

HANSARD

NOVA SCOTIA HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY

COMMITTEE

ON

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS

Wednesday, February 11, 2015

LEGISLATIVE CHAMBER

Tri-County Regional School Board

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Public Accounts Committee

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Mr. Joachim Stroink
Mr. Tim Houston
Hon. Maureen MacDonald
Hon. David Wilson

[Mr. Terry Farrell replaced Mr. Joachim Stroink]
[Mr. Stephen Gough replaced Mr. Brendan Maguire for a portion of the meeting.]
[Hon. Christopher d'Entremont replaced Mr. Allan MacMaster]

In Attendance:

Mrs. Darlene Henry
Legislative Committee Clerk

Ms. Cathleen O'Grady
Legislative Counsel

Mr. Terry Spicer
Assistant Auditor General

Ms. Dianne Chiasson
Audit Principal

WITNESSES

Department of Education and Early Childhood Development

Ms. Sandra McKenzie, Deputy Minister
Ms. Diana Eisenhauer, Chief Operating Officer

Tri-County Regional School Board

Ms. Lisa Doucet, Superintendent



House of Assembly
Nova Scotia

HALIFAX, WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 11, 2015

STANDING COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC ACCOUNTS

9:00 A.M.

CHAIRMAN

Mr. Allan MacMaster

VICE-CHAIRMAN

Mr. Iain Rankin

MR. IAIN RANKIN (Chairman): Good morning, I would like to call this meeting to order. Before I begin I would ask that all cellphones be either turned off or placed on silent or vibrate.

Today on the agenda is the Tri-County Regional School Board relative to Chapter 3 of the December 2014 Report of the Auditor General. We have just concluded the in camera briefing, and with us for witnesses are, from the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development: Ms. Sandra McKenzie, Deputy Minister, and Ms. Diana Eisenhauer, Chief Operating Officer; and the Tri-County Regional School Board Superintendent, Ms. Lisa Doucet.

I'd like to start with the introduction of members, starting with Mr. Maguire.

[The committee members and witnesses introduced themselves.]

MR. CHAIRMAN: Mr. Houston.

MR. TIM HOUSTON: Mr. Chairman, just looking at the agenda for today's meeting, there was an item that I had requested to be added to the agenda for today and I don't see it on there. At this time I'd like to put a motion on the floor. I'd like the committee to entertain a motion:

I move that the Standing Committee on Public Accounts bring the Premier's Chief of Staff, Kirby McVicar, before the committee at the earliest convenience to discuss the process involved in ministerial travel, both approval and oversights.

That's my motion I'd like to put on the floor at this time, Mr. Chairman.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Right. With all due respect, we have witnesses here who are going to give a presentation and we have that as committee business so we'll get to that after they have their presentation and then the caucuses have their questioning. We will bring that up.

You can go ahead with your introductory remarks, Ms. McKenzie.

MS. SANDRA MCKENZIE: Hello and good morning. I want to apologize for my voice, to start. I have a bit of a cold. If I break into a coughing fit it's not because you've asked a particularly hard question, it's because I genuinely have a cold.

I'm looking forward to talking with you about the Auditor General's recent review of the Tri-County Regional School Board, along with the plan to address each and every one of his recommendations. I've made my introductions so the three of us are going to work together this morning to answer your questions. I will speak on behalf of the department, Lisa will speak as the Superintendent of the Tri-County Regional School Board and I will answer the questions related to Dr. Gunn's work with the elected board. If there are any answers we cannot provide to you this morning, we commit to sending the information to you in a timely manner.

I was pleased to receive your invitation to appear today, not only because I believe the Auditor General's findings are very concerning and need to be addressed but also because it will give us the chance to talk about our new action plan. *The 3 Rs: Renew, Refocus, Rebuild, Nova Scotia's Action Plan for Education* was released just last week. Many of the plan's initiatives will benefit students and staff in the Tri-County Regional School Board and we have copies of the plan for you.

Our work at the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development is focused on helping all students to reach their full potential, to give them the education they need to support responsible citizenship and to support the choices they make - whether it be to pursue post-secondary education, pursue a trade or apprenticeship or go straight to work.

Our job, along with the school board, is to provide the proper and most effective resources, supports and plans to help ensure students have success. It is at the centre of our action plan. It's at the centre of all that we do at the department and the centre of all that is done by the school boards.

The Auditor General's review of the Tri-County Regional School Board in the summer resulted in serious and concerning findings with both the governing board and senior management. Significant change and improvements are needed. As pleased as we were to learn that both the board and senior staff accepted all of the Auditor General's recommendations, we believe it was critical for them to be supported and guided in their work, to ensure the recommendations are implemented in a timely manner.

That is why the minister immediately took the steps to appoint Dr. Gunn, a well-respected and well-known educator, to work with the board and staff at this critical time. We announced his appointment on December 5th, and he got to work right away. So far, Dr. Gunn has met with the board and worked on an action plan. He provides regular updates to the minister and myself and I anticipate that I will be providing more detail on that as we move to the questions.

We are confident in the school and the senior staff's commitment to ensure each and every one of the Auditor General's recommendations are implemented. Everyone agrees that change is needed and needed now, in the best interest of students. I am pleased now to answer your questions.

MR. CHAIRMAN: We'll start with the PC caucus for 20 minutes. Mr. Houston.

MR. TIM HOUSTON: Thank you for those opening remarks. Looking through the assessment results from across the province, we can see that some school boards consistently rank higher and some school boards consistently rank lower. Would this be a reflection of the quality of the students in those different geographic areas?

MS. MCKENZIE: The quality of the students, is that the question?

MR. HOUSTON: Yes.

MS. MCKENZIE: I wouldn't say it was a reflection of the quality of the students, no.

MR. HOUSTON: So if it's not a reflection of the quality of students, then it must be a reflection of the system that they're being educated within. So my question was, if the pattern is there that some school boards have higher economic results and some have lower - to your knowledge, when would the department have become aware of this type of pattern of different academic results across the province?

MS. MCKENZIE: I think as long as we've been doing assessments, we've been aware that there have been differences in certain school boards, with certain schools within school boards. I would just like to sort of identify what has been happening over the last nine months as we've been looking at what the differences in those results mean.

For the first time in 10 years we've released the IPP data, which told us how many children are on individualized program plans. We also released EDI data, which told us whether children were prepared to come to school and learn. That has shown us some patterns that we need to address, both in populations and in geographic regions. We launched a review of the IPPs and we've targeted funding to Grade 3s who weren't meeting outcomes while we were doing the education review and putting together the education action plan.

We've introduced math mentors in a number of different areas to be able to begin to address that. What we're looking for is, from a research perspective, why do we see achievement gaps in certain areas and with certain students.

MR. HOUSTON: So these types of initiatives - it seems to me that particularly since the AG's Report, there has been a flurry of activity. I guess what I'm trying to understand is, if the department was aware of the issues, why did it take the Auditor General alerting the public of the problems before we actually really saw any action? I guess that's the biggest question that's really in my mind - why then? Why weren't we bringing these people along as time passed?

MS. MCKENZIE: To your question of, did we wait until we received the Auditor General's Report to act, we didn't wait until we received the Auditor General's Report to act. As a result of the Grade 3 testing, there was money put into the school system to immediately address the achievement gap for Grade 3s who hadn't met the outcomes last Spring.

We also provided funding to the same school boards to track those children into Grade 4 to make sure that we hadn't lost any traction over the summer from the investment to bring them up to the expected outcomes.

MR. HOUSTON: So these were initiatives between the department and the boards. The department was giving more money to the boards?

MS. MCKENZIE: Yes.

MR. HOUSTON: And the Auditor General's Report suggested that maybe there are a lot of issues at the boards. We're going to get into that. I mean, throwing money at a problem doesn't always solve it, so I'm just wondering - if the department was busy pushing more money down to the boards, that might have been a bit premature, I guess.

MS. MCKENZIE: I'm trying to follow the question. Originally you asked if we had only acted before we had received the Auditor General's Report. I said that we were acting prior to receiving the Auditor General's Report. We were doing that by targeting money to schools to deal with the Grade 3s that hadn't met their outcomes and we tracked that into Grade 4. We also added math mentors to the schools. This was all targeted funding that the minister provided. There was not just a block of funding that was provided to the boards for the interventions; it was targeted funding for math and literacy.

MR. HOUSTON: Thank you for that. It's not a question, but it's a statement. If there were systematic problems with the boards - and we're going to talk about one board today - it's just concerning to just start new initiatives without any way to really evaluate them or see if the money is having any impact. So we're going to explore that a little bit.

My question to Ms. Doucet would be, did you feel like your board's academic results were trailing others?

MS. LISA DOUCET: When we look at the provincial assessment data it does show us that we were behind over the years in our assessment results.

MR. HOUSTON: Were you surprised by the Auditor General's findings?

MS. DOUCET: I don't think being surprised would be the response, I think we knew that things needed to improve and that things were happening. As the Deputy Minister said, some of the initiatives that were supported by the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, those initiatives were put in place and things were happening in our schools.

I think where we were missing as a board is looking at the whole picture as a board. There were lots of things happening in all our schools but it was tying that all together and then linking that to our board business plan and priorities there.

