

HANSARD

NOVA SCOTIA HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY

COMMITTEE

ON

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS

Wednesday, April 3, 2013

LEGISLATIVE CHAMBER

**Department of Education
Home-Schooling**

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Public Accounts Committee

Hon. Keith Colwell, Chairman
Mr. Howard Epstein, Vice-Chairman
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Mr. Gary Ramey
Mr. Mat Whynott
Mr. Brian Skabar
Mr. Andrew Younger
Mr. Chuck Porter
Mr. Allan MacMaster

[Hon. Karen Casey replaced Mr. Andrew Younger]

In Attendance:

Mrs. Darlene Henry
Legislative Committee Clerk

Mr. Jacques Lapointe
Auditor General

Mr. Terry Spicer
Assistant Auditor General

Mr. Gordon Hebb
Chief Legislative Counsel

WITNESSES

Department of Education

Mr. Frank Dunn, Associate Deputy Minister
Mr. Alan Lowe, Senior Executive Director, Public Schools Branch



House of Assembly
Nova Scotia

HALIFAX, WEDNESDAY, APRIL 3, 2013

STANDING COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC ACCOUNTS

9:00 A.M.

CHAIRMAN
Hon. Keith Colwell

VICE-CHAIRMAN
Mr. Howard Epstein

MR. CHAIRMAN: Good morning, I'd like to bring the meeting to order. First, I would remind everybody to make sure you have your phone on silent or turned off.

We will start this morning by introducing our members.

[The committee members and witnesses introduced themselves.]

MR. CHAIRMAN: I'd like to welcome our guests this morning and we'll start off with a presentation from the department if we could, please.

Mr. Dunn.

MR. FRANK DUNN: Thank you, and good morning, Mr. Chairman, members. First of all I'd like to extend our Deputy Minister Carole Olsen's regrets. She couldn't be here this morning; she is chairman of a national committee and she's out in Alberta this morning so I'll be filling in for her.

Dr. Lowe has introduced himself, and I will be forwarding most of the questions this morning to him because he has had a lot of experience in home-schooling and has done a fair bit a research in that area. A few comments, though.

Every child in Nova Scotia has the right to a free public education. There are approximately 120,500 students, children, studying in public schools in Nova Scotia this year. Under the Education Act parents can also have their children attend a private school or teach their child themselves at home, and there are approximately 850 children in the province who are receiving their education at home. The province does not provide funding to parents to home-school their children.

There are many reasons why a child receives home-schooling, often it is because of philological or religious reasons. Courts have ruled that parents have a right, under the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, to determine the method of education they want for their children and that that method follows the parents' religious and philosophical convictions.

Here in Nova Scotia we want every child to get a high-quality education so they can reach their potential and fulfill their aspirations. The parents' right to educate their children is balanced against every child's right to a good education; therefore the Education Act puts a duty on parents who want to home-school their children to register with the department each year and outline the program of study.

The program of study may be a commercially available program, correspondence courses, or a program developed by a parent. The province does not provide a home-schooling curriculum package but we do provide access to our curriculum outcomes, guidelines, and their correspondence studies available for children in Grades 7 to 12. Parents must also report the progress of their students each June. How the parent assesses the child is up to the family.

It's important to note at this point that students studying at home are not required to participate in provincial, national, or international testing. When the Auditor General delivered his report last November he made 12 recommendations about home-schooling, and we have begun implementing some of the recommendations. For example, we are developing a robust system to track key data such as registration, receipt of progress reports, and transition of students between the public system and home-schooling.

Those are the types of short-term actions we can do right away to address the Auditor General's recommendations. Addressing some of the recommendations will require a bit more time and discussion; therefore a longer-term strategy will be developed over the coming year. This strategy will include developing a new policy framework to address the following: the current legal context in Canada related to home-schooling; mechanisms to assess educational programs; required supports for parents to develop study programs for their children, and the role of local schools and school boards with respect to students who are being home-schooled.

The new strategy may also need legislative changes to be implemented. This longer-term strategy cannot be developed without consultation with families of

home-schooled children and other stakeholders. We plan to begin these consultations in the coming months.

That concludes my opening remarks, and we're free for questions.

MR. CHAIRMAN: We'll start with Ms. Casey, and you have 20 minutes.

HON. KAREN CASEY: Thank you to both Frank and Alan for coming to respond to our questions. First of all, my question would be recognizing that we have between 800 and 900 students who are being home-schooled, and recognizing that those students may have as many as 800 or 900 different curriculums or programs that they're following, what discussion has there been at the department as to how it may be practical to collect the data that you're suggesting you will be collecting?

MR. ALAN LOWE: It is quite a volume, as you have said, and that is one of the points of discussion that we want to have in consultation with the parents in our public hearings. Different provinces have tried different strategies. Some of them have individual schools as the co-operating school, in which the school would do some of the monitoring of the program and give help in developing them, and also in evaluating the success of the students. Others have left it at the school board level, and some have left it at the ministry level.

Within the ministry, one of the options that we have is the regional education services, which have had two vacancies - one of which is just about to be filled, and another one to be posted next week. So we have regional education officers, and now we'll have a total of three, plus myself. We think that might be an option we can present to the parents as a possibility.

Some of the programming the parents are using are packaged programs, particularly some of the religious-based programs. Some of them are not religiously based, but they're specifically for home-schooling and they have their own outlines, and so we can deal with those in a more systematic way. They also have their own evaluation instruments for that, and what we're doing is we'll have a close look at those to see how far they are able to indicate to us how the children are doing.

MS. CASEY: My next question is with respect to the individual parents and their rights and the fact that they are delivering a program - and my understanding is that they are having great successes with their programs. Have there been concerns raised at the department about the well-being of the home-schooled students and the achievement or lack of achievement of outcomes for those students?

MR. LOWE: In our experience at the department, we have found that the students are doing very good work. The parents are very dedicated, and they're doing exceptional jobs in working with their students. Occasionally we have concerns when there is an

indication that the student has special needs, and we contact those parents to see what support can be provided for them through the various services available and through getting them to make contact with the local school.

It is an option in Nova Scotia for home-schooled students to still have a connection with the school if the school agrees. In the regulations and in the Act the degree of co-operation is up to the school board and the school, but that is happening. We even have some students who spend half the week at school and half the week being home-schooled.

There is a concern that some parents who are new at this may not have all the support that they would like to have. That was one of the observations of the Auditor General, that some of our materials are quite complex. Even our everyday public school teachers have been indicating that there are too many outcomes, which I know you are well aware of. So we'll be looking to have a simplified version of the outcomes down to - if I dare say it - the bare essential outcomes, in the context of the broader overall objectives of home-schooling.

To your question of whether we have great concerns, the answer is no. Some of the correspondence I've been getting from home-schooling parents about the Auditor General's Report is that the concern that the report addresses, that there might be children out there not receiving a proper education, or a good education, or the best education that they could have - the home-schooling parents say, you're addressing the wrong group. You should be addressing the group of parents who aren't sending their children to school, who aren't registered in either private school or home-schooling. In other words, truant.

That is a separate problem, and in the report there was a mention - and it's one that we've been looking at, working with the Health and Wellness Department. We believe the Health and Wellness Department has more complete records on the school-aged children population in each area, but due to privacy concerns, all we can access there are numbers.

So we'll start with that. We'll analyze the number of students who are school-aged, and how many we can account for as being enrolled in the private schools, the public schools, and the home-schooling, and see if there's a gap there, of how many children are not addressed. Those are the students who, under all the laws in the country, are really not having their right to have an education, and they're the ones who we think we might be also suggesting, apart from home-schooling, some legislation to address that problem.

MS. CASEY: Thank you. If I could go back to get you to clarify, perhaps, in the beginning you talked about how there have been some concerns brought to your attention. What would the frequency of that be? Are we talking single-digit numbers?

MR. LOWE: Low double-digit.

MS. CASEY: Low double-digit. These would be concerns that have been brought to your attention at the department, that there may be children whose academic needs are not being met? Would that be fair? Or special needs looking for supports? Can you be more specific?

