

First Session - Fortieth Legislature
of the
Legislative Assembly of Manitoba
Standing Committee
on
Public Accounts

Chairperson
Mr. Larry Maguire
Constituency of Arthur-Virden

Vol. LXIV No. 8 - 6:30 p.m., Tuesday, June 19, 2012

MANITOBA LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
Fortieth Legislature

Member	Constituency	Political Affiliation
ALLAN, Nancy, Hon.	St. Vital	NDP
ALLUM, James	Fort Garry-Riverview	NDP
ALTEMEYER, Rob	Wolseley	NDP
ASHTON, Steve, Hon.	Thompson	NDP
BJORNSON, Peter, Hon.	Gimli	NDP
BLADY, Sharon	Kirkfield Park	NDP
BRAUN, Erna	Rossmere	NDP
BRIESE, Stuart	Agassiz	PC
CALDWELL, Drew	Brandon East	NDP
CHIEF, Kevin, Hon.	Point Douglas	NDP
CHOMIAK, Dave, Hon.	Kildonan	NDP
CROTHERS, Deanne	St. James	NDP
CULLEN, Cliff	Spruce Woods	PC
DEWAR, Gregory	Selkirk	NDP
DRIEDGER, Myrna	Charleswood	PC
EICHLER, Ralph	Lakeside	PC
EWASKO, Wayne	Lac du Bonnet	PC
FRIESEN, Cameron	Morden-Winkler	PC
GAUDREAU, Dave	St. Norbert	NDP
GERRARD, Jon, Hon.	River Heights	Liberal
GOERTZEN, Kelvin	Steinbach	PC
GRAYDON, Cliff	Emerson	PC
HELWER, Reg	Brandon West	PC
HOWARD, Jennifer, Hon.	Fort Rouge	NDP
IRVIN-ROSS, Kerri, Hon.	Fort Richmond	NDP
JHA, Bidhu	Radisson	NDP
KOSTYSHYN, Ron, Hon.	Swan River	NDP
LEMIEUX, Ron, Hon.	Dawson Trail	NDP
MACKINTOSH, Gord, Hon.	St. Johns	NDP
MAGUIRE, Larry	Arthur-Virden	PC
MALOWAY, Jim	Elmwood	NDP
MARCELINO, Flor, Hon.	Logan	NDP
MARCELINO, Ted	Tyndall Park	NDP
McFADYEN, Hugh	Fort Whyte	PC
MELNICK, Christine, Hon.	Riel	NDP
MITCHELSON, Bonnie	River East	PC
NEVAKSHONOFF, Tom	Interlake	NDP
OSWALD, Theresa, Hon.	Seine River	NDP
PEDERSEN, Blaine	Midland	PC
PETTERSEN, Clarence	Flin Flon	NDP
REID, Daryl, Hon.	Transcona	NDP
ROBINSON, Eric, Hon.	Kewatinook	NDP
RONDEAU, Jim, Hon.	Assiniboia	NDP
ROWAT, Leanne	Riding Mountain	PC
SARAN, Mohinder	The Maples	NDP
SCHULER, Ron	St. Paul	PC
SELBY, Erin, Hon.	Southdale	NDP
SELINGER, Greg, Hon.	St. Boniface	NDP
SMOOK, Dennis	La Verendrye	PC
STEFANSON, Heather	Tuxedo	PC
STRUTHERS, Stan, Hon.	Dauphin	NDP
SWAN, Andrew, Hon.	Minto	NDP
TAILLIEU, Mavis	Morris	PC
WHITEHEAD, Frank	The Pas	NDP
WIEBE, Matt	Concordia	NDP
WIGHT, Melanie	Burrows	NDP
WISHART, Ian	Portage la Prairie	PC

**LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF MANITOBA
THE STANDING COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC ACCOUNTS**

Tuesday, June 19, 2012

TIME – 6:30 p.m.

LOCATION – Winnipeg, Manitoba

CHAIRPERSON – Mr. Larry Maguire (Arthur-Virden)

VICE-CHAIRPERSON – Mr. Gregory Dewar (Selkirk)

ATTENDANCE – 10 QUORUM – 6

Members of the Committee present:

Hon. Mr. Gerrard, Hon. Mr. Struthers

Mr. Allum, Ms. Braun, Messrs. Dewar, Helwer, Jha, Maguire, Pedersen, Whitehead

APPEARING:

Mr. Cameron Friesen, MLA for Morden-Winkler

Ms. Carol Bellringer, Auditor General

WITNESSES:

Hon. Nancy Allan, Minister of Education

Mr. Gerald Farthing, Deputy Minister of Education

MATTERS UNDER CONSIDERATION:

Auditor General's Report—Annual Report to the Legislature, dated January 2012

*Chapter 6 – Special Needs Education:
Department of Education*

* * *

Mr. Chairperson: Okay, good evening. Will the Standing Committee on Public Accounts, please come to order. *[interjection]* No—yes, it will.