MR. HOUSTON: Okay, so you weren't surprised then. Did you feel like your board was functioning properly or did you feel like there were issues with your board's functionality?

MS. DOUCET: I guess if I'm speaking about the assessment results in the work that staff is doing, no, it's not a surprise that we were lagging behind other boards, and we were working on those things. But as I said, those things needed to come together in the big picture for the whole board.

The governing board is, I think, the other question that you're asking?

MR. HOUSTON: The question I'm asking, and I'm sorry I'm having trouble articulating it, I'm a little surprised that if you knew there were issues with how your board was operating - and I don't know that you said you did, I'm not sure - but if you knew there

were issues like the board wasn't operating at the highest level that it could, did you reach out to the department and say look, I need some help here with the management of my board? That's a question.

The second part to that, the part that I'm really trying to get to is just receiving more money into your board and being asked to take on more initiatives and more programs, did you feel like you were properly prepared to do that, knowing how the board was functioning?

MS. MCKENZIE: I just want to make sure that we're separating out the management function of the school board and the elected function of the school board. When you say "board" are you asking about the elected board or are you asking about the management of the staff and the board?

MR. HOUSTON: Well the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development oversees the school board, correct?

MS. MCKENZIE: Yes.

MR. HOUSTON: The elected school board oversees the management, correct?

MS. MCKENZIE: Yes.

MR. HOUSTON: So the management is only ever a function of what they've been asked to do by the elected board, who has been asked to do something by the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. So if you want to separate them out, my question to Ms. Doucet would be, was the elected school board properly functioning, in your mind?

MS. DOUCET: I'm going to ask the deputy to answer.

MS. MCKENZIE: So the distinction we made at the beginning was that Lisa would answer the questions about the staff and the management of the school board and that I would answer the questions with respect to the elected school board, so your question is?

MR. HOUSTON: That's fine. Did the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development feel that the elected school board was properly functioning?

MS. MCKENZIE: There was information that we were provided in the Auditor General's Report that would have provided new information to us but that we do have a regional education officer who attends regular meetings with the school board. We had already received information through the education review run by Myra Freeman, that 19,000 Nova Scotians told us there were concerns with every level of the system. So that wouldn't have been a surprise that it was reinforced that there was some concern with the elected board level.

MR. HOUSTON: So the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development had some concerns about this specific board, prior to the Auditor General's release of his report - you had some concerns?

MS. MCKENZIE: I wouldn't say that we had concerns about this specific board. We had a review, and 19,000 Nova Scotians responding to us in a survey told us that at every level we needed to rethink the delivery of education in Nova Scotia.

MR. HOUSTON: And prior to that everything was great, from the department's perspective. Prior to the Freeman report and prior to the Auditor General's Report, people thought that this was working just great in the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development?

MS. MCKENZIE: Those would not be my words. For us to have launched a survey and worked to engage as many Nova Scotians - historically it's the most Nova Scotians in the history of a survey to have responded, to tell us that there were concerns. For the minister to have launched that review, for the government to have been elected on a platform that said they were going to do a review, indicated there were concerns that the system itself was not working optimally for the outcomes of students.

MR. HOUSTON: How often do you, in your capacity as deputy minister, meet with the superintendents of the various school boards of the province?

MS. MCKENZIE: I meet with them monthly and I talk with them weekly.

MR. HOUSTON: Do you ever, in your capacity as deputy minister, sit in on a school board meeting in any region of the province?

MS. MCKENZIE: I have attended and met with school boards in a number of regions and I have a few more to go. I've just joined the department in the last eight months.

MR. HOUSTON: So you are kind of ramping it up since the Auditor General's Report?

MS. MCKENZIE: No, I wouldn't say that. I haven't been travelling in the month of December; we've had a lot of snow. I have attended one school board meeting since the launch of the educational review and the Auditor General's Report.

MR. HOUSTON: Has the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development put a figure on how much it will cost the department to implement both the changes recommended from the Auditor General's Report and also from the action plan? How much will it cost to implement these things, is that something you've looked at?

MS. MCKENZIE: Yes, the Liberal Government has committed to a reinvestment of \$65 million in education in Nova Scotia. The actions in the action plan will be covered within the allocation that has been given to us.

With respect to the investment in the Tri-County Regional School Board, a number of the actions that have been identified are governance and we don't expect those to cost. We expect those will be a change in the way that we do business.

With respect to the investment in math and literacy and the understanding and doing the research related to the achievement gap, that's costed within the action plan for Education.

MR. HOUSTON: And what is that cost? You referenced the \$65 million; that will only come in over four years. A year has already passed, so it's really a pocket of money that is almost irrelevant to this question because the question is very specific on how much will it cost to implement and make the changes for the recommendations of the Auditor General's Report and then how much on the action plan? I think you said you've costed out the action plan - what figure did you come up with when you costed that out?

MS. MCKENZIE: Again I would say that the managerial changes that the Tri-County Regional School Board is contemplating as a result of the Auditor General's Report, it's not related to cost. It's related to different ways of working and that's what they're working on.

The specific actions that will improve student outcomes, based on the Action Plan for Education, have been costed within the \$65 million and will be within the allocation that we receive this year as part of that investment.

MR. HOUSTON: So is the answer to the question that there's enough money? I'm trying to ask how much money is required and I think what I'm hearing is that we have enough. Is that kind of where we're at?

MS. MCKENZIE: What I'm saying is that the investment in the math and the literacy and the changes that we would make in the classroom are costed within the funding allocations that we'll be receiving this year and in the next two years to be able to implement Nova Scotia's Action Plan for Education.

MR. HOUSTON: If they're costed within the plan, I'm just wondering - it's part of a plan, what element of the cost relates to this?

MS. MCKENZIE: We're in the process right now of doing the individual breakdowns associated with each of the costs . . .

MR. HOUSTON: That's okay, so you don't know the answer to the question at this time. You feel like there will be enough money but you just don't know exactly how much it is going to cost - that's fair if that's . . .

MS. MCKENZIE: I am confident and the minister has committed that we will operate within the \$65 million and deliver every action in the Action Plan for Education.

MR. HOUSTON: Okay. How long will it take to implement everything in the action plan?

MS. MCKENZIE: We have a very aggressive action plan. We will have a number of the actions in place for September 2015, a significant number in place for 2015-16, and we are right out to 2020 with the plan.

MR. HOUSTON: Who is going to be responsible for monitoring whether or not you are meeting the plan?

MS. MCKENZIE: Well, the commitments that have been made in the education action plan are that we will be doing an annual report. Our intention is that the minister will be reporting to the community with respect to the achievement of the elements of the action plan. I think she stated very clearly when she announced it that the actions we said that we will achieve in 2015-16 will be achieved.

MR. HOUSTON: I guess my concern with that is - even the Auditor General in his report talked about certain initiatives that had been taken, but in his findings they weren't meeting the outcomes. So if there are a bunch of new initiatives, what do they matter if they don't meet the outcomes? My question is, who is going to measure that the outcomes are being met? Is that the school boards or is that the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development?

MS. MCKENZIE: We will be doing it collaboratively and there will also be accountabilities and measures that are built into the plan to show that we're making progress. Most significantly, between now and September there will be a focus on the P to 3 curriculum, making sure that we've identified the essential learning outcomes, and cull the curriculum so that teachers are able to focus and also align across multi-grade classes.

MR. HOUSTON: Have you at this stage - is it too early or have you determined the indicators that you're going to look at to evaluate whether or not the outcomes are being met?

MS. MCKENZIE: We have identified a number of indicators. We're going to be changing the way that we do assessment and evaluation in a number of different ways. We'll be using PowerSchool and a number of the other monitoring systems that we have, but we're also going to be building in pre and post testing to make sure that we're able to evaluate and quickly catch if the students aren't meeting outcomes, but I think additionally the introduction of a screen at 18 months, a check at 36 months, and a check again at six months before the children are starting school is a breakthrough in terms of us being able to catch earlier . . .

MR. HOUSTON: So those are indicators that the department will be looking at and kind of pausing and trying to fix things, or whatever, as they go along.

MS. MCKENZIE: We'll be assessing all the way through.

MR. HOUSTON: A question for Ms. Doucet - how important is the role of the elected board in the process of educating kids in Nova Scotia?

MS. DOUCET: The governing board or the elected board oversees everything; they create the policies and oversee the management to ensure that all of the policies and everything that's in place in the board is in place and being completed, and that everybody is doing what they're supposed to do, which is the education of students.

MR. HOUSTON: So the elected board plays an important role in your opinion?

MS. DOUCET: If I could just explain. The elected board or the governing board is the governing body and I report to them as superintendent, and then I'm responsible for all of the staff to ensure that they're doing what they're supposed to be doing.

MR. HOUSTON: But the elected board plays an important role in the process.

MS. DOUCET: Yes.

MR. HOUSTON: Ms. McKenzie, the Auditor General's Report in this case noted that the governing board did not understand the full nature of its responsibilities - the governing board did not understand the full nature of its responsibilities - so upon being elected to a school board, whose responsibility is it to present and educate board members about their role in the process?