MR. LOWE: Yes. The concerns sometimes come from the parents themselves, who indicate they have special needs, and that they've had access to the IWK and so on, but they're wondering what else they should be doing. If the child has autism, we make sure that they're put in contact with the autism network in the province and have access to some of the school services. A continuing one - and what the mechanism is hasn't been announced formally yet, but we've been working with the Health and Wellness Department to provide speech pathology for home-schooled children. Under the legislation as it currently stands, speech pathology services are available to children up to school-entry age, and after school entry it's all through the schools. So it has been a Catch-22 for the parents who are home-schooling, and that's one of the areas that we are addressing with Health and Wellness.

Sometimes the school calls, and there is a developing conflict between the school and the family, and so they call to see if they can pull the children out of school and start home-schooling. That's not really a very sound basis, many times, to begin a home-schooling career, so what we do in those cases is we try to mediate between the schools and contact the school board to see if there are alternative placements, and that kind of thing. Generally we've had success with that.

Then there are other times, I have to tell you, when families are breaking up. Sometimes one spouse wants to begin home-schooling and the other spouse doesn't agree with it, and then you get into the arguments back and forth on that. The legislation is worded in the singular. It doesn't require both parents, so then we have to sort out with the lawyers who has the final custody in respect to determining the education.

MS. CASEY: It would sound to me then, based on your response, that parents do come to the department looking for assistance or support, and the department is able to provide that or at least guide the parents in the right direction. That does not appear to me to be a problem with home-schooling or a problem with the response that the department is giving to the home-schooling. So I'm trying to narrow it down to the numbers of situations where either the parent is not providing appropriate programming or the department doesn't know whether they are or not - would those be the areas that the Auditor General appears to be trying to address?

MR. LOWE: Yes, I shouldn't speak for the Auditor General, but a part of their concern is that they are unable to determine from the evidence that they had to look at how many there may be because the evaluation reports are not standard, it's more anecdotal of what the parents have done, what the students have done. Personally, in my own working experience, I guess in the last three years there are only two students whom I really was

concerned about, and I actually got the school to start making contact with the parents again.

MS. CASEY: Next question, there is provision within the Act for the minister to terminate a parent's rights to home-school?

MR. LOWE: Yes.

MS. CASEY: Has that happened?

MR. LOWE: No. Certainly not in my connection with the home-school program, and I have nothing in the records to indicate that has ever happened. It's a very drastic action when you consider the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

MS. CASEY: That would be my thought as well. Next question, recognizing, as I said, there may be between 800 and 900 in any given time and the human resources that would be required in order to do the follow-up with those, what thoughts does the department have about additional human resources to provide that data that you need to have recorded?

MR. LOWE: First of all we're looking to have a better software system. Part of the difficulty with the old software system that we have now is that it does not archive, and so after the current year everything goes into paper records, which was some of the frustration for the audit - so along with that, and the connection with the school. My preliminary thoughts - but this is prior to consultation with the parents - would be first of all to have the regional education officers who are spread out across the province be responsible for the students in their area, because it's different boards, then we look at other jurisdictions where the boards take some responsibility for overseeing the program, and in other jurisdictions individual schools.

A little bit on the anecdotal feedback I have from some of those provinces is that then they have the difficulty of making sure there is consistency across the province in how things are interpreted and to what degree they are respecting the rights of the parents, and balancing this against the needs of the children. I have to tell you that in home-schooling the relationship between the department and the home-school parents has to be one of trust. Parents have indicated to me that they find that the current relationship is a good one and they want to develop that further and to have more communication. If it becomes too bureaucratized and intrusive the fear is that parents will stop registering or that it will become just a bureaucratic exercise that doesn't serve either side well.

So my answer is that I want to leave that question open until we have a discussion with the parents.

MS. CASEY: My question, again, is a follow-up to that. I think it is good news that the home-school parents feel that they're not threatened by the department. I think it is good news that they are working with their community schools, and in many cases, I know that kids are there for physical education or music or art or whatever. I think that positive relationship between the home-school parents, the students, and their local school is probably one of the areas that needs to be strengthened, because that's the community those kids are living in and growing up in and going to church with and whatever.

I think there was some fear that this report and recommendations would lead to the heavy hand of the department coming in, and I have sensed in my conversations with many parents that that will do more to harm the relationship than it will to strengthen it. Parents who are now coming to the department for advice or recommendations for special needs children or whatever will withdraw from that.

I think proceeding in a very respectful and cautious way is important. Parents do have the right, and they don't want to have to exercise that in court, but I expect they will. Having said that, how much of a conversation is the department having - or is the minister having - with the parents who are anxious about this report?

MR. LOWE: We are setting up a preliminary meeting with a broad range. As you know, the reasons for home-schooling are varied and very individual. We can't say that one group represents the whole spectrum and so on, so we're going to have a preliminary one to discuss how to best set up those public hearings. I would like them to be as extensive as possible so that the parents are satisfied that they've had clear input and that they've been listened to.

One of the things that I hope comes out of those hearings, apart from looking at changing things so that there's more support for parents - and really, that would be my goal, to increase the support available to parents as much as possible, because ultimately my concern is about the children. I'm hoping that through this process there will be greater public appreciation for what home-schooling parents do and what the home-schooling program is, and for them to share some of the great successes that they've had. They've had students win large scholarships to prestigious universities in the United States, for example, and in Canada. That part of the story isn't always communicated very well. I'm just hoping that the whole process will raise that comfort level with the parents.

I would like to go back to what you said, too, about the local school. In the recent modern history of home-schooling there have been periods, I believe, in the United States and in Canada, where there was - maybe "adversarial" is too strong, but there was almost an adversarial atmosphere between the schools and the home-schoolers - you know, they should be coming to school and everybody should and that's the proper thing - that kind of thing. It has taken a few court challenges to change a few legislation pieces around the country. I'm just hoping that we can build that spirit of co-operation.

From an audit point of view, the informal things that I'm telling you about, when I call the schools and I call guidance counsellors and I call principals and try to make arrangements for students to have closer co-operation with the school, that's successful, but it's hard to quantify because it's not in print.

MS. CASEY: Do you believe that if that kind of data had been readily available - I know it happens; you know it happens; the parents and the schools know it happens - if that had been available, would that have been important for the Auditor General to see?

MR. LOWE: It would have been a piece of evidence, but I think the Auditor General is looking at a broader spectrum of data, and that they would like to see more measurable results in the evaluation.

MS. CASEY: Thank you. With respect to the individualized programs, because we know in classrooms we have many children who are on individualized programs, we're now looking at the expense of the province with 800 individualized programs, so to speak. Would you be looking at having standard outcomes for all of those, or individual outcomes for each individual program?

MR. LOWE: Yes, this is a great challenge, and it has been a challenge across the country when you look at the different jurisdictions.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Order, please. Unfortunately, Ms. Casey's time has expired.

Mr. MacMaster.

MR. ALLAN MACMASTER: Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and I'd like to thank the gentlemen for coming over from the Department of Education this morning. My first question is, what research and background would the department have - for instance, maybe the department has consulted with stakeholders in the past in an effort to understand the metrics for success in a home-schooled education?

MR. LOWE: I'm sorry, I missed one of the words that you said - to determine the?

MR. MACMASTER: If we're looking at the department's understanding of home-schooling, what research will you use, what expertise would you have, or what people might you have consulted with or do you consult with on home-schooling?

MR. LOWE: Home-schooling has two major dimensions. One is legal, because it's very much a balancing of rights, where you have the rights of the parents to determine how and what makes up the instruction program for their children. You also have the rights of the children themselves, independent of the fact that they are minors, and that has been endorsed by Canada in international agreements and covenants that guarantee the rights of children to education.

You have something that's called the compelling interest of the state to have all its citizens educated. That was the original seed for having compulsory education in the western world back in the 1800s. Then there's a fourth dimension, and that is the duty of the state to protect the rights of the children, even if that means going against the rights of the parents, so there's that whole legal side of it.

On the educational side, parents are able to choose the philosophy of the way they wish to teach. There's no standard accepted way of teaching in the world. Some of the parents follow what they call "un-schooling," which is a concept of following children's interests. It's a teachable moment kind of thing, so you have no set curriculum as those children are going around and things - why is that like that, and then, well, let's explore that; that kind of thing. Our own public school system in the 1920s developed into the project kind of approach so that children had the leeway to find things that they were particularly interested in, and they're motivated, and then they would do things like that. I'll come back to that.

