotia we still are exceeding countries like the United Kingdom, Sweden and so on, but that's not good enough. We know that we still have to improve. We are looking carefully at the curriculum. We still believe in the mathematics that we have a sin of having too many outcomes in the curriculum to be covered and so we're looking at going to the essential ones in more depth.

MR. EPSTEIN: It was obviously a much longer conversation but thank you for the answers.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Thank you very much, Mr. Epstein, and I'm not sure that - we really don't have any time but you may have one or two quick comments, Ms. Penfound, to wrap up.

MS. PENFOUND: Only to say thank you for your attention and we'll be continuing to work with the boards to make sure we have an appropriate and fair allocation model for funding to school boards. Thank you very much.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Well, thank you very much, I appreciate that. We have no committee business today so we'll be back next week on December 7th for the Department of Health and Wellness. Could I have a motion to adjourn?

MR. EPSTEIN: I so move.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Thank you very much, Mr. Epstein.

We are adjourned.

[The committee adjourned at 11:01 a.m.]