MS. MCKENZIE: There is an orientation that's done at every board for new members. We've identified and already been speaking to the Nova Scotia School Boards Association to identify looking at those orientations at the various boards, but also to be able to support board self-assessment, both as a board and as individual members as a check-in annually.

MR. HOUSTON: I'm short on time so I'm just going to ask you - so there's an orientation. Is there any kind of follow-up, professional development for board members in the process as it stands right now?

MS. MCKENZIE: I would say that varies by board and it's something we can improve.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Now we'll move to the NDP caucus for 20 minutes, starting with Mr. Wilson.

HON. DAVID WILSON: Thank you for coming today. I'm sure you would rather be somewhere else because when we saw the results of the audit - as an MLA, but I think more importantly as a father with two children in the school system, I'm concerned when I hear the Auditor General coming out with quotes that the Tri-County Regional School Board aren't fully meeting their respective responsibility in overseeing education in the region.

I know the audit was done on Tri-County but I would assume that if it was one of the other school boards, there may be similar findings because some of the concerns that the Auditor General had in your school board, I know that I've heard from other parents and I have some concerns, especially around mathematics in school. In monitoring my own kids' grades and seeing how they fluctuate, I have to say that over the last couple of years I've seen - I think with more of my friends - a decrease in what our children are achieving in mathematics.

So it does concern me when the Auditor General indicates that the board doesn't get sufficient information or spend enough time on the fundamental role of educating students - that was one of the statements that really stood out to me. A quick question, and I'll maybe ask the superintendent first - did you get the same feeling on hearing language from the Auditor General - I mean this is tough language indicating some of the issues in your school board. What was your first reaction when you read those comments from the Auditor General? And you can hear from the deputy after that, if you'd like to make comments.

MS. DOUCET: So you are right, you are correct. The words stand out to us all and that is referring, I think, to the governing board and how they oversee the process but also with the management and how we are delivering that information to the governing board. That needs to be very clearly laid out and those processes need to be reviewed in how they are getting the information they need in order to make those decisions they need to make.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Ms. McKenzie, would you like to comment?

MS. MCKENZIE: I think the concern with respect to how are we supporting governing boards to be able to do the job they are required to do to oversee the school system, we've identified through the education review when we heard back that there was concern that all levels of the system weren't necessarily functioning optimally, but whether we were providing the support to the elected to be able to do that - that is something that we're taking seriously.

I do think that the minister's introduction of an audit to be carried out in all school boards to be looking at the functioning of the elected board, the effectiveness of the management structure of the board, the operations of key functions and also how effective school boards are at rolling out provincial initiatives - those are going to give us a really solid picture to see what we need to do to improve.

MR. DAVID WILSON: Thank you for that answer. So with that request that the minister made of an audit of the other school boards, is there a timeline on that? The school year goes by quickly, we're in the second semester, I believe, in high school and things are moving quite quickly.

Looking at the results of provincial assessments, for example, and I know with Tri-County - looking at the data that was provided and the information provided on every category of reading, ideas, organization, language, convention, math - the results for the students are below the provincial average so that should be alarming to me. Changing that should happen quickly, or as quickly as possible.

I know we're only looking at Tri-County, but I assume there will be other boards that aren't meeting at least the provincial average. So what kind of timeline is it on the audit so that we can figure out and government can figure out what needs to be done to improve the results of our assessments on our students?

MS. MCKENZIE: The review of school boards - the Auditor General has provided the minister assurances that he will be building the request into his audit planning into the future. We will be having meetings, starting next week, to talk about what that timeline could potentially look like and what the subject of each of the audits will look like.

We can't wait to implement the action plan while that audit process moves forward, so there are a number of actions to address. The Action Plan for Education has brought the minister's focus on reading, writing, numeracy and there are actions that will be taking place - we're starting this month - on working to improve our outcomes in those areas for our children.

MR. DAVID WILSON: Would it be your expectation that the audit would be one audit, let's look at all the other school boards, or would it be one school board or the next school board, because that could take years to be truthful? Is that your expectation that you would ask the Auditor General's Office to just look at all of them all at once so that you can really get a true picture of what's happening across the province?

MS. MCKENZIE: The Auditor General doesn't take direction from the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. What we've asked is for these four areas to be audited and he has assured us that he's going to consider that in his audit planning, but that we have to have other mechanisms in place to ensure that we're getting outcomes that we are intending for our children.

MR. DAVID WILSON: I'll quickly maybe turn to the Assistant Auditor General. What discussions have you had, or have you had any? I know you have a number of your audits planned now so could you enlighten us maybe quickly on a timeline, if you have one?

MR. TERRY SPICER: We will be meeting with the department, I believe, later this week or next week, as the deputy minister said. We have received a request and we'll discuss with them how we can go forward with the request.

MR. DAVID WILSON: Of course, I made mention of provincial assessments and the results of those, and I really think that's kind of our reflection on how the students are doing when it comes to the curriculum that's delivered to them. What discussion on the department level - and I would like to ask both the superintendent and on a department level - what discussion have you had to look at the root causes of under-performing students in our province? Maybe the superintendent, because we have your results in front of us, maybe I'll ask you first.

MS. DOUCET: We are having discussions because one of the things that was pointed out in the Auditor General's Report was that it looks like we're not putting enough effort into getting to the root of the problem. The minister's action plan will support that with the research that will be done.

At our board level there are things happening in our schools to address the low literacy and the low numeracy results. It's just that when you look at the big picture in our board, we're not making that connection and making it to the board business plan and priorities again. So for us, we need to take all of those things that are happening in the individual schools and look at the big picture and hopefully be supported with the research that will be done through the action plan to get at the root cause of the problem - we have the EDI - and to work with our community partners to address those concerns as early on as we can.

MS. MCKENZIE: Just to reinforce what the superintendent has said, there is a very focused piece of work called Understanding the Achievement Gap which has been laid out in the education action plan, including the establishment of an inter-university chair to begin to do the research to understand what the achievement gap is for populations and also for geographic regions.

There will be an initiative which will really be a cross-departmental initiative to begin to understand how much of that is starting in the early years and then transferring into the education system. The minister has recently announced additional funding to remove the wait-list for early intervention and we do need to understand what we can do as a society, not just government departments - Health and Wellness, Community Services, Education and Early Childhood Development, Justice, and Labour and Advanced Education - but also working with our community partners and the communities and families themselves, to begin to understand what we need to do to lay the solid foundation for children to have success in schools.

MR. DAVID WILSON: I hope that the department doesn't walk away from the audit and try to reinvent the wheel in trying to figure all this out. There has been a lot of work over the years to try to figure out the root causes of maybe low test scores with students. One of the areas that I know does have an effect, or talking with teachers on what

the challenges are in a classroom and often you look at teachers - I say this and I know people used to say it about my career as a paramedic - I don't know how teachers do it. It's an extremely difficult job to manage children and try to educate them and ensure that they are meeting the goals that are in place.

Do you think class size plays a role in the root cause of low test scores? Maybe to the deputy, I guess.

MS. MCKENZIE: I think the issue with respect to low test scores is a complex and multi-faceted issue. Having said that, the Liberal Government has committed to addressing class sizes from P to 6 over this mandate and already has started with the class caps of P to 2.

MR. DAVID WILSON: I know there have been some recent reports on that and I think with the new government and their commitment to Nova Scotians, I think there was an understanding that that would happen sooner than later, that the class cap sizes would be implemented once they were elected and we know that has not taken place. I know we're up to Grade 2 now. In a recent report there were 85 classes, I think, that were over that cap size. Has the department tried to address or have correspondence and interaction with the school boards that have seen those cap sizes over what was promised?

MS. MCKENZIE: We've spoken in depth on every classroom. For the most part we've achieved I think in the 90-plus per cent range of classes being capped. In the event the classes were not meeting the 20 cap, it was because of the physical size of the school and the parents would prefer having the children stay in the school as opposed to having them bused. So it was a joint decision that the class cap would go over a little bit as opposed to having children travel.

In some cases it was tied to French immersion and the ability to get a teacher. In each case it was a decision that was taken at the school level from an education perspective, either to limit by size or by programming.

MR. DAVID WILSON: I know in Tri-County, out of the 85, I believe only four classes were over the size cap. Are you aware if any of those fall under what the deputy was saying, that they are still over because of those reasons, or have you been able to mitigate being over the cap size?

MS. DOUCET: Yes, I agree, the classes in the Tri-County were following under the same.

MR. DAVID WILSON: Another area which I've read about around root causes of why students may be under-performing - I know our Chief Public Health Officer, Dr. Strang, and Paul Bennett of Schoolhouse Consulting recently talked about the effect of the time children are on a bus going to school and it affects their health. They indicate that, in turn, does affect their test scores.

Are you aware of those kinds of comments from our Chief Public Health Officer and others, especially in Tri-County because I know it's a more rural setting. So as we move down the road of school and locations, are you concerned as some are with the length of time students are on buses going to school? That's for the superintendent.

MS. DOUCET: We do try to limit the time a student travels on a bus to one hour but as you pointed out, in a rural area sometimes that is difficult because of the sheer geography of the area. I think it just makes sense that if they are on a bus travelling, then they are not engaged in doing homework or doing any of those physical activities and all those things that would happen.