Then there is the more traditional and classical method - and some of the home parents, by the way, are following a classical program in which they are teaching Latin and following Greek and Roman literature. Then there are the parents who are following the Nova Scotia curriculum. Then, of course, there's the religiously-based curricula. Most of them come from the United States, but most of them are very careful to include the skills and knowledge base for the different subject areas, along with the religious content, so it's researching into that.

Each of those methods obviously has different ways of evaluating, so you can't have a standard test to test these children, because that's not the way they've been taught. In the conventions in Canada on fair evaluation and assessment, it is a principle that it's unfair to test children on something to which they've not been exposed, or to do it in such a way that they've never had to answer that way. For example, multiple choice - if you're following a Waldorf kind of method, which is developing along children's interest lines, and so on, in a cross-disciplinary kind of way, they would be unable to do multiple choice and it wouldn't be appropriate.

What I've been doing is looking across the country and all provinces, and trying to deal with having these individualized programs and yet having a standard. They've used concepts such as what are the broad areas that we would expect by the end of high school that students would have? I think in the notes that I sent to you, I put our essential graduation outcomes in those, so the different areas - the aesthetics and the computation and all that kind of thing - and there's a similarity across the country and provinces that that's what they've done.

Even Alberta, although they would prefer that the home-schoolers follow their curriculum and they've made many documents available that are parent-friendly, they do

concede that because of the legislation and the rights of parents, they do give a list of general outcomes that you would expect an educated person to have.

So what the provinces have said is that they should be educated in such a way that they would be able to be integrated back into the public school system at any given time. I guess it's a concept of different but equal, that they would have no difficulty if they were being properly educated of fitting back into the system. That's a very complex thing to say. In the old days it would have been easier because they'd be working at a Grade 2 or 3 level and that's the grade you'd put them in. That's not how schools work.

We have schools in the public school system, all our schools where we have inclusive education and we have children working at different grade levels in the same grade and developing at different speeds, and abilities differ. You also have language that says they are appropriately educated according to their individual abilities and so if you got into a court challenge and were trying to prove all of that, you'd have to have psychological testing and all that kind of thing.

MR. MACMASTER: Mr. Chairman, if I may, I appreciate your answer because I think what I'm hearing is that - it's funny, I was talking to somebody who works for government now in helping to get people retrained for the workforce and we were talking about even in the public schools, how many people go through the public school system and never really achieve great marks - maybe because they're wired differently than how the school teaches - and then they come out of it, end up with a trade, might even start their own business, and they're making more money than all of us put together.

I think what I'm getting from you is that the reason maybe the department has chosen to provide more of a supportive role for home-schooling parents is because every situation is different. It is almost impossible to standardize-test students who are each given a customized learning experience, but you're also finding there are not a lot of problems that you've seen. I think you mentioned two children in the last three years that caused you enough concern to want to address it. Would it be safe to say that's why the department has chosen the approaches chosen to this point?

MR. LOWE: Yes, I think that what you're saying clearly encapsulates my thinking at this time. I would say that I am still looking forward to the consultation with the parents on this matter. On top of that, you have the individualized special-needs students that have particular learning disabilities.

MR. MACMASTER: Certainly. I know from talking to some people who do home-school their children, one of the central elements of home education is the ability for parents to tailor the curriculum and the learning experience to the needs of the student. I think we heard today that there are about 800 different types of home-schooling programs that we know of. How would the department - I guess we recognize it would be difficult for the department to certify all of those programs, and this might be something that comes up

in the discussions - but have you considered working with a home-schooling association who might be better equipped to maybe give their blessing in conjunction with the department to some of these programs so that parents still have the freedom to educate their children in a way that's customized?

MR. LOWE: Certainly the support groups that are now in existence, and some of the others that may even still be forming, the support that they are able to provide is absolutely critical for many parents and, apart from that, because people are home-schooling it can be an isolating kind of activity and I think that people certainly enjoy having connections with one another, and certainly parents get together and they form outings and athletic events and that kind of thing as well. I'm certainly looking forward to the parents and their input on this, yes.

MR. MACMASTER: Is it also recognized - and I think I heard this already today - if there is a real focus on testing for outcome-based learning that it would ultimately lead to limiting what could be taught through home-schooling? I know I've spoken with teachers who tell me it limits what they can do in the classroom. They only have so many hours in the classroom with the students and they are focused on teaching the students something for a standardized outcome - it limits their ability to be creative and to engage the students. Is that recognized as an issue for home-schooling, if government starts to become too regimented and require specific outcomes for the students?

MR. LOWE: Yes, and that's also a challenge in the school system, as you indicated, and that's why I spoke to use the unofficial phrase of identifying essential outcomes, the higher-level outcomes, the ones more connected with process and critical thinking, and hypothesis forming and that kind of thing. But it is possible in the outcomes we have, how should I say it? - not all outcomes are equal, and so if you bring it up to the higher level of thinking in the broader categories it still is possible to have leeway within that.

One of the areas that we're investigating this actively in the department is in our review of the Grade 9 curriculum. "Inquiry based approach" is the term that's used - in the old days it would have been called project-based approach. That presents its own challenges insofar as it's interdisciplinary, and so one of the schools, for example, did a study of food in their neighbourhood. That sounds very broad and innocuous but as they got into it what they had to find out was how does the food make it into the supermarket; what kinds of systems are in place to ensure health and safety; what kind of profit margins are there; what kind of waste is there - and so it just goes on and on and on. But that is real learning and that's the real world that we're trying to prepare people for and it doesn't fit neatly sometimes into specific objectives from 4.3 to 8.7 in different subject areas.

So it's the same kind of process. I think even - you know, there is a consistency in the different curricula the parents are using of what children are doing in mathematics in particular, and in literacy there are different approaches to literacy, as you well know. Most

of the American-based programs have a stronger emphasis on phonics than our public school system has, but 60 per cent of our language is phonics-based. So I think that even allowing for variety, I think identifying at the appropriate developmental level what kinds of things students can be doing will be a guide for parents - and they don't have adhere to it specifically - and this is what other provinces have also done. They have taken the end product, if you want to call it a product, of a responsible citizen who is able to think critically and be able to discern nuances and that kind of thing. These are the kinds of activities at different age levels that would be appropriate for developing those.

MR. MACMASTER: Can you give a practical example of one of these higher-level outcomes that you've mentioned - a way that the department could look at and review somebody who has been home-schooled to see if they are actually learning, if they are getting a good, quality education?

MR. LOWE: Just generally, the ability to think critically, to take different pieces of evidence to create a hypothesis, to work through the logic and come to a conclusion and to be able to defend the conclusion in writing - if that was the object of the particular exercise - or to be able to debate it, that kind of thing. It's more the activities of real living, I guess, than concentrating on the specific subject matter and the kind of education I would have had when I went to school, of memorizing the unification of Italy or something.

MR. MACMASTER: Sure, okay. My next question is, right now I think in the public education system about \$10,000 is attached to each child, roughly, each year to have them educated. If the government was to - and from what I'm hearing today, I'm not hearing that there's a real interest to drastically change the way the Department of Education works with home-schooling parents, but is there any consideration to provide home-schooling parents with funds to help them educate their children?

MR. LOWE: I know from correspondence from some of the home-schooling parents now that that is one of the proposals they want to talk about. The only province in Canada that gives a fair chunk of money for home-schoolers is Alberta. In Alberta the grant is given to the co-operating school, and the co-operating school has to have two meetings a year with the parents to go through what is in the plan and how they're evaluating it. Up to 50 per cent of that money is available to the parents for supports and tutors or resources or whatever they're going to use it for.

The home-schoolers who have spoken to me have indicated that they would fear that funding would also entail more accountability and more intrusion.

MR. MACMASTER: I've heard that as well. I think intrusion is what I've heard as more the concern. They're not so concerned about the accountability, but I know what you mean. They're concerned that with funding comes greater scrutiny and intrusion.

Mr. Chairman, how much time do I have left?

MR. CHAIRMAN: About another three minutes.

MR. MACMASTER: You mentioned earlier how in some cases children are both being home-schooled and going to public school, taking art or physical education, that kind of thing. For children who are reintegrating into public school, what have you seen there? Have most home-schooled children been well prepared, going back into public school - at least from an academic standpoint?