This meeting has been called to consider the Auditor General's Report—Annual Report to the Legislature, dated January 2012, Chapter 6—Special Needs Education: Department of Education.

Are there any suggestions from the committee as to how long we should sit this evening?

Ms. Erna Braun (Rossmere): Mr. Chair, I would suggest 8:30 or before, and if we're not done by 8:30, to review the time then.

Mr. Chairperson: It's been suggested that we review at 8:30, if we haven't finished the committee by then. What's the wish of the committee? *[Agreed]*

And so I just want to welcome Minister Allan and, if you could ask your deputy to come forward, we could—welcome again, Mr. Farthing. So we'll begin our meeting with the—while we had some introductions before, and so I think it's unnecessary with Minister Allan and Deputy Minister Farthing, are there other—yes, maybe I could get the minister to—I can understand why she'd want to sit beside the guy from Dauphin, but maybe I could ask her to help her deputy minister, if you wish to.

Hon. Nancy Allan (Minister of Education): Yes, ooh, I'm so pleased to introduce to you this evening Gerald Farthing, who is the deputy minister in the Department of Education, and we'd also like to invite Aileen Najduch to come and sit at the table, and Aileen—highly regarded in my department. You can thank her for the new report card because she did an incredible job working with our oversight committee in regards to our department, and works with our Student Services branch, and we also have with us this evening Joanna Blais, and I would just like to ask if it's okay if Joanna sits at the table as well.

Thank you, thank you. That's terrific.

Mr. Chairperson: Yes, that's fine then. Thank you very much for those introductions, and I would ask the Auditor General, before we proceed, to have her introductions as well of persons that are with her before we ask for her opening comments.

Ms. Carol Bellringer (Auditor General): Tonight, Sandra Cohen is here, the assistant auditor general of Value-for-Money Audit Services; and she's joined by Vernon DePape, who's an audit principal in the Value-for-Money Audit Services area as well, and they're both responsible for this audit.

Mr. Chairperson: Welcome, everyone. And so we'll begin our evening meeting here, Public Accounts Committee meeting, with an opening statement from the Auditor General.

Ms. Bellringer: We had—do you have to name me, or are we past that?

Mr. Chairperson: Well, I—Ms. Bellringer.

Ms. Bellringer: We had three objectives in conducting this audit: first, to assess the systems and practices supporting the quality of special needs education; second, to look at processes for funding special needs education; and, third, to examine the measurement and reporting of related performance information.

In looking at quality, we found that Education had developed regulation standards and guidelines that clearly outlined its expectations for the delivery of special needs education, but it was not monitoring for compliance. Our audit found a low level of school division compliance with certain key standards, underlying the need for better monitoring. It also found that Education needed to help the school divisions improve the quality of the individual education plans required for all students receiving special needs funding and further clarify allowed paraprofessional duties.

We found that Education ensured and supported teachers' special education knowledge through its teacher certification process and professional development offerings, but had not set any certification requirements for educational assistants who often work closely with students with special needs. Education was working with stakeholders to try to reduce clinicians such as psychologist and speech language pathologist shortages in school divisions. However, there—they had no wait-list information.

Education offered consulting services to school divisions and schools on both general and student-specific special education matters, but needed to complete and co-ordinate development of its life skills learning resources. It also had a limited inventory of assistive technology equipment and software to lend to rural and northern school divisions on a short-term basis, but needed to explore the potential cost savings and other benefits of purchasing assistive technology for school divisions centrally.

In looking at funding, we found that Education had limited processes to verify the information on funding applications received from the school divisions, and its documentation often did not adequately explain its funding decisions. It also did not make the detailed eligibility criteria for funding available to the school divisions or parents. As well, significant funding amounts could be approved for a child's entire school life without any second review.

In looking at performance information, we found room to enhance the existing financial and operational information and analysis, and finally, Education was not monitoring or publicly reporting the outcomes being achieved for students with special needs, although one of its objectives was to maximize the outcomes. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Chairperson: Thank you for your statement, and I would request the deputy minister if he has an opening comment.