MR. CHAIRMAN: You still have five minutes.

MR. DAVID WILSON: Do I really? Excellent. Do you have the average time? Do you keep those stats of your students and what their average time is that they spend on a bus? Do you keep that kind of data in the school board?

MS. DOUCET: We probably do have that but, as I said, we would normally not have a student on a bus any longer than an hour.

MR. DAVID WILSON: Could you provide that to the committee, just so we can see it? I know that definitely is a big concern from parents who have contacted MLAs and caucus offices, especially when a school review is happening for potential closure. That is really at the forefront, I think, of what parents don't want to see is a child on a bus. So if you could provide that, I would appreciate it.

MS. DOUCET: Yes, I'll get that information - just understanding as well that sometimes a parent or student may choose to spend that much time on a bus to access a school that they may want to attend or programming at a certain school. So sometimes if it goes beyond that, it may be that the parents are fine with that in order to attend a certain program.

MR. DAVID WILSON: Another area that has come up around potentially the root causes of students not doing as well is, of course, poverty and hunger. I know in 2013 there was a program created - Nourish - that was provided about \$750,000 annually, provincial funding, to a charitable organization to help children get a good breakfast in a breakfast program around the province. I know reading through recently the report that came out that it has been quite successful and it has, from what I've heard, made an impact.

So to the deputy, is this a program that the department will continue to fund and is there a possibility to see an increase in that budget so that we can maximize addressing some of the root causes like hunger? It is astonishing to think that that is part of the problem but it is. I hear from my own kids going to school that it is an issue, so maybe a comment on that.

MS. MCKENZIE: As a society and as a community, none of us would want to think that a barrier to a child's education would be that they were hungry. I can say that the department - and I know that the individual schools and through the school boards have worked to be very creative in terms of providing breakfast programs, and what have you, for children that are attending school.

I also know that we are working as a deputies' social policy committee to look at how we can work better together to use the funding that we have across departments to ensure that the suite of programs that support children would include, in the communities that require them, those supports in the morning, at lunch time, and after school.

MR. DAVID WILSON: But I didn't hear you say that you would like to see it increased. I know you probably won't answer this because the budget is coming up, but would we anticipate a cut to that program in the upcoming budget? I know you've gone through your budget preparation and you're going through it now. Can you indicate if there's going to be a cut to that program in the upcoming budget?

MS. MCKENZIE: I can't comment on the budget issues at this time.

MR. DAVID WILSON: I had to try. I know, I've been on that side. To the superintendent of Tri-County, some of the information we were provided indicates how many breakfasts per dollar that each school board can provide. I know Tri-County is right around the middle of the pack and I don't know what 5.079 breakfasts are, but about five breakfasts for every dollar that's provided to the board, which is a great achievement. Are you doing anything to try to see how to maximize that even more? Are you looking at what other school boards are doing to maybe increase that with the dollars?

I know, for example, there's one - they're up to almost seven and a half breakfasts for every dollar. Has there been any discussion on how you can maximize that even more and maybe try to touch even more kids with the breakfast program?

MS. DOUCET: We have a healthy active living consultant who works around healthy promoting schools, and those are initiatives and the types of things that they're always looking out for the way that we can support children, and as you've pointed out, that they need that nourishment and all of those things before they can actually get to the academics of the school day. I don't have any numbers of things that are being done right here, but I know that there are always continuous conversations with the community partners and with health as to how we can promote learning for our children and their health.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Order, please, 20 minutes has lapsed for the NDP caucus. We'll move to the Liberal caucus, starting with Mr. Maguire.

MR. BRENDAN MAGUIRE: Thank you for coming today. I just have one quick basic question and then I'll pass it on. There are some findings that were alarming in the AG's Report. One in particular was that board members and management did not have a clear understanding of their basic roles and responsibilities. My question is, how did we get here? How did we get to that point, why are we here today?

MS. MCKENZIE: I think that's an important question. One of the things we're going to be taking a look at is the orientation - board self-evaluation, individual board members' evaluation, whether overall board members feel prepared to govern to achieve the education outcomes that we're looking for.

I know that Dr. Gunn is working with the board to be able to look at establishing what the roles and responsibilities are and governing to achieve outcomes; he has been very busy with the board doing that. We've been discussing what's happening at the Tri-County Regional School Board at our superintendent meeting with the deputy in the two months since the results of the Auditor General's Report has come out so that the lessons learned in terms of - is it orientation, is it agenda management, is it support to the Chair, what do we need to do, how can we improve the role of the regional education officer in that activity to support boards being successful.

There's a whole sort of multi-layered look at how we got here, how we can improve, and move on. The Auditor General's Report has sharpened our focus in terms of what we need to look at, as well the audits that the minister has requested the Auditor General consider moving forward.

MR. MAGUIRE: Did anyone reach out and say guess what, there's confusion here? That's what I can't wrap my head around on this. If your role in your mind is not clearly defined and you don't know your authority or what you are mandated to do, did anyone reach out and say guess what, we don't know if this is our role or if this is your role, we don't know if we're overstepping here.

I would suspect that once there's a little bit of confusion, somebody would have come forward and said guess what, we don't know what we're doing. That's what I'm getting at - why was there nothing in the past and why did no one step forward and say guess what, we don't clearly understand our role?

MS. MCKENZIE: I think that with respect to various boards, they've fallen into their own rhythm. I can't speak to this too far back historically because as I've said, I've come to the department in the last eight months. But I can say that what I've determined, in the time that I've been here, is that every board has their own culture and what they believe to be their own areas of responsibility. I do believe in some cases - as identified by the Auditor General - that has become blurred in terms of whether some boards have become too operational or not, or haven't embraced the parts that they would be responsible for as an elected board, in terms of governance and oversight.

I do think there has been a fuzziness. That's why we have been working with the Nova Scotia School Boards Association, to be able to start to say, what can we do pan-Nova Scotia to improve the outcomes for elected boards?

My experience to date has been that the people who are willing to put their hands up and say I'd like to run in a particular area - it's not for the fame and the glory. They're putting their hand up to be able to improve education outcomes for Nova Scotian students. They are all very interested in making sure that they are doing that job to the best of their ability.

We're working with willing partners and what we need to do is at every level, from the regional educational officer and how they support the boards, through to how we work with the Nova Scotia School Boards Association, to support elected members. That's what we're looking at.

MR. MAGUIRE: So what I'm hearing from you, and correct me if I'm wrong and then I'll pass it on, is that it was a bit of a scattershot. Each board had their own management style and each board had their own direction, maybe. Now this minister and Mr. Gunn is saying okay, we need to all go in one direction here. We all need to be working towards the same goals instead of having multiple ways of doing things.

MS. MCKENZIE: Multiple ways of working. I think that's why the minister has started with requesting the Auditor General to consider a broad audit of the school boards in key areas - elected management and in the achievement of program outcomes - to be able to understand best what we can do from a provincial perspective.

MR. MAGUIRE: Thank you.

MR. CHAIRMAN: We'll move to Ms. Lohnes-Croft.

MS. SUZANNE LOHNES-CROFT: My question is probably directed to you, Ms. Doucet. These findings were, of course, serious and concerning. Surely the parents were devastated to hear the results of the Auditor General's Report. How have you communicated and reassured the families that there are going to be changes?

MS. DOUCET: Communication is the key component of working through the recommendations so Dr. Gunn is working with our board chairman around communications with her report each month. I've had communications through my report that are shared with the SACs, the school, and shared in parent newsletters. They can take that information and share it out with the parents.

We've also had the principals of our schools closely involved in working through the recommendations so we've met with them, went through all the recommendations and the context, and now we're taking each recommendation, getting feedback from them and their staff as to how we can implement that recommendation and working with them as a

team to move forward. So now the principals and the administration at the schools are better equipped to speak to the recommendations when parents come in. We're hearing that a parent may come in to speak about their child and then the Auditor General's Report comes up in the conversation, so we're better equipping them to be able to speak to that as well.

Dr. Gunn and I met with the NSTU Management-Teacher Committee at our board, I've met with one of the NSTU locals; we've gone out to schools. Some of the senior staff and I have met with staff to go through the report because it is a time when teachers are feeling very low. When you talk about staff morale and what it's like in a classroom, it is challenging, none of us would say anything differently, I don't think.

I think it's important for us to get the message out to our teachers that we take these recommendations seriously. We want to work as a team to move forward. Our intention is not to download more work on teachers and to give them the opportunity to express their concerns around the recommendations and moving forward. So communication has been a key component of working through the recommendations.

MS. LOHNES-CROFT: You spoke about Dr. Gunn's work, how is that proceeding? What were his first steps when he came in - December 5th was it?

MS. MCKENZIE: Dr. Gunn has been very busy. I have a list here of what Dr. Gunn has been up to, and I spoke to him as recently as this morning. He meets regularly with the board and has been running private working sessions with the board in order to be able to specifically address some of the actions to address the Auditor General's concerns and what that would shape up to in terms of an action plan.