MR. LOWE: It's anecdotal, but the reports that I have - because the schools do call just to check on what has been going on, and they generally find that the students are working at or above grade level with the peers that they come to. Also, we are increasingly having a number of students going straight from home-schooling into the universities. Some universities are ahead of others in being prepared for how to figure out whether they're eligible. Some have their own placement tests. They write and they ask for the records, the home-school records that we keep on file. We indicate that they are parent assessments and so on. They indicate that they find that useful.

The anecdotal reports that I have on students going to universities is that they are doing extremely well.

MR. MACMASTER: When home-schooled children are going back into a public school setting, getting reintegrated, what kind of processes are in place to look after that or to integrate?

MR. LOWE: Well, that again is up to the parents. We advise them to go early, in the Spring, in May - whenever Spring is in Nova Scotia - and to meet with the guidance counsellors or to meet with the principal and to talk about and actually to have the student come and visit the school. Sometimes the students find that that's not the school they'd like to go to. Like, I just had a call the other day that the student has decided that he'd rather be in the IB program going back to high school, so he's in conversation with the guidance counsellor at that school and they seem quite eager to have him.

MR. MACMASTER: Good. What about the consultation that's coming up? Can you give us a little bit of information on when that's happening and what it's going to look like?

MR. LOWE: Well, as I say, I'm going to have a preliminary meeting with a group, a sample, I guess, of home-school parents to talk about how to have the consultation, because I don't want to have it too unstructured and not too over-structured. So I'd like to have input from them first. It's my plan to have those . . .

MR. CHAIRMAN: Order, please. Unfortunately Mr. MacMaster's time has expired. Mr. MacKinnon.

MR. CLARRIE MACKINNON: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. I'm wondering about the response that the department got from the Auditor General's Report. I know at a constituency level I had some concerns. Was the response significant?

MR. LOWE: Yes. I had a meeting at the time the report came out, just invited some home-school parents - I guess there would have been about 60 - so they did express some of their concerns. I guess one thing that they would say, generally, is that they felt the report implied that there was something wrong with the majority of home-schooling in the province, and they said that's not true. And the concern that we have that there might be children out there who aren't receiving a proper education, they said, that's not us, so why are we being drawn into that discussion when, you know, there's a whole group of people out there who are not even sending their children to school and not registering. So they didn't like that kind of association being placed next to them.

They feel very strongly - if you've spoken to your constituents - about the rights of parents to engage in educating their children according to their beliefs and in the philosophy that they've chosen to do it. They, I guess in a venting kind of way, would rhyme off several instances where the public school had failed their children, from their point of view. They also pointed to the fact that it's talking about the class of home-schoolers as if they're a class of students, instead of being the individual students that they are, and that you can't make broad statements about that.

They also thought that there was not enough appreciation of the tremendous strength that there is in one-on-one instruction, particularly with somebody to whom children have an emotional attachment. In educational research, it's very clear that the single most important factor in successful education of children is the teacher and the attachment that students make with the teacher, particularly in different phases of growing up. If it's a positive relationship and the teacher has high expectations, and there's an excitement about learning, that learning is extremely successful. The parents say that describes the home-schooling context and what their children experience.

MR. MACKINNON: To follow up on Mr. MacMaster's question in relation to consultation, from your response it is clear that you haven't really determined the level of consultation that will take place. I'm hopeful that it will be from Cape Breton through to Yarmouth and that there will be some regional consultation. How soon will it start, and are there some organizations of the home-school community? I know there are certainly informal gatherings, but I think that in some areas, including Pictou County, home-school community members, families that are participating, are involved in discussions among themselves.

MR. LOWE: My intention would be to cover the whole province. There are different concentrations around the province. The largest concentration is in the Halifax and Annapolis Valley and Chignecto area, the central area, but we do have parents in all parts of the province, including the French board - very few students, but we have some.

My intention would be to speak to anybody who wants to be heard, if that can be logistically set up.

MR. MACKINNON: I recently met with one family for two hours. The purpose of the meeting was to hear concerns, but also to give a bit of a civics lesson to the students. I was really impressed with the three children in this family and how much they were learning and the concerns that they had for standardized testing. I'm not a big fan of standardized testing; I'm certainly not a fan of some IQ testing that used to take place years ago. Some of the smartest people in the land, Newfoundlanders, used to test way below the national average - and that was in St. John's and the towns, and even less so in the outports.

Standardized testing - I remember one question in relationship to the boy who climbed the water tower to overcome his fear of heights, and none of the outport kids knew anything about a water tower. They had no idea how high one may be or anything else. So standardized testing is a concern that exists out there in the home-school community.

Some provinces are just not involved in real monitoring at all. British Columbia, for example, is a totally hands-off province. Can you go on a little about this in some detail, perhaps?

MR. LOWE: About standardized testing - the limitations for standardized testing have been well documented, and particularly the older IQ tests that were culturally biased and experientially slanted toward urban living are well documented. The other thing that I had mentioned earlier is that no kind of test is appropriate if it isn't congruent with and consistent with the curriculum that has been taught and the methods used to teach it. There have been in recent times standardized tests in the sense that they measure basic knowledge and they're not designed for a large group. They're designed for individuals. But even these have their limitations, and in my experience they're relatively restricted in what they cover.

Whatever comes out of these consultations, I can pretty well give assurance that it won't be a standardized test. It's interesting that none of the provinces in Canada make it mandatory for those students to take their provincial tests. If I dare say, even Alberta doesn't make it mandatory. The tests are available to students on a voluntary basis, but they're not mandatory. As you say, British Columbia is hands-off. In B.C., in fact - just reading in the handout that I gave you: "full responsibility of parent, is not supervised by a B.C. teacher, is not required to meet provincial standards and is not inspected by the ministry."

I think that's as hands-off a statement as you can probably make. So thinking of the different balances of rights, I would say that British Columbia is firmly on the parental right, almost exclusively.

Ontario changed their legislation and if you'd just look there, they ". . . are to notify a school board of intent to homeschool. School board [sic] are to accept such notices of intent as evidence that the parents are providing satisfactory instruction at home." Again, that's a very hands-off kind of thing. The ministry will get involved if they have reason to believe that a student isn't receiving a proper instruction at home.

Prince Edward Island, again, I found it difficult to find the records on this, and as I understand it, the number of home-schooled students is not large there, but the only slight difference that they have is that the parents have to indicate on the registration form that they have access to a certified P.E.I. teacher, or somebody who would qualify to be a P.E.I. teacher, who can give advice or guidance on the child's home education. But again, it's my understanding that there is no particular scrutiny by the department on that.

Newfoundland and Labrador, again - the one who has the interesting one is Quebec. Quebec is the one that is strongest, I would say, on protecting the rights of the child and they go so far as to prosecute parents who don't provide a proper education for their students of child neglect, of basic rights. They are the ones who also have the strongest language about the children being at a level where they can re-enter school so that it's comparative. But even in Quebec they don't prescribe a curriculum, they say it should be the same as the outcomes of the province, but they don't prescribe it, and they give a general list of the kinds of activities that they would expect a responsible citizen coming out of school to have.

The lists are interesting - someday when I have time, to put the lists side by side, it's very interesting. One of the ones in Quebec is that children come out with a strong sense of environmental protection and stewardship. The strongest ones are in Alberta where the parents are subject to twice-a-year annual meetings with the co-operating school or authority. That's the one that tries most closely to be equivalent to Alberta outcomes, but even in Alberta they do give a list of general outcomes and not specific ones. Manitoba is almost the same as ours.

MR. MACKINNON: Would you say that we are somewhere between the Alberta model and the British Columbia model?

MR. LOWE: Yes, absolutely.

MR. MACKINNON: I understand that Prince Edward Island will actually allow textbooks to go out to those being home-schooled, at a cost of \$50 - I guess it's \$50 per textbook or maybe it's multiple, I'm not sure. But they do have a system over there where you can, in fact, get textbooks and it's totally refundable when the textbooks come back. Do we do any of that?

MR. LOWE: That's correct what you say and that is an area that we will be exploring in the consultations. We do it informally, the schools will provide the textbooks

if they have them, but I think it's worthwhile exploring to do that here because our concern is for the students and the students have a right to free education. Therefore, if we would like them to, as much as possible, follow the outcomes and expectations that we have in the public school system, it seems logical to me, following the outcomes of logic, that we would provide those textbooks free of charge, and maybe a refundable deposit.

MR. MACKINNON: In this province are there any what you might call, I guess the best word I can think of is hybrid systems, where someone may attend a few classes and also be home-schooled, to take something within the school system? Is that possible in this province?