Mr. Gerald Farthing (Deputy Minister of Education): Mr. Chair, I would like to begin by thanking the committee for their invitation to provide an opening statement on the Department of Education's work related to special needs programing and funding in our schools, and on the recommendations that have been provided by the office of the Auditor General.

The progress towards more 'inclsive'—inclusive schools in our communities continues, and while we can be very proud of what we've accomplished in the last decade and more, there is still, of course, much more work to do. The auditor—the auditor's report outlines many challenges, some of which you just heard about and, thankfully, provides some recommendations on how to address some of those challenges and how to make changes in the interests of continuous improvement, and we are always interested in continually trying to improve the way in which we and our partners, and our partners and us together, serve the students in this province. For this reason, we welcome the Auditor General's work and the report and the recommendations.

As I was indicating, Manitoba Education is very familiar with the process of continuous planning and improvement, and it is therefore important that we have this valuable advice provided by the OAG. We view it as constructive feedback, and we look forward to using it in our future work as we move forward. I have no difficulty in assuring you that the areas identified by the OAG are priorities for Manitoba Education and that we've already made many significant changes, and we will continue to make changes to our practices and to our policies in response to the recommendations in the report.

* (18:40)

It is important to note that the Province—or, pardon me—the department works 'collaborately' with school divisions in schools to ensure compliance with both the regulations and the standards that

we've established for the service that we and our partners together provide to students. As I indicated earlier, there is—and as the Auditor General has pointed out, as the recommendations make clear, there is still much more work to do.

The role of the department in the educational programming for students with special needs, though, is not only to ensure compliance, but also to work with schools, families and service providers to build local capacity to ensure that we're meeting the needs of all the learners in our schools.

As I noted earlier, much has been accomplished already with regard to the enhancement of accountability for special needs funding, including revisions to the review and reporting process. This process was just beginning when the audit was conducted. On a three-year cycle, Manitoba Education staff meet with school divisions to review files and policy, as well as to stock specifically about programming for students with special needs in our schools.

I want to indicate how important this is. There are many ways to engage people to ensure that standards are being met; that policies and procedures and practices are in place; that we're working together collaboratively. You can do that through reports, you can do that by reporting, and so on. But one of the most effective ways is to meet and talk, because in that way you can have in-depth discussions and gain a deep understanding of what it is that you're trying to do and others are trying to do and how well they're accomplishing it. When you do that, you figure out how you can work together.

So, a number of years ago—I think about six or so—five or six—we decided that we would be meeting with school divisions on a regular basis. Because we don't have unlimited resources, we can't meet with every school division every year, but we make sure we meet with every school division at least once a year. And with those school divisions that we need to meet more oft—if we need to meet more often with school divisions, we do so, but we meet with each one at least once a year to have these face-to-face, in-depth discussions.

In addition, the department consults with school divisions on a daily basis to support their work on appropriate educational programming. Very specific things, such as a writing of IEPs, appropriate education—appropriate programming for students with specific diagnoses and the provision of assisted technologies, but to name a few.

We have, therefore, taken the office of the Auditor General's recommendations to heart as being very good advice. We accept the recommendations and we appreciate the constructive feedback that they provide, and have already started to work towards many of the implementation of many of the recommendations. We will work on the recommendations diligently and they will be completed as quickly and as soon as possible.

So, in closing, I would like to thank committee again for the opportunity to be here tonight, and I want to congratulate the OAG on their good work and thank them for the very useful advice and feedback that they have provided. I'm sure that as we go through the process of implementing the recommendations, we will see improvement in what we're doing, and that can only be good for education in this province and only good for the kids that—only be good for the kids that live in our community—the community we call Manitoba.

Thank you very much.

Mr. Chairperson: Thank you as well, Mr. Farthing.

And before we get into questions, I usually—I do my little reminder here to members that questions are of an administrative nature to be asked of the deputy minister, and that policy questions are not be entertained this evening and are better left for other forums and that the—but if there is a question that borders on policy and the minister would like to answer that question, or the deputy wants to defer to the minister to respond to it, that's something we would consider.

So with that, I would open the floor to questions.

Mr. Cameron Friesen (Morden-Winkler): Thank you, and good evening to all of you. I want to begin my—this evening, by thanking the Auditor General and her team for being here this evening, for preparing this report for our consideration. I also want to thank the deputy minister for appearing, and his staffers as well.