He has been meeting with the chair, the superintendent and the vice-chair as a team. He has met with all the committee leads or is in the process of meeting with all the committee leads from the board perspective. He has talked to individual board members, attended a principals' meeting, met with the Management-Teacher Committee, as Lisa said, with the NSTU. He has been helping with external communications with the superintendent and with the chair, so that community knows what's happening, to be able to address the board, how the board is going to address the Auditor General's observations.

He has been supporting development of the action plan, he has had regular conversations with the program directors and coordinator and has established a support network for specific schools of a team that's made up of people from the department and also from the school board and has met twice with the minister and with myself - separate meetings. Again, I talk to him on the phone so there has been quite a bit of work that has happened since he took office in December.

MS. LOHNES-CROFT: So what are his next steps?

MS. MCKENZIE: His next steps will be to continue this work, to work with the board, to begin to develop that action plan. In some cases there are pieces of work that need to be done, the audits that school boards go through in terms of self-evaluation, to be able to identify what needs to be put in place to move forward. Dr. Gunn anticipates wrapping up his work over the summer and providing the minister with a report in September.

MS. LOHNES-CROFT: With the \$65 million that was cut to education in the previous government and now the minister has committed to reinvesting in education, can you see this benefiting school boards such as Tri-County in rehabilitating itself and coming up to standard?

MS. MCKENZIE: I think there are two separate streams of work. One is, how does the board embrace its governance role and how does it carry out that governance role? That starts with understanding what that governance role looks like in-depth and then moving forward from there. That's a piece of work that Dr. Gunn is going to support the board in.

In addition, the investment that is being made in education around reading and writing scores, looking at the achievement gap, putting in math mentors, putting the class caps in place - these are the pieces of work that will also support the board in understanding what the outcomes are that they're currently getting and how the improvements are moving forward.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Ms. Miller.

MS. MARGARET MILLER: Thank you for coming in today. It's a lot of information and you've been great at answering the questions. Most of the recommendations that I see from the Auditor General's Report seem like they are being addressed very well. I look forward to seeing some really great results coming back from that and some good feedback.

I would like to change a little bit here and ask about the IPP programs. I believe in the report it said there was a higher than average percentage of children in the school board district who are on IPP programs. Is that true?

MS. DOUCET: Yes, when we looked at the provincial data, we do have the highest number of students who have individual program plans. Individual program plans are necessary if a student is not meeting outcomes, also if a student is achieving beyond outcomes as well. I just want to point that out as well because sometimes I think that gets missed in the whole process - we have enrichment IPPs as well. That's not to say that that's the majority of the IPPs in our board, but that is a point.

Through the minister's request, we are in the process of looking at students on IPPs and if they are appropriately placed from the Auditor General's Report. What we need to be looking at as Tri-County Board - and I'm assuming all school boards will be requested to do - is if those students who are on IPPs achieving those outcomes. So there are two

different things: if the placement is appropriate and whether or not those students are achieving those outcomes, which they need to be.

Part of the work that we're doing now, which is actually starting today is beginning that process of taking a sample, which was selected through the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, and looking at those. So we have our Student Services staff who will be reviewing those individual program plans and looking at the components - and they have criteria to look at - to see if they are appropriate, but also then taking it a step further for our work to ensure that the students are meeting the outcomes.

In the action plan as well, it does speak to work that will be done provincially around TIENET, which is part of PowerSchool that houses the IPPs, to be able to pull reports from that so we can look at the general population of students on IPPs and if they are meeting the outcomes.

MS. MILLER: That's great to hear. I didn't realize that it was both ends of the spectrum - that you were also dealing with children that were very gifted. I think that has been a concern too that a lot of these children sort of get lost in a classroom because they're not being engaged, they're not being challenged more, so it's good to hear that.

Do the students in an IPP program generally - how does that work at the end? If they're in an IPP program all the way through to Grade 12 and they graduate, does their certificate identify them as being an IPP student? What happens to the children who have had an enriched program so they could be graduating high school at a younger age possible? Does it show that they were on an IPP program and how does that relate when they apply for university or vocational school?

MS. DOUCET: All the way through, the students are monitored. They have IPP report cards. So in PowerSchool through using TIENET, there is an IPP report card which would show their progress. When they go through high school, it is noted on their transcript when they finish. So if it's Geography 10 and they have an IPP, it's noted as Geography 10 IPP and the outcomes are attached. So when they move on to post-secondary or if they move on to work in the community, it is attached to their transcript because it is an individual program so it's important for whoever is receiving them to understand what their program is.

MS. MCKENZIE: I would just like to point out that one of the key actions in the minister's education action plan is the establishment of a transition task force that will be made up of department staff, school board representation, the Nova Scotia Community College and universities, to talk about how we can support successful transitions through school and into post-secondary.

In addition, there's also a commitment to having programming put in place in every school board that helps to transition for children who may have learning disabilities and learning exceptionalities, so there's sort of both ends of that piece.

MS. LOHNES-CROFT: Thank you so much.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Okay, we've got about four minutes left. Mr. Farrell.

MR. TERRY FARRELL: In reading the report I learned a lot about what the role is of the elected board. I'm wondering if there's not a structural problem in the relationship between the elected board and board management, in terms of they are together in the same community and I think the elected board - some of them may have an educational background but many of them won't and wouldn't they naturally gravitate to the board management for their advice and things like that? They are not assuming their proper role of oversight in that context and the department is another thing, far away down in Halifax and they are all down there living in the same community together.

MS. MCKENZIE: I think there are many reasons why we've ended up where we are with respect to the elected school boards. I think we need to take a look at how we've been supporting the school boards through our regional educational officers but also through our interaction with the Nova Scotia School Boards Association - are there things we could have done and that's what we're looking at - that could have supported a better understanding of the role of governance and not operational.

I do think that people put their hands up to run for school boards for a variety of different reasons. Some people come in with a very specific agenda in mind, which lends them to become quite operational in terms of their focus, and others come in with a broader perspective. So helping people once they've been elected to understand what their accountabilities are and what their roles and responsibilities are is key. So you are identifying some of the complexities of local politics and it is one of the issues that we're taking a look at, in terms of supporting with the Nova Scotia School Boards Association, but I think that will also be illuminated if the Auditor General decides to look at all the areas the minister has requested.

MR. FARRELL: Thank you, that's all.

MR. CHAIRMAN: That's it for the Liberal caucus? Okay, we'll move back to the PC caucus for 14 minutes. Mr. d'Entremont.

HON. CHRISTOPHER D'ENTREMONT: Well thank you very much. It's my pleasure to maybe ask a few questions of one of my home school boards. There are six schools in Argyle-Barrington that belong to the Tri-County Regional School Board and there are five that belong to the CSAP, so we're very well represented by both of those school boards. My disclosure on this one is that my wife is a school teacher, she works for the CSAP so of course I hear a lot about education in southwestern Nova Scotia.

I'm going to take maybe a little bit of a different tack on this. There are a number of board issues that I think a lot of people have been aware of for some time in southwestern Nova Scotia, but I think a lot of it revolves around the school boards having to do a little

bit of the dirty work for the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development when it comes to school closures. Arcadia School is a good example of people's thoughts being taken up by that kind of process rather than about the education or the falling of IPPs or those kinds of things, or whether South Side school versus Clark's Harbour school is the right move. People got caught up in that debate and that discussion.

I'm just wondering, are we asking the school boards to do the wrong things? We're so busy trying to get them to deal with school closures and sort of the bad news stuff and the department just sort of can sit there and say well, we didn't do that. Maybe that's a question to the deputy right now.

MS. MCKENZIE: From the reading that I've done, my observation is that when we went from 55 boards down to 22 boards and then to eight boards, one of the major concerns was that communities were concerned that local decision-making would be moving too far away from them. What was laid out in the Education Act in terms of the responsibility of the boards has been closely linked to the desire of the communities to have people from the communities making those decisions.

I understand that then leaves local boards in the decision-making process. I do hope that the school review process that has been recently announced by the Liberal Government and also the requirement for long-range planning to be in place for the end of this fiscal year, will contribute to communities being able to have those dialogues but it has been clear, as we've amalgamated down from 55 to 22 to eight, that local decision making has been key.

MR. D'ENTREMONT: Having been an MLA for quite some time now, the genesis of the Tri-County Regional School Board happened during my time as an MLA and there was a great big debate on whether Tri-County should have its own school board or not because it wasn't part of the South Shore board at that time. There was always a challenge for getting information and being responsible for their own HR and there was a whole bunch of reasons why Tri-County, I think, needed to have its own school board.

I'm just wondering, in the whole view of what's going on, should we have school boards designed the way we do? Is the Tri-County Regional School Board still the right model or are we going to be looking at district health authorities? There's one large district health authority for the whole province now, are we going to be doing the same thing to school boards? That's a big preoccupation right now, especially since this has happened.

MS. MCKENZIE: I think the minister, when she announced the Action Plan for Education, was clear in her support for school boards and the importance of school boards as local governance bodies for the school system and that what she has requested through the audit is how can we improve these as bodies that provide oversight to the education system? There has been nothing that I've seen that has indicated the minister is interested in following the route of the health boards.