MR. LOWE: Yes, it is, and that's another topic for discussion with the parents. As it stands now it depends on the school or on the school board, how they delegate the decision-making. Generally schools are able to have part-time attendance and the students at home for the rest of the time; in some cases it can be up to even three days a week and two days not. Particularly with children who have - I don't want to label children - but children who find it difficult to be in a confined space for a long time, the schools are eager to co-operate in those arrangements.

There are some particular challenges where the parents are really quite expert in working with the children and the schools welcome that expertise and they make arrangements to have a portion of the time at home and a portion at school.

Some of them, in this case he has indicated, are a concern - this is a myth but it is raised sometimes, that the children who are home-schooled don't socialize. My experience is that that is not true. Parents very often will enroll the students, with the co-operation of the school, in physical education programs and art programs and music programs. I don't know if I should say it, but some parents would like their children to also have access to the sports team, but that's another question.

Certainly it has worked out very well, the students integrate in the class quite naturally and the parents report that it's a very positive experience.

MR. MACKINNON: When we had lighthouses in this province that were being manned or personed, and islands on which people used to live full-time, there were many, many students around the province who were, in fact, home-schooled and went on to excel in university and in life, in all aspects of life, in all professions, and I'm wondering what the experience is today of those who are home-schooled and go on to university. I know some personal experiences, or people I know of who are still excelling, after being home-schooled, to a great degree.

MR. LOWE: Yes. It's all anecdotal in my experience, but the anecdotal experiences that I have are that the students are extremely successful because in home-schooling they're not only learning the curriculum that's there, they are really

learning to be thinkers and to be critical thinkers and to self-motivated and figure out how things can be related to one another. So they are true learners, what we would aspire for all our students to be. When they hit university, they find it not a challenge but they find it almost liberating that they have this freedom to go further and further and to specialize in different areas.

The other thing about home-schooling is that people often bring up special needs, but special needs also includes the end of the spectrum of bordering on genius, and there are examples in the province of students who are working in high school math who are still elementary age and those kinds of things. When parents call me about that, I try to get them to go and speak to the subject resource person at the school boards to see what kinds of arrangements can be made eventually for their early entry into university to take courses - typically it's math and that kind of thing.

The students who have great abilities, and there are - another one comes to mind a few years ago who wrote the SATs in Grade 10 and got right in the top 5 per cent of the scores.

MR. MACKINNON: In relation to those who are home-schooled today, we certainly know that isolation is not the factor that it used to be, but there are many reasons, and you just mentioned, health and disability as perhaps one as well, certainly religious aspects as well. There are 850 students being home-schooled, that we know of, in Nova Scotia. What are some of the other reasons that you have run into over the years in relation to home-schooling other than the ones that I have outlined?

MR. LOWE: There are many reasons, bullying is given as a reason. We don't specifically ask it, but parents often in their correspondence will indicate that there has been extreme bullying at the school; the student just is not comfortable in going to school anymore. There are students - I believe that the psychologists have now recognized "school phobia" - so-called - is a condition where they're unable . . .

MR. CHAIRMAN: Order, please. Unfortunately Mr. MacKinnon's time has expired. Ms. Casey, you have 16 minutes.

MS. CASEY: Mr. Chairman, if I could go back to pick up on some of the comments that have been made and perhaps get your thoughts on that. I do want to say on behalf of the home-school parents that I've met with, who have written to me and e-mailed me and so on, their feelings, their reaction, to the AG's Report - they felt, as I'm sure they'll tell you, they were anxious, they were nervous, they were questioning why and they were feeling a bit hurt because they felt that the picture that was being painted, or the interpretation that people could take from the AG's Report, was that nothing good was happening in home-schooling. I'm hoping and I believe you will be compassionate with them in understanding how they felt. They also have watched very closely the department's response, and the word "intrusion" has been used here today.

I don't believe that any of the parents I've met with - and I think they're a fairly broad representation of the home-schooling parents - are afraid to share anything with anybody about what they're doing, how they're doing it, the successes that they're having. When I look at the short-term response or the response from the department as to their short-term plan, which is to have a better system of recording, collecting the data, I can see that the parents would be very anxious to work with you and provide you with that information and that that will satisfy some of the recommendations that came from the Auditor General.

But I do think the long-term approach is one where we have to be cautious that we don't bring back those same fears of anxiety and the thought that everyone - everyone being the general public - is now looking at home-schooling and perhaps not in a positive light. The long term is probably where that sense of department support for home-schooling parents and programs can be strongest.

I want to talk a little bit about, or ask a question a little bit about, the whole funding issue because that is a double-edged sword, as you know, because we do not provide any funding, public dollars for home-schooling at this point and that basically says to those parents, you've made a decision, you have a right to make that decision, you provide the home-schooling, and basically we'll leave you alone. If we start providing funding then it means two things; it means that the department can now come in and hold them accountable and they're saying, if you're going to come in and hold us accountable and we're going to have to follow some guidelines from the department, we want some funding. So when you're speaking with parents about that, because you said it has been mentioned, in what context was it mentioned?

MR. LOWE: It very much was in the context that you're now speaking. Some parents have indicated that they would like more funding and more support because some of them are using packaged programs, if I can call them that, and they're not cheap. Then other parents have said to them, wait, more funding can come with more strings, I guess if you want to call it that, and more accountability.

The two don't have to be that way. I mean in one of the provinces it's not a large amount of funding but what the province does is it gives \$250 per student to a school that registers a home-schooled student. The idea is not so much surveillance, I guess if you want to use that word, it's more to provide support, to have a teacher available, a teacher who is sympathetic to home-schooling, who is available to work with parents and to just have general discussions with them about the plan and about the evaluation and how things are going.

To me, having more data and information on how the students are doing, I would see to be used by the department and by schools to figure out if there's need for more support and what kinds of support would benefit the student as well as the parent. Sometimes parents will begin home-schooling at an early grade and then as the students get

older and the curriculum is more complex, they say, I'm not sure if I'm able to do this and so then we talk about things like, well, correspondence courses are available, tutors are a possibility, and even enrolling in individual courses is a possibility.

I can certainly understand the apprehension of parents that working more closely with the school, if that was the method, might result in - I don't know what to call it - more interference, perhaps, in their autonomy to determine the course so I can certainly understand that. But where I'm coming from, it's really to determine if more support is needed, no matter what kind, whether it's more resources, whether it's specialist support or whether the parents really should begin to look for outside assistance if it's getting beyond what they feel comfortable in teaching.

MS. CASEY: Thank you. If I could follow up on something you said there that one model is to provide some funding to the community or the neighbourhood school. I think the situations where we have good relationships between the family, students and the co-operating school are probably some of the most successful ones we have. That doesn't take away the independence of the parents but it does give them access, I believe, to a number of the supports that you've talked about.

I guess my question is, what efforts does the department make now, or has made in the past, to ensure that all home-schooling parents are aware of those supports? Do home-schooling parents know that if they might need access to a tutor that they can work through a contact person at the department? How broad-based is that knowledge about what supports parents can access?

MR. LOWE: The knowledge is not broad-based because largely what we're talking about is informal at the present time, and that's what I'm hoping will come out in the conversations of what other kinds of support structures we can have more formally available that parents are aware of. Now the support groups, the home-schooler support groups that we have in the province already are able to give a lot of information to parents who are looking for tutors and that kind of thing.

I guess what I'm talking about is a more formalized understanding of what kinds of resources - for example, textbooks and that kind of thing. When it comes to special education, that's a more complex discussion because of the high demand in the public school already for those services and the model that we have in Nova Scotia that requires a program-planning team to come up with the model. Parents who are home-schooling, that's an area they wouldn't want to get into because of the autonomy that they now have. The speech pathology is an example, maybe, of a direction that we can go in, where we have our partner departments providing some services. But these are early stages for that discussion, at the moment.

MS. CASEY: With respect to transition back, and appropriate grade placement when students make the transition back, have you had any concerns brought to you by

parents, or from the receiving school, who say we just can't agree on the grade placement for this child?

MR. LOWE: No, I've never had that comment made to me. But I have had a few times - very few - when the parents have indicated that they tried to reintegrate, he's not ready for it or she's not ready for it at the moment, and later they do integrate. Choosing the right time to do it, the right grade level - and I haven't actually had any comments come back to me where the school felt the student wasn't prepared appropriately for the grade level they were going back into. It's the school, in the legislation, that determines the placement, and generally they've worked out very well.