And my question for the deputy minister, to begin, is coming from recommendation 1 by the Auditor General, where the Auditor General recommends that improvements be made to the organization of the website information to make it more user-friendly for parents of students with special needs. And I wonder if the deputy minister can indicate what improvements have been made with respect to the organization of the website.

Mr. Farthing: We are currently working with what we call media production services to improve the accessibility of the website to make it more user-friendly. To increase accessibility for persons with disabilities, the website has information that can be enlarged or that can be transferred from print to voice for people who have the appropriate software. We follow the Manitoba policy on access to government in planning all our information sessions, and we actively participate on this.

A major overhaul of the website is in draft form and will be posted in the fall of this year. This will include enhanced information on a variety of topics in student services programming, access to downloading workshops, announcing events, et cetera. Buttons will be used to allow for quick access to frequently sought information for parents. The rubric used, or the—I should say, the form used, for level 2 and 3 funding, as well as a comprehensive explanation of both the funding process and the way that schools must provide appropriate programming for all students regardless of whether or not they receive level 2 funding, will be added.

I have to—we are always talking to the people, trying to get information and feedback from people, who use our website to see how it can be made more useful, how we can put information up that is as clear as possible, that is easily understandable, that is accessible to those who have difficulty reading what would be normal for the rest of us.

Mr. Friesen: Could the deputy minister also indicate, then, and I appreciate his answer with respect to the changes that are going to be made and put into place to make the website more user-friendly and also more accessible, as he mentioned, what were the changes that were already undertaken with respect to the website? I understand that there were—that the website was reviewed last spring, 2011. What preliminary changes were made already that we would see now on the website?

Mr. Chairperson: [*interjection*] Yes, Mr. Farthing.

Mr. Farthing: Sorry, forgetting.

New postings of all information have been scrutinized for parent accessibility, including information on student services' forum, the parent handbook on consultant services for blind and visually impaired students, and a question-and-answer section for the formal and informal dispute resolution process that parents can access when they

are in disagreement with the programming that school is providing.

In addition, the content has already been organized in a different way, all in the interests of trying to make the information there, as I said earlier, as user-friendly as possible to everyone. And that's where the accessibility challenge comes into play, because, as we all know, we all can't read the same thing and some of us need some assistance. And so, we're trying to provide that.

Mr. Friesen: To the deputy minister again, I can assure you, I also had some trouble using the website. I tried recently to go and find the Handbook for Parents of Children with Special Needs in School. I just wanted to ask the deputy minister: Is that still the main support document for parents with children with special needs? Is it the Handbook for Parents of Children with Special Needs in School?

Mr. Farthing: It's not the only document, but it is one of the main documents. And I—it is unfortunate that you had difficulty finding it; it should be easy to find. I experience that, too, sometimes on websites. Some things that you think should pop up right away, or there should be a button that's obvious, it's not. We'll check that. It should be right there easy to find.

Mr. Friesen: Thank you to the deputy minister. Yes, I was able to find it, but only when I actually typed that term in word for word, and then I could find the document online. I think if the parent lacked the name of the document, it might be difficult to find. For now, I do appreciate the information that there will eventually be a set of links there, some buttons that would provide ease of access to parents.

Wanted to know, also, with respect to the Handbook for Parents of Children with Special Needs in School, how often is that handbook for parents updated?

Mr. Farthing: No, we'll check and make sure that that handbook is very easy to find, that you don't have to have the exact wording of it, of the title, in order to be able to find it. That shouldn't be the case when it is one of the main support documents for parents. So we'll fix that.

* (18:50)

The handbook is not updated regularly; it's updated on an as-needed basis. The information that's in it now we think is pretty current and valuable. We will be revising it in the future; we're

not sure when. It depends on the kind of feedback we get on how useful that information is and how up to date it remains. So, right now, we think it's pretty useful, pretty current.

Mr. Friesen: And just to clarify, to the deputy minister, is that handbook, then, also available at each school for parents? Is it something that they are given? It's available to them through the Student Services or through the classroom teacher?

Mr. Farthing: Yes, it is.

Mr. Friesen: To the deputy minister, with respect to recommendation No. 2 by the Auditor General, the Auditor General recommends that Education consult more regularly with EAs or representatives of educational assistants when developing or updating standards, guidelines or support documents that could affect EA delivery of services to students with special needs.

I wonder if the deputy minister could indicate, just to begin with, first of all, how many educational assistants are there throughout the province at this time?