MR. D'ENTREMONT: I'm also wondering, too, as a local representative, I can say my connection to this Tri-County Regional School Board is probably very quiet, I don't hear much from it until I see Auditor General's Reports and all of a sudden I'm asked to comment on them. I do find I have a good relationship with some of the board members, whether it's Andrea Huskilson, Ron Hines, Dolores Atwood or Steve Stoddart.

What's happening now, and I don't know if it's an operational item or whether it was a board decision - I don't know, I'll sort of look between both of you - that when I call for information - the example was with the expansion of the Clark's Harbour school - there were some problems and the dates were getting a little long on that one, so when I call, it's just what's going on so that I can pass it on, because when the buck doesn't stop with the school board and when they can't get their answer from school board members, they are going to call the MLA. So I call to get some information and then I get, well, I've got to get permission from the school board chair in order to talk to you.

I'm just wondering, is that an operational item or is that an edict from the staff? I don't know. I think the information flow is going to be very important when you're making these changes or trying to answer the Auditor General's Report. That's my last comment here.

MS. DOUCET: I'm not sure - I know you're correct on the communication around the plan and the Auditor General's Report, again communication is very important and key. I'm not sure if you're referring to the board having a policy that if elected officials - so if an MLA was going to meet with board staff, that a board member has to be present. I'm not sure if that's what you're referring to or if it's just a communication at our level. I don't know of any blocks to say that you shouldn't share information so I'm not quite sure.

MR. D'ENTREMONT: Well no, it's more that if I wanted to call someone, if I want to call you and talk to you about something, do I need to have a board member to be there, to be present or listening to our conversation? I just want some information that I can pass along to my constituents because they're the same constituents, the same people, and the same parents that have the same kids. I just want to make sure there's not an impedance on the way the board is managed. Is this a board issue or is this a staff issue - I'm confused a little bit there?

MS. DOUCET: I would say that if you called me to talk to me, I would talk to you. I'm thinking it's probably around the meeting because it is in board policy which the board developed that if there is a meeting with an MLA, or whomever, that a board member should be present for that.

MR. D'ENTREMONT: Okay, and just quickly, finally, we used to meet with the school board about twice a year so we would know what's going on in the school board. We haven't had a meeting in six years so it would be really nice to have a meeting to find out what's going on in the Tri-County Regional School Board. That's just my last comment.

MR. CHAIRMAN: I'll move to Mr. Houston for seven minutes.

MR. HOUSTON: I guess maybe what I was having trouble articulating in the first round of questions is, I do have some concerns about the department and, in this case, the Tri-County board's ability to act on all the recommendations and the action plan and stuff, with their ability to provide proper oversight and properly evaluate whether things are being met. That's my main concern and I'm going to come back to it if I have time at the end to ask what specific actions might be taken to increase the overall system of oversight and assessment, but for the moment I want to ask about IPPs. How will the department and the school boards develop indicators and use data in order to properly understand the success of the IPPs?

We did hear from Ms. Doucet a little bit about the system that's in place, but I really don't think the system is working very good. I think IPPs have been a failure to kids at the high end and at the low end. What is the department doing to prevent a situation like what's happening - specifically in this case in the Tri-County - where there's not sufficient monitoring of IPPs? What's the department doing to prevent that from happening again?

MS. MCKENZIE: I wouldn't say across the board that IPPs have been a failure. In fact, having an individualized program plan has allowed many children who may have exceptionalities to have success in the classroom. It's around whether or not we're doing the proper monitoring, where the children have been placed on IPPs in a proper way and whether we're monitoring them to see what their progress looks like.

So the commitments in the Action Plan for Education are as follows. We're going to complete a comprehensive assessment of IPPs. That has begun. That's what Lisa referred to where we're doing a sample across the province. We're looking at - what was the process to place this child in IPP and what's the process that you've been following through the monitoring? We're going to be establishing provincial criteria for placing a student in an IPP.

One of the things that we observed as we were putting together the Action Plan for Education is there has been kind of a way of working that the guidelines were developed at the department - they were passed out; policies were developed at each board based on the guidelines and then we would get various iterations of that happening. So there will be provincial criteria for placing a student in an IPP. There will be consistent monitoring of student progress on IPPs. We're going to be revamping the IPP process.

MR. HOUSTON: I guess that's the one that I'm worried about - the monitoring. I don't know if the way you're going to monitor those hasn't been developed or not because kids have IPPs, but I don't know that they've been meeting the - I'm sure some of them have, but as a rule from teachers I have spoken to and stuff - I did a lot of research around IPPs - I don't think that kids are really meeting - the IPPs aren't serving the purpose that they were intended to. So it's the monitoring. What indicators is the department going to

look at? Have you developed some indicators that are going to tell you whether IPPs are working for kids or not?

MS. MCKENZIE: I just want to say that the minister shares your concern in terms of whether the monitoring of children that have been placed on IPPs . . .

MR. HOUSTON: We always agree on stuff, the minister and I.

MS. MCKENZIE: I can tell. That is why she put such a focus on IPPs in the action plan. Lisa is going to answer about the monitoring.

MS. DOUCET: Through the program planning process, which has already been developed provincially - and there is a parent guide, there are all kinds of supports that are already in place - the plan is monitored. They have individual program planning teams where the parent is involved from the very beginning to develop so that is a form of monitoring.

MR. HOUSTON: In the interest of time, I think I'll say that I hear you. Those things are in place - they're not working. I think the minister shares that and I'm happy to hear that today and I'd like to see some effort focused on that because parents in most cases aren't properly equipped to determine whether or not the outcomes are being met - they're really not. So as long as the minister is going to focus on it, that's what I was most curious about today.

The action plan does call for shared responsibility for the development and implementation of IPPs. We talked about that. It does call for that. That's going to require co-operation between classroom teachers and resource teachers and other professionals. That's a requirement that's going to take some time. Has the department considered that those teachers for that co-teaching element are going to require some extra time for classroom preparation and stuff? Have you thought about that and how that will work?

MS. MCKENZIE: We have thought about that. We will be bringing in someone to provide some leadership related to this piece of work. What we're trying to move towards is - right now, oftentimes if you are getting resource or you are getting support from student services, you're coming out of the classroom.

Looking at the co-teaching model would be to stay in the classroom so that the classroom teacher can benefit from the supports that are being provided to the student and that learning can be passed on to the classroom teacher. It may be that although there will be additional reports sort of required, it also is a change in the way of working.

MR. HOUSTON: Okay, that's important, thank you for that.

In my last 30 seconds I guess I do have a quick question for the deputy minister. Do you think the education system, as it stands today, is prepared to take on the challenge

of really educating children about technology and for future employment opportunities in technology? That's one thing I really think is missing from our curriculum - identifying those kids who are interested in coding and gaming and programming and all this stuff and giving them an opportunity. Have you thought much about how you can get access to that type of learning to those kids who are interested?

MS. MCKENZIE: I think about it all the time. I believe the minister will be having some very positive announcements related to that in the next little while.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Order. We'll move to the NDP caucus, Ms. MacDonald.

HON. MAUREEN MACDONALD: I'm interested in knowing a bit more about the background and the context to the operation of the board. My first questions are probably best directed at Ms. Eisenhauer. I'm interested in knowing about the operating budget for the board over a five-year period, let's say. Are you able to provide me with that?

The Auditor General's Report says that the operating budget in 2013-14 was \$69 million so I'd like to go back and look at what the annual operating budget was in each of the previous let's say four years or five years.

MS. DIANA EISENHAUER: I don't have that information with me. I do have the 2014-15 budget, which you already know, but I can provide you with the information. Do you want to go back five years?

MS. MACDONALD: That would be very helpful. I would like to understand what the operating budget was, and I also would like to know what the student enrolment has been over a period of time. In fact I don't think it's unreasonable to ask for what the student enrolment in the board has been since its inception in 2004.

Really we're looking at the Auditor General's Report that gives us a snapshot of right now, but I'd like to know what the trends have been with respect to student enrolment and funding of this board over a longer period.

MS. EISENHAUER: I can prepare that for you.

MS. MACDONALD: Okay, I think that would be quite helpful. The other thing that would be useful - I guess the first thing is, does the department or the board have this information, is information around the numbers of students over a five-year time frame, let's say, who are on IPPs.

MS. EISERHAUER: Yes, we have that.

MS. MACDONALD: This particular report happens at a certain point in time; close to 10 per cent of the students who attend this board are on IPPs. I'm wondering, can you tell me how does that correspond to the percentage of students in other boards? Is that on

par? Is it higher? Is it lower? What is the kind of benchmark or the median percentage of students in the other boards that have IPPs?

MS. MCKENZIE: We all look like we were ready to answer. With respect to your first request, we will be able to provide data on IPPs and we will make sure that is part of the package that is developed. Lisa is going to talk about the board's percentage of IPPs.

MS. DOUCET: As was pointed out, we are at a higher percentage than any of the other boards. I guess we are looking into that more closely right now, but we always look at the point of - if that's what a student requires to be successful, then we shouldn't say we're at 5 per cent in our board or we're at 7 per cent so we have to stop. We've had those discussions with principals because it is challenging for principals when you feel all the pressure of, here's the provincial data.