MS. CASEY: I would think that where families have had a close working relationship with the school leading up to when they get to the point where they may want to make that full transition, it's probably going to be easier than if they have not been familiar with the school, the staff, at all. So I guess that goes back to encouraging that relationship that I'm not sure all home-school parents know even exists for them.

MR. LOWE: Yes, and I think it also requires work on our part to talk to schools about that, because it has been part of the regular communications that we've had with schools about - the most frequent thing that happens when somebody is going back to a school to reintegrate is that the school calls me and says, is this allowed, or what are the rules about this, and can you send their records, and once it's in high school then it becomes a question of credits, and that's very tricky. So schools accepting transfer credits will accept them from other jurisdictions and so on, but from home-schooling it's not the common practice.

The other thing I think I would like to say, though, is it's not always the case that there are good relations with the local school, and in other provinces they've acknowledged this by making it clear that if parents had a co-operating school, it doesn't necessarily have to be the local school. In other provinces, as well, that have more specialized schools, say with a larger music program or a larger technology program or something like that, it's acknowledged that the parents might want to form an association with those schools. It does vary, but I agree with you, I think it's always healthy to have that relationship between the school and the family.

MS. CASEY: I know that in some situations, transfers into a school, even from one of our public schools to another, can present a bit of a problem, and it's usually based on numbers at the school - can the school accommodate additional students from somewhere else, and what does that do to the students that are in their home school? So I guess the question would be, you talked about the student who wanted to be involved in the IB program, whether it's that, or whether it's a course that's not offered in their local school, or whatever, are there still some guidelines like that around that would say, well, you know, our IB class is filled with the students who normally are public school students, and so we

can't accept you? Does the school have some guidelines there to follow? I know they do for transfer of other kids.

MR. LOWE: A home-schooled student is not a category; it's a method for instruction so that if a home-school parent decides that their child is going to go to the local school, under the Act, they have the right to do that. If they want to go to a different school than their local school then they would follow the procedures for out-of-area transfer, or whatever it's called, in the different boards and I do help parents navigate through that. But a student is a student in Nova Scotia and they have the absolute right to attend the school in their district.

MS. CASEY: So a student who wants to attend outside their local school, again, the same as others, the transportation is the parents' responsibility and those kinds of things. But they would not be denied that access.

MR. LOWE: Not on the basis of being home-schooled, no.

MS. CASEY: A question that I have for you, you talked about legislation in other provinces and we've talked here about perhaps we're targeting the wrong group with the report, and I know some home-school parents are feeling that. We've talked about parents whose kids are (a) not going to school, or (b) not getting an appropriate, adequate education program. In other provinces is the reaction to that a reaction which under legislation is considered neglect, and if so, which department takes the lead on that?

MR. LOWE: In two provinces, in Quebec and the other one escapes me at the moment, where there is a determination that the student is not receiving schooling - "schooling", I think, is the word they use - it becomes - in Quebec for sure - it's deemed to be neglect and it goes to Community Services, social services.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Order, please, Ms. Casey's time has expired. Mr. Porter, you have 16 minutes.

MR. CHUCK PORTER: Thank you, Mr. Dunn and Mr. Lowe, for being with us this morning, a very interesting topic. I have had a number of calls from quite a few people in my constituency, ones I wasn't even aware that do home-schooling, some I was aware. Certainly they have expressed some concerns, it's something that has really been, I guess, untouched, for lack of a better term, over the years, that they've gone through - multiple children and the same families have gone through. I know of one family that I think has seven children and they are all home-schooled and they are home-schooled for various reasons, and that's fine. You said there were about 850 in the province that are being home-schooled now?

MR. LOWE: Yes.

MR. PORTER: How many students overall in the Province of Nova Scotia?

MR. DUNN: About 120,500 currently.

MR. LOWE: That would fit in with the national statistical average: between 1 and 2 per cent are home-schooled.

MR. PORTER: I was just going to ask you that very question, how we rack up against other provinces and jurisdictions, so we're pretty much on target for what that is, fairly consistent. Did I also hear early on - and I think I did in your presentation, it's probably written there - that you talked about laws around home-schooling, some things about Charter of Rights issues and so on? Are you saying those things can't be changed, can't be looked at, or aren't open to discussion? The reason I'm asking that question is you talked about consultation with the home-school community. If you're of the opinion that there really may not be an opportunity to do anything, what is the purpose of the consultation? I may be off on that but I'm just looking for clarity around that, Mr. Lowe.

MR. LOWE: I'm not a lawyer but the legal framework, as I understand it, really is there is still work to be done in finding the balance of the parental rights, the child's rights, and the state's compelling interest, it's called in the courts, or the state's duty to protect children at the other extreme. It is finding that balance and nobody has come up with the perfect solution. As I was saying in those jurisdictions where they have individual schools as being a co-operating school, and what have you, they then have trouble with consistency of application and understanding of what's going on here and what the oversight of the co-operating school is meant to be.

So there is still a need to have a discussion with parents to see from - you know, they have their focus and it's their children and their rights are being looked after, their rights are being looked after, and they're not sure why it should be a concern of theirs to worry about the state's compelling interest being looked after. They're saying it's almost like whole-class punishment in a way - I didn't do it so why am I being punished by being more restricted in what I'm doing?

It really is to come to a positive understanding of what this is. For example, the requirement to present a plan at the beginning of the year, which all provinces are now requiring except B.C. and Ontario, is individually a good idea for anybody instructing a student, to have a broad view of what's going to happen during that year and to have the broad objectives and goals that they're looking for.

MR. PORTER: Just on that, Mr. Lowe, while you're on that theme, can I ask are those 850 home-schooled children doing that? Are they putting that plan in to you?

MR. LOWE: Yes.

MR. PORTER: They are, okay; carry on then.

MR. LOWE: I can tell you that last year it is in the Act but we've never put it in the policy and the regulations, but I did ask them to send me a few pages of sample work that the students are doing. This caused a fair amount of anxiety for parents - is this the thin edge of the wedge for more intrusive oversight of what they're doing with their students?

Again, the idea behind that is really to identify any areas where students may need extra help. I mean there are students who have disabilities that make printing and writing very difficult. So if that's what's apparent, then to have a conversation with a parent about what other strategies they are using - I mean this happens in the school, too, so there are other strategies for learning. There are adaptive software programs coming out all the time that they may not be aware of and that kind of thing, so the idea behind it is support.

I think it's to come to agreed solutions that satisfy a monitoring that there isn't something going off the rails somewhere, on the one hand, and being a positive experience for the student and for the parents. I can tell you there are some parents who joyfully - and please don't send any more, is my feeling - who share everything that they're doing with their children. I get packages like that and that kind of thing and it's a delight to read but obviously . . .

MR. PORTER: I don't want to cut you off but I've got only a few minutes and I've got a few other questions I want to ask and I appreciate your detailed answers.

From start to finish, there's a decision made at some point, are the home-schooled children starting their education, as well, at four and five years old? Does that vary? You're shaking your head yes, I'm going to assume that's a yes. Can you just take me through very quickly - I know you can give a long, detailed answer if I really wanted you to. I don't want you to but just in summary, a short one, if you would - and again, I appreciate the answers but I'm limited in time - from start to finish, these folks who are going through the home-school program, their level of education and how they go on to post-secondary.

MR. LOWE: There are some children who are home-schooled their entire school career, starting at age five. They have the same entry age as public school. Parents only have to send reports in up to age 16, which is compulsory school attendance in Nova Scotia. Many continue on past age 16, until the students complete Grade 12 equivalent.

At that point parents do different things; they sometimes will write the American SATs, the college entrance exams, and the anecdotal reports back on that are that they do exceedingly well. They sometimes apply to universities and some universities and the community college are getting more used to home-school applications now, and the registrars will write and ask for copies of what we have on file of what the students have done over the years. Then they make their own determinations. Some universities have

developed their own placement exercises or tests, whatever you want to call them. Again, the anecdotal feedback that I have from that is these students are doing very well on those.

As you know, some of our universities are also doing English placement tests for public school graduates.