Mr. Farthing: We don't have a count—an exact count of the number of EAs in the province because they're reported with other employees in the FRAME report. And so, right now, there are 6,825 full-time equivalent staff in what's called instructional other. Most of those are EAs, but we don't know exactly how many are. That's something that we're going to be looking at, as to whether or not we should be counting—asking divisions to report on EAs separately from everyone else.

Mr. Friesen: To the deputy minister, does the department see the merit in breaking down that number to account for, specifically, those employees listed currently under other specific to determine who are EAs? And would the deputy minister as well—would there—would he believe that there would also be merit into breaking down that number further to figure out EAs by region or by, you know, in the city or rural or northern?

Mr. Farthing: Yes, I think there is a reason for looking into reporting on EAs separately from everyone else. If that's done in the normal course of things through the FRAME report, it would get reported by school division and then we could slice and dice that information on a regional basis or many—you know, in many different ways because it will already be reported on a school division basis.

We have something called a FRAME committee that's been in existence for a long, long time. It does very good work. This will be a topic of discussion there.

It's always—there's always a tension between—you know, we all want more information, but we want that information not to be overwhelming. We want it to be meaningful, and we don't want the gathering of that information to take resources away from what otherwise—which otherwise could be used for a direct service to kids—provision of direct service to kids. So we don't collect everything that one could possibly think of collecting, but I do think that collecting information about EAs, the number in our school divisions, and reporting on that separately would be a piece of information that it would be useful for all of us to have.

Mr. Friesen: With respect specifically to recommendation No. 2, I see that the Auditor General's recommendation was that Education consult more regularly, and I see here that the department response is that they would consult as appropriate. Would the deputy minister indicate how regularly is appropriate?

Mr. Farthing: Well, appropriate is, you know, it's a judgment call. It's about consulting when you're dealing with issues that impact someone and so you should consult with them, or they have a particular interest or a point of view that is of value, and then once you consult with them.

And so appropriate—you know, appropriate could mean regularly. On the other hand, it might not if what you're basically doing is wasting your time and other people's time. So if it's irregular, then it becomes a matter of judgment and it depends on the issue in play or the concern that's being dealt with or the decision that might have to be made.

So with some people, some partners, we consult with them on a regular basis because we're talking about things that they have an interest with, or we need their opinion about, or we need to work with them on. With other things, it's on an irregular basis. It's on an as-needed basis, which could mean the same thing as appropriate.

Mr. Friesen: Could the deputy minister please indicate what's the current level of consultation with representatives of EAs?

Mr. Chairperson: [*interjection*] Mr. Farthing.

Mr. Farthing: Oh, sorry.

It's irregular. There is not regular consultation with EAs like there are with some of our other partners. That could change actually in the near future as we anticipate having more discussions with EAs and with our other partners about the role of EAs in our schools. And when, you know, if and when that happens, and I think it's very likely to happen, we'll be talking more with EAs than we have been in the past.

Mr. Friesen: So, not to be redundant, but then on what basis would the department determine when it would be appropriate and when it would not to consult with EAs. I'm asking because the Auditor General's recommendations seem to suggest that education assistant representatives were not being consulted regularly enough at the present time when it came to decisions that would affect their delivery of services to students with special needs.

So on what basis then is the decision made to or not to consult with them when you're already consulting with other educational stakeholders?

Mr. Farthing: Well, we know what the auditor—or we have been thinking about and talking about the point of view expressed by the Auditor General and thinking about the recommendations with regard to this. EAs are consulted when we're talking about things that directly affect the work they do. They are not, you know, if they want to consult with us or speak with us about various issues, we're always open to that.

We don't talk directly and only with EAs on a regular basis. As I said earlier though, that may change in the new future—near future. We may be having more discussions with them about their work. But we're going to be having discussions with others who work in schools about the work that EAs do, because people in schools and in school divisions, in fact, in education generally need to work in partnership. And they need to find ways to work together in a way that works best for kids.

So the—I think the observation by the Auditor is a good one, in terms of causing us to give some thought to whether or not we have been, in the past, talking with EAs enough. Have we been doing it on a regular enough basis? Have we been doing it as appropriate and as we should be when we're engaged with certain issues? And so we're going to be giving the observations of the Auditor General and their recommendations regarding this a lot of thought.

Mr. Chairperson: Mr. Friesen. Oh, sorry.

Mr. Farthing: I'm pretty sure it's going to have an impact on how we do our work in the future.

Mr. Friesen: I want to skip ahead to recommendation No. 5. The Auditor General