There are obviously reasons why in our area that we have students who have challenges. We need to work more closely with our community partners and when we look at programs like the Early Years Centre, which we have one established in Yarmouth area, it allows us that opportunity to have those discussions. We have EDI data that shows that we are. We have children with challenges before they come into the school system, so how are we going to work with all the community partners and with parents and families to support those children in the school system?

I guess we do have a higher number of IPPs. We are looking into that right now, but that's not to say that if a student requires an IPP to be successful, then we have an obligation to do that.

MS. MACDONALD: I'm assuming though that many of the undefined challenges that would result in this would exist in other parts of the province as well, would they not?

MS. DOUCET: Yes, they would, and if we look at some of the reasons why a student is on an IPP - there are academic IPPs, there are students who have behavioural challenges who are on IPPs. We have students who come into our system with challenges who may be non-verbal, need personal care - so that's how we track and monitor their progress in those areas as well so that may be outside of the academic part of IPPs.

MS. MACKENZIE: I'd just like to add that the EDI data that Lisa referred to does tell us though that there is a higher statistic of children who are arriving at school with vulnerabilities in that community. That is why we need Nova Scotia-specific research to understand what those achievement gaps are and why they're starting so early. That's the part I'm quite excited about in the action plan - to generate that Nova Scotia-specific research to take a look at why children are arriving at school at a higher percentage with a vulnerability and then how that is translating into perhaps children being placed in IPPs as they progress through. That research on the achievement gap is going to be critical.

MS. MACDONALD: Earlier in the presentation, the deputy made reference to restoring \$65 million that had been cut from the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development budget. What I would really like is a detailed explanation of the \$65 million figure, where that comes from. Where do you get that \$65 million figure? How do you arrive at that \$65 million?

MS. MCKENZIE: It was a commitment of the Liberal Government to reinstate the \$65 million, and that would have been an accumulative impact of cuts that had happened over the previous four years.

MS. MACDONALD: I get the commitment in the Liberal platform, but what I'm asking for is a detailed accounting for that \$65 million from the department. That's not a politicized number, based on some notion that had the funding of education, P-12, continued at the same rate of increase that had previously occurred in previous years, that that would result in a reduction of \$65 million, if you understand what I am saying. I would like some accuracy around the real numbers for what the impact was of previous funding for Department of Education and Early Childhood Development and school boards over a four-year period. That's what I'm looking for.

MS. MCKENZIE: We can provide that and that would include a cumulative impact.

MS. MACDONALD: I would like it segregated out - the idea of, if increases had continued at the previous rate versus the actual funding that was provided, okay? I'm sure the CFO understands the point that is being made.

The other thing you've made reference to is that the \$65 million will be restored. I'm wondering if you could give us some clarity over what period are we looking at restoration, and I use that quite loosely? Investing \$65 million in Education and Early Childhood Development budgets will go up by at least \$65 million over a four-year period?

MS. MCKENZIE: Over a four-year period.

MS. MACDONALD: Beginning in 2014 . . .

MS. MCKENZIE: 2014-2015.

MS. MACDONALD: So the year that we are currently. How much was the budget increased this year in Education and Early Childhood Development?

MR. CHAIRMAN: Ms. Eisenhauer.

MS. EISENHAUER: For 2014-15 it was \$17.5 million, I think it was.

MS. MACDONALD: Okay, thank you very much. (Interruption) That's right, my colleague has indicated that this really is pretty much the rate of inflation and I think that's

probably true. I think we can go back and look at the budgets of the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, over let's say a 10-year period. That's something I will certainly be doing.

One of the last questions I want to ask you is about the adequate oversight and monitoring by the elected governing boards. The Auditor General was quite critical, I would say, about the elected boards' oversight in this particular case. My question is, what is the capacity of these boards to actually do this? How much time would you estimate the elected board members are spending in their task?

MS. MCKENZIE: I think it would depend if they were committee leads. I know they do extended hours into the night, if they are discussing the school closures. I think it varies, depending on the item that is in front of the elected school board.

Do I think that elected school boards would have the time to carry out their oversight duties if they were well-supported and if it was clearly laid out for them and supported by the management staff? I believe that, and not only do we believe that, I believe they believe that.

MS. MACDONALD: Has the complexity of what it is that we are now asking elected boards to do grown to such an extent that it is becoming more and more difficult for those folks who often are parents who get involved in their local home and school, their local SAC, they develop a passion for seeing broader system reform and change and run and get elected, and then suddenly they're in a situation where they're the mediators between the community around school closures, the whole question of busing kids long distances. I have a great deal of empathy for these folks.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Order, sorry, the 14 minutes have elapsed. We'll move to the Liberal caucus and Ms. Lohnes-Croft.

MS. LOHNES-CROFT: Have any policy changes been made to the governance of the board at Tri-County since the Auditor General's Report?

MS. MCKENZIE: I think they're in the very beginning process of identifying what would be required to implement the action plan. Have specific policies changed? I can't speak to that, I can find that out for you but I believe they're in the beginning process of actually mapping out, understanding better what their roles and responsibilities are and how they would actually carry that governance out.

MS. LOHNES-CROFT: Okay, so moving forward, that is part of the action plan.

MS. MCKENZIE: It is.

MS. LOHNES-CROFT: There will be new policies that will come forward and then communication is important again, too, because I think in order for parents to feel good

about what their children are receiving in education, they need to know there are going to be changes and that they will be monitored. So that will be communicated when these new policies are put into effect, that parents will be notified of them?

MS. MCKENZIE: There are ongoing communications happening now from the superintendent, with the support of Dr. Gunn, and also from the chairman of the board to the community, out to the school advisory councils, to the community as a whole. They are doing their best to do that electronically, through meetings in a variety of different ways. So yes, that's absolutely a key objective.

MS. LOHNES-CROFT: Going back to what Mr. Maguire was saying, were parents vocal in how they felt their children were being educated, before the Auditor General came and did the research and the report?

MS. DOUCET: When you say vocal, do you mean groups of . . .

MS. LOHNES-CROFT: Were there indications from parents that they were unhappy with the services that their children were receiving?

MS. DOUCET: I think as with any board, we would get calls about individual students or parents who are not happy with something that has gone on at a school. They feel it hasn't been dealt with so they come to speak to us about that, but as a whole, not as a whole group to say that we're alarmed. There would always be questions around when assessment results came out and those types of things.

I think when we could say there are things happening at your child's school, then parents see that more as - and not to speak for parents, but I think when it is happening and taking place at your child's school, the whole board picture is not really a concern because they're looking at what's happening in their child's school and maybe even in that classroom, if that makes sense to your question.

MS. LOHNES-CROFT: And your principals meet on a monthly basis, I assume, you have monthly principals' meetings?

MS. DOUCET: Yes, we have monthly, or as in the case here, we had a special principals' meeting to spend the whole day looking at the Auditor General's Report because we thought it was very important for them to understand and to understand that there are things being done.

Not to speak for the Auditor General's Office or anyone else, but I understand that it's to point out so-called deficiencies or where improvements are needed but that shouldn't take away from the good things that are happening as well. I say that maybe because I'm an educator and that's what we look at, improvement, but we also look at the good things that are happening in order to help people improve or to move forward. We had that discussion with principals and then moved forward.

At each principals' meeting there will be - and we have had one already where we took one recommendation and went through that and brainstormed ways that we could help support them. They receive feedback from their staff before the meeting so we can all work on it as a team because that's the way we work in school boards. We wouldn't just go to principals and say, now you're going to do this - we want to have their input on how that's going to impact schools.

MS. LOHNES-CROFT: Were there any schools that seemed to do better than others in the Auditor General's Report, in the Tri-County area? Did some schools stand out more for achieving better, because sometimes it's an economic and social situation as well?

MS. DOUCET: That is the case and that's one of the things we're working with - we'll be working with Dr. Gunn and some staff from the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development around supporting those schools that need that extra support.

MS. LOHNES-CROFT: So having these monthly principals' meetings are going to be really crucial in sharing leadership and initiatives that are going on in the more successful schools.

MS. DOUCET: If I can add to that - and not so that schools and classroom teachers feel like now they're being targeted by us because there's a problem. It's about - let's have some conversations about how we can support you, understanding where you are in that classroom and what's happening and the dynamics of the classroom so we can better support what needs to be done to support our students.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Ms. Miller.

MS. MILLER: I'm back to IPPs again. I find it really interesting. When I went to school, certainly there were none and even when my children went there were none. I probably shouldn't even say that. I find this really interesting, the whole concept. The more I think about it, I think about the resources it takes to be able to have all these individual programs for different students, although I agree it's necessary.

What about the resources? Are these programs taking away from the other resources? Do you find that it's too difficult? I just made some notes here. Do they take more teachers' resources to be able to run these programs, and what about the cost? Does it mean that more teachers are being hired or are there less resources directed to the other students in the classroom?

MS. MCKENZIE: I'm going to let Lisa respond specifically to the classroom level and the allocation of resources. I can say that the Liberal Government has made an investment in additional resources - \$2 million this year - into ensuring that those resources are in place to support children who need that.

There is no question that with the wholehearted adoption of the inclusion model in our schools in Nova Scotia, it has changed the resources that are required. That has been funded through student assistance funding and through resources, and that's where we've seen the advent of the individualized program plans. I'll let Lisa speak to those supports, but there is a line of the budget and it has increased this year specifically for supports for children who need it.