MR. PORTER: So these children who are going through the home-school program, every year that child has a record that goes into the department, there's a registration. Is there a number that you think are not registered or that where - you talked earlier today about maybe you're not 100 per cent sure of how many children are out there, how many are not in school, based on health records, I think you mentioned as well, and maybe your inability to cross-reference those numbers?

MR. LOWE: Again, I don't want to relate this to home-schooling because the home-schoolers are . . .

MR. PORTER: Nor do I, I'm talking schooling in general here, just to be very clear.

MR. LOWE: That's right, to be very clear. We do have a problem; school boards have reported the problem. School boards have attendance committees and they become aware of families where the students are not being sent to school, they are being kept home to look after younger siblings and that kind of thing.

MR. PORTER: Is there a number there, though?

MR. LOWE: No, we don't have the numbers and that's why - just for a broad number, I thought if we start to do a little research with the health records, at least the numbers, we may be able to determine - and this became an interest for me because of a research study that was done in British Columbia in which the researcher found 20 per cent more school-age children who were not in school than the school records had. I'm sure that was a high incidence but it was a very urban, moving-back-and-forth area.

In Canada, because we don't register where we live and in other countries people do, we actually don't know exactly how many school-age children we have at any particular time anywhere, because in Canada you can move wherever you want. People move in and out of the province and there's no tracking of that so we go on estimates. Really it's mostly neighbours who report students . . .

MR. PORTER: Sorry, are you saying then that all of the children who are home-schooled, actually being home-schooled, are reporting that and registering that they are actually home-schooling?

MR. LOWE: I'm not aware of anyone who is home-schooling who isn't reporting, but there could be; I wouldn't know that.

MR. PORTER: But there could be. I've spoken to a number of these families, as I've said, and none of them seem to have any issue with the registration process. Is there only that one point in the year that the bulk of these 850 or so that you would have interaction with, at the end of the year, I guess, or at the end of their 16 years - what's next? They come in, they register in September or some time prior to that, that we're starting again, and I have one, two, five, whatever it might be, home-schooled children - what's the follow-up throughout the year?

You talked a few minutes ago about a regional education officer, is this in place now? Are these the folks who are dealing with these children at home?

MR. LOWE: No, the assignment for home-schooling is assigned to the regional education officer for Halifax-Chignecto, and that position has been vacant for the last two years so I've been doing it.

MR. PORTER: You're doing the entire province, then, basically?

MR. LOWE: Yes. I'm looking forward to sharing it.

MR. PORTER: Let's go back to how many of you should there be. I think this gets down to more of the detail of maybe what we're looking at here and the need to have some interaction. How many should there be of you? Only you can answer that, given the amount of work you're probably doing.

MR. LOWE: That's hard to say. I mean . . .

MR. PORTER: I'm basing that on call volume, interaction that you currently have and maybe that you feel is appropriate to have.

MR. LOWE: I can't quantify that and I wouldn't want to until I have more discussion with the parents about the type of interaction they want. I know that I feel I am not able to answer all the inquiries that I'm now getting.

MR. PORTER: I'll bet you're not.

MR. LOWE: I'm thinking that three regional would be better able to address that. I would make one comment, just for the interest of people; the statistical average of the families who are home-schooled, they have more children than the average family in Nova Scotia so it's not unusual for me to get an application that would have six children.

MR. PORTER: I'm not surprised by that, knowing some of the families; I know you're correct. They are large families, in comparison maybe to some others. So there's just yourself at the present time?

MR. LOWE: With administrative help.

MR. PORTER: Yes, with the administrative ability to do that. Do you know when the consultation will begin, a serious consultation with the home-schooled children and their families, and will you touch base and consult with all 850 of those, given that the number, relatively speaking, the amount of children in this province is small?

MR. LOWE: Yes, my intention, within the next – actually I set a date of April 10th, but I now have to change it, so it's within the next few weeks that I'll have my preliminary meeting, and then I would like to schedule the rest of the meetings in May and June.

MR. PORTER: How will you do that? You're saying a meeting – are you talking bringing everybody into one meeting type of thing or have you got some other idea by way of – what does consultation really mean, I guess, is my question?

MR. LOWE: Right. No, my intention would be to have regional meetings.

MR. PORTER: Regional meetings. How much time do you see that taking? I mean, there is only you – and I'm going back to this and there's a reason for that. How much time do you see that taking, in all fairness, Mr. Lowe, to give it what it needs to have to come out with the appropriate policies going forward, if there are new policies?

MR. LOWE: Right. I would see spending a minimum of one day in each region of the province.

MR. PORTER: And breaking down the 850 – and you can just do Cape Breton Central, West, if you want, and Northern – how many, are they pretty much equal across the board or do the numbers vary drastically?

MR. LOWE: The concentration of students is in Halifax, the whole Halifax region, Chignecto, and the Valley is very active - and the Valley has different support groups in the Valley, so you have a combination of organized and independent. So that would be, the vast majority are there - Cape Breton has fewer and the Strait has fewer . . .

MR. PORTER: Just based on the total population basically then. It stands to reason why the numbers are higher.

How much time do I have left, Mr. Chairman?

MR. CHAIRMAN: You have less than one minute.

MR. PORTER: Well I guess I'll just say, with that, in talking to the people that I spoke with, the ones that have called me certainly expressing their concerns about changes, but at the same time these folks have all been very open-minded and want the best that they

can possibly have when it comes to the education for their children, and I think that they'll look forward to having the opportunity to offer some solid input with regard to the Auditor General's recommendations. And I think they take that seriously, to some degree - some maybe not as serious as others. But anytime you have something like that, it's very important when it comes to the education to all of our children and we want the best for them.

So we'll look forward to you being in our region for those sessions. So with that, Mr. Chairman, I'd say thank you.

MR. LOWE: Thank you, I welcome you if you come.

MR. PORTER: I'll be there.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Mr. Ramey.

MR. RAMEY: Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you for coming this morning. You cited a little nugget there about 35 minutes ago, about the unification of Italy - something you learn in school, Victor Emmanuel II and Giuseppe Garibaldi and all that, maybe out of a book called *A Record of Mankind*, I don't know . . .

MR. LOWE: It could be the . . .

MR. RAMEY: A wine-coloured book with grey letters on it, as I recall.

MR. LOWE: Yes. With underlined passages.

MR. RAMEY: There you go. My nugget is The Repeal of the Corn Laws, 1864 in England and the economic impact it had on Great Britain, but we won't continue that.

This is going to require maybe a long answer, but I'd like to get a short one if I could - and the question simply is, sir, what do you think is the purpose of an education?

MR. LOWE: I think the purpose of an education is really to expose children to the widest variety of human thinking and activity and culture as possible, in a way that's meaningful to them at their developmental stage.

MR. RAMEY: Okay. So would you argue that one of the major factors should be learning how to learn; in other words, becoming an independent learner?

MR. LOWE: Absolutely. I think that that's the most critical and the most useful thing that we can teach children. You know, when you read the futurists, about how many jobs will exist that we don't even know yet . . .

MR. RAMEY: Correct.

MR. LOWE: So anything that we learned, including the repeal of the corn laws, may have been a good exercise for the mind, but whether it's transferable is the real test.

MR. RAMEY: Right. So would you further argue that it doesn't matter how you achieve the goal of learning to learn and become an independent learner, as long as you learn how to do it and you can achieve that, and educate yourself once you've done it - is that correct?

MR. LOWE: Yes. And I think that in reforms in education over the years to move away from - just the memorization and regurgitation wasn't the best education that we could give, so I think that anything that builds the thinking structure of the mind that has a true knowledge base and not just a short-term memory base in the front of the brain, is what will serve the students best.

MR. RAMEY: I concur with you on that. Can you do this in bullet points, if you don't mind? Could you just give a very brief historical synopsis of home-schooling in Nova Scotia? Did we start from ground zero or is it something that came along later?

MR. LOWE: Home-schooling would have been the normal with the early settlers when they came to Nova Scotia, home-schooling would basically be all that was available. Sometimes through churches and other groups, different things were set up, but it was in the mid-1800s that Sir Charles Tupper here in Nova Scotia introduced the concept of free schooling in Nova Scotia and eventually in Canada.