MS. DOUCET: At the classroom level, I guess we'd be remiss to not say that it does add pressure to the classroom teacher, but the classroom teacher is not following the whole process on their own. They wouldn't be developing an IPP and not necessarily even implementing that on their own. They would have support from the resource teacher, maybe a speech-language pathologist, school psychologist, student services consultant, autism - any of those supports that we would have on a board would be part of that team that would help implement that individual program plan. So it may not all take place in the classroom. The guidance counsellor may have some support as well. So it's truly a team process to help support those children who would require that.

MS. MILLER: So I would expect that probably a lot of teachers are putting in a lot of after-hours time to be able to implement these programs too - into the management of these programs. That would probably be fair to say?

MS. DOUCET: There are, yes, and along with implementing the program there are review meetings, there's preparing lessons for children if you have a number of students on IPPs in your class. Yes, those are all individualized programs so it does add.

Through the NSTU there is an article that provides some substitute time to be able to have meetings; to release teachers to have meetings; to be able to discuss and work on developing with the program planning team. So I guess we do try to support the classroom teacher as much as possible so they're not on their own.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Are there any more questions from the Liberal caucus? I'll allow for concluding comments from the department now. Ms. McKenzie.

MS. MCKENZIE: I'd like to pass off my opportunity to make a concluding comment to my colleague, Lisa Doucet.

MS. DOUCET: I just want to thank you for the invitation to come here today, because as an educator and a lifelong learner, this was a new experience for me, so I appreciate that and I'm very pleased to have been here. I do want to say that I understand a lot of things have come to light around the Auditor General's Report and things that we do need to work on. But I just want to say that as the Tri-County Regional School Board we are very fortunate to have a very dedicated team of staff, parents, and support staff who work to help educate our students. I didn't want to leave without being able to make that comment.

Yes, things are challenging, we have work ahead of us, but I'm sure that as a team we can work together to work on the Auditor General's Report recommendations and to move forward as a board. Thank you.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Okay, I just wanted to review. There were a number of correspondence requests asked by committee members, I just want to make sure that we have it right. So from Mr. Wilson, you wanted empirical data on the bus time in the Tri-County region and then there were three aspects from Ms. MacDonald. The first one was historical operating budget in education and enrolment numbers dating back to approximately 2004 and the IPP enrolment data over the last five years. The third one was a detailed breakdown of the operating expenses in the Education budget, specifically where the \$65 million was allegedly cut over the last four years. Okay, so that will be provided for the committee.

That's all we have for today for that topic. The next thing will be an in camera briefing on the surgical wait-lists and operating room utilization.

[10:41 a.m. The committee recessed.]

[10:52 a.m. The committee reconvened.]

MR. CHAIRMAN: Order, please. We are not in camera yet, but we will be following the committee business, for the surgical wait-lists and operating room utilization.

We have two pieces of committee business. The first one would be discussion of the CCAF workshop. On Tuesday, February 3rd, the clerk circulated to you via email correspondence, via the chairman, regarding the offer from CCAF to hold the training session with our committee. It was asked that you consider this offer and provide feedback on your interests.

I will now open the floor for discussion. Do the members feel like they could take advantage of having more training? We had CCAF in here before. We had a training session which I thought was quite productive. Most of the members were here so this is just an ask for the committee to entertain thoughts of them coming back for another session. I'll open the floor for discussion - are there any comments from anybody?

This would go in our regular scheduling on a Wednesday. I think it's a good idea. Mr. Houston.

MR. HOUSTON: Yes, Mr. Chairman, I do agree, I think it's a good idea to get some training to make sure that we're relevant and up to date.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Okay, so I guess we'll correspond with the CCAF and see if we can get that in on the schedule. The schedule is open the last two weeks of April so we can do that - either that or in May.

The second piece of business would be a letter received from the PC caucus just yesterday, I believe. This pertains to calling in Kirby McVicar, the Chief of Staff for ministerial expenses. I'll open the floor. It came from Mr. Houston so comments from Mr. Houston.

MR. HOUSTON: Mr. Chairman, thank you very much. It's just a situation where it's the responsibility of this committee to look at how taxpayer monies are being spent, to provide maybe some oversight and ask some questions about how taxpayer money is being spent.

I don't think anyone questions that the ministers will always have to travel on behalf of the province and that some good things can come of that. That doesn't minimize the fact that there should be some processes in place for how that travel is approved and somebody should be evaluating those budgets.

The reason we have asked for Mr. McVicar to appear is because he is the Premier's Chief of Staff. In the most recent example where there has been some public concern, let's call it, over a minister's travel bill - in the case of Mr. Younger it's \$35,000 - we had conflicting stories about how that travel arose. Mr. Younger has stated that that's travel that he was asked to take by the Premier's Office. The Premier has publicly stated that he is not aware of why the minister would be taking that travel. That raises some concerns in my mind and if it's not a matter of concern to the Premier because it's not on his agenda of things he has to do, then it must be on the Chief of Staff's agenda.

We do know that in Mr. Younger's case a lot of his correspondence was with the Chief of Staff so in this case I think it's completely relevant for the people of Nova Scotia and particularly this committee to hear from Mr. McVicar on the processes in the Premier's Office about how potential trips are approved, how budgets are approved and how decisions are made. So I would like to bring Mr. McVicar before this Public Accounts Committee so we can ask him questions about how things operate and how taxpayer dollars are watched over.

MR. D'ENTREMONT: I think if this would have just been a newspaper article - but we saw on TV the Premier say, I didn't know about that travel. We had Mr. Younger saying these things were approved by the Premier's Office and not only just approved but some of them, I was asked to go on these trips by the Premier's Office, and then we had a Premier who said, I didn't know. So that's a breakdown of communications. Maybe the Premier isn't bothering himself with detail, but again, Mr. McVicar is the one who is supposed to be responsible for that detail as well. I think it's very relevant to have him in and talk about how ministerial travel is approved.

There is not only the travel issue. There are going to have to be Orders in Council or minute notes taken in council in order to change the acting ministers from one to another when a minister travels outside the province. So there is a whole process piece here that we should be finding out about and not just the money, so I think Mr. McVicar would be the appropriate person for that.

MS. MACDONALD: We support in principle this proposal. I think the thing that is really important is the whole question of accountability around ministerial travel. We have seen that one minister has racked up an unprecedented amount of travel in an eight-month period and I understand that today we're learning that this is not isolated to one minister, but in fact, there is significant and serious expenditure with a second member of the Cabinet now. So I think we do want to get some accountability into the process.

For me the question is, who is the appropriate person to call in front of the Public Accounts Committee? I need to really think more about this question of the Chief of Staff being the person, rather than the Deputy Minister to Executive Council. I say that only because it would be unprecedented to have a Chief of Staff appear here when we typically have deputy ministers or, in fact, on occasion, ministers have been brought in front of the Public Accounts Committee.

In principle, on the principle of accountability on expenditures where there seems to be a lack of accountability, I think as a member of this committee we have legitimate questions to ask about the kind of value for dollar that we're getting as a result of these exorbitant amounts of travel which are unprecedented, frankly, in my time here in this place.

I would support this request in that we have maybe some conversation about who is the most appropriate person to appear.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Mr. Farrell.

MR. TERRY FARRELL: Mr. Chairman, my submission is that I don't think it's the role of this committee to respond to every question that is raised in the media. That's not the test of what the business of this committee is. These types of expenses are disclosed fully; it's a very transparent process that occurs there. Anyone can engage in a line-by-line analysis of all of that minister's expenses, the expenses of any other minister, or the expenses of any other member of this House. That information is available to the public, to the media or to the Opposition.

There are no specific questions of appropriateness of any individual item being raised here. In my mind it's not really an issue and I don't see it as being a valuable use of the committee's resources.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Do we have a motion on the floor? What is the motion? Mr. Houston.

MR. HOUSTON: The motion I'd like to put on the floor is, I move that the Standing Committee on Public Accounts bring the Premier's Chief of Staff, Kirby McVicar, before the committee at its earliest convenience, to discuss the process involved in ministerial travel, both approval and oversight.

MR. CHAIRMAN: The motion is on the floor. Ms. MacDonald, some concluding comments.

MS. MACDONALD: I would like to propose that we amend the motion, adding in and/or the Deputy Minister of the Executive Council.

MR. CHAIRMAN: So do we go on the amendment first? The motion is that it is amended for the Deputy Minister of the Executive Council to appear before the Public Accounts Committee.

Would all those in favour of the motion please say Aye. Contrary minded, Nay.

The motion is defeated. (Interruption) Okay, so it's tied and then I'll vote and my vote is Nay.

The amendment is defeated. Do you want to put forward the original motion now?

MR. HOUSTON: Yes.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Okay. The original motion is that the Chief of Staff appear before the Public Accounts Committee.

Would all those in favour of the motion please say Aye. Contrary minded, Nay.

So it's a tie and my vote is Nay, so the motion is defeated.

We'll now go in camera for the in camera briefing on the surgical wait-lists and operating room utilization.

[The committee adjourned at 11:03 a.m.]