In 1892, Halifax City introduced compulsory education, and interestingly enough, the concept and the article in the Journal of Education, available in the Nova Scotia Archives, had an article published describing the school system that had been set up by Bismarck in Prussia, before German unification, and the strict rules that they and everybody had. Interestingly enough, Germany does not have the provision for home-schooling today. We have some families in Nova Scotia who immigrated to Nova Scotia from Germany so they could have home-schooling, and that's a phenomenon right across North America.

When they adopted the mandatory schooling in Halifax in the next year in 1893, in Dartmouth, and then 1895 for the whole province, they made it mandatory for students to attend school, but even then - I'll just quote from the legislation of 1895, "The child in question . . .", this is how you would avoid being prosecuted in court, ". . . has been educated otherwise than in public or approved private schools unless such child present a certificate before the supervisor or principal of schools of having passed a satisfactory examination on the grade of work suitable to the child's age and the previous opportunities for receiving an education." The subjects were reading, spelling, writing, English

composition, geography and arithmetic. From that time on we have had the concept of “otherwise than in a public school”.

MR. RAMEY: I think these are the numbers you said - you said them a couple of times today - about 120,500 students in Nova Scotia at public schools, 850 home-schooled students. Do I have that right?

MR. LOWE: Yes.

MR. RAMEY: Where are we right now - I mean 850 out of that many is a very small percentage, I realize that - has it gone up or down or is it staying the same, let's say, over the last 10 years? Are we floating up and down or are we staying roughly the same?

MR. LOWE: In my experience, in the last three years it stayed relatively the same, it's between 800 and 900. Previous to that time it's my understanding - but don't quote me on this because I didn't access those figures - it would have been around 600.

MR. RAMEY: There aren't huge fluctuations then?

MR. LOWE: No.

MR. RAMEY: The next question is if I want to home-school a child and I want to take advantage of pre-Primary screening, which is done in the elementary school system by speech pathologists and other folks who take an early look at where the student happens to be and they may or may not find something that they want to follow up on, am I allowed to have my son or daughter pre-Primary screened by the school system if I'm not going to have that child attend school in the public school system?

MR. LOWE: I'll make a note of that because in our consultations with the Health and Wellness Department, where we're talking about providing speech pathology services to home-schooled students, we actually hadn't talked about the pre-screening aspect. Before going to school that would still be a responsibility of the Health Department, but that's a specific point I'll bring up with them.

MR. RAMEY: It's interesting because I know sometimes what's picked up is there are auditory discriminations and other problems which can affect spelling and reading. I noticed at one point you mentioned that a number of the home-school based programs are phonic-based so I could see a difficulty with auditory discrimination, for instance, being a real problem maybe later on for a student.

Another point that was brought up - you mentioned that some students actually do a bit of part time in the school system and then some part time at home as well. I think you mentioned art and physical education or sports teams and things like that that kids might want to access. I can easily understand why they'd want to access those things. But can a

student actually be home-schooled two days a week and then go to school three days a week and actually take the regular classes, and then stay home two days again - is that possible?

MR. LOWE: Yes, we have a few arrangements like that.

MR. RAMEY: Okay, I was just trying to figure out the logistics of how that would work, but obviously there must be some kind of a plan put together that would allow it to happen.

MR. LOWE: Yes, in those cases so far as I have knowledge of them, the classroom teacher works very closely with the parents so that the parent in, say it was the last two days of the week, would then carry on reinforcing what had been done in the school. They would be working very closely about new concepts and that kind of thing.

MR. RAMEY: My final question is - just because I'm going to hand it off to my colleague for Pictou East who has yet another question for you - I'm trying to figure out if a parent, and I'm talking now the higher grade levels, has not been exposed to trigonometry, or let's say algebra, knock it down a notch, although Euclid maybe wouldn't appreciate that, but anyway if a person hasn't been exposed to algebra, and algebra is part of what needs to be taught, how would you do that as a parent if you haven't taken algebra yourself - what would be the way around that?

MR. LOWE: It's interesting you mentioned algebra, I know it's just an example but as a matter of fact the American curriculum is very strong on algebra. But the answer is that correspondence courses are available for parents, and a lot of parents beginning in Grade 7, or more typically maybe in Grade 9, begin to look at the correspondence route as a help to them. Also we do make available for parents the possibility of having the outline of the correspondence course so that they can teach it themselves.

MR. RAMEY: Okay, thank you very much and I'll turn it over to my colleague from Pictou East if that's okay with you, Mr. Chairman.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Mr. Mackinnon.

MR. MACKINNON: Thank you, Mr. Chairman, I want to talk about funding for just a couple of moments if I could.

I'll make a statement and I believe it to be true, but you could fill me in on this because I don't know it to be true. Most parents of home-schooled children are not strong lobbyists for funding. It's my experience that most of them are talking about the flexibility, certainly against certain types of standardized tests and so on. Is that true from a funding perspective, or are you lobbied repeatedly for funding?

MR. LOWE: My experience has been the same as yours - I have not had a strong lobby for funding.

MR. MACKINNON: How many provinces do in fact provide funding for students who are being home-schooled, or how many are like us?

MR. LOWE: From my memory, only two, but there is - the member had mentioned about Prince Edward Island, the provision of textbooks at no charge is common across the country. It's hasn't been the practice here except informally.

MR. MACKINNON: The Province of Manitoba - looking at Manitoba, I always like to compare other provinces and looking at Manitoba I guess we share many philosophies in Nova Scotia with Manitoba - a government there that has existed for several terms with similar philosophies. Having Manitoba's model examined, it is most like ours, is it not?

MR. LOWE: Yes, I would say Manitoba's is most similar to ours, including the forms we use.

MR. MACKINNON: So Manitoba is similar in funding, of course, but the parents enrolled students for home-schooling with a plan of study, which is also similar to what is required here. Is that right?

MR. LOWE: That's correct.

MR. MACKINNON: And there is no requirement to follow the Manitoba curriculum.

MR. LOWE: No, and they actually give some details of the various types of curriculum that people use.

MR. MACKINNON: So parents must submit two progress reports per year, and that again is similar.

MR. LOWE: Yes. We have one progress report, but they have two.

MR. MACKINNON: So Manitoba and Nova Scotia are totally in sync in relation to this.

MR. LOWE: Yes.

MR. MACKINNON: Okay. That is the number of questions that I have for today, and maybe we'll finish up just a couple of minutes early. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Thank you very much. Nobody else in the caucus has any other questions? Okay.

Mr. Lapointe, do you have any comments?

MR. JACQUES LAPOINTE: Yes, thank you, Mr. Chairman. I would like to just add a couple of comments. Many of the questions that are being asked, and certainly the responses from the department, paint a fairly rosy picture of this program. It would appear to be a pretty good, well-run program that protects the rights of parents and that might need a little tweaking here and there.

I would say that is not the case. This is a seriously flawed program. Our findings were that the program is so under-resourced and the department's approach is so hands-off that, in effect, it comes close to not existing at all.

We took on this audit from the point of view of the rights of the children, with particular concern for children who may be at risk. I would remind the committee of the overall conclusions we reached in this audit, which were that the Department of Education is failing in its responsibility to protect the education rights of children enrolled in the provincial home-schooling program.

The program lacks the key elements necessary to be effective. The audit identified the deficiencies with the program that significantly diminish the likelihood of the department identifying children who may not be receiving a suitable education. If these children are not identified, the department cannot take necessary steps to intervene and provide the required support. That was the focus of our concern, the children who are at risk, not the children who are receiving a good education from it.

As a final comment, I would remind the committee that we made 12 recommendations to correct the deficiencies we found in this program. The department has accepted them and has agreed to implement them all. Thank you.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Thank you. Mr. Dunn, would you like to make any comments to wrap up?

MR. DUNN: Very quickly, Mr. Chairman, committee members, just a thank you for allowing us here today to talk about what we believe to be the very important topic of home-schooling. Thank you.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Thank you very much. I'd like to thank you for coming today and providing all the information that you did. It's always very informative when you do come.

Immediately following this meeting we're going to have an in camera briefing regarding our next topic, which will be the personal health information system, by the Auditor General from 11:00 a.m. to 11:30 a.m.

Our next meeting will be Wednesday, April 10th, and it will be Hospital System Capital Planning. So this meeting, with a motion to adjourn . . .

MR. MAT WHYNOTT: So moved.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Thank you, Mr. Whynott.

We stand adjourned and we will reconvene at 11:00 o'clock.

[The committee adjourned at 10:54 a.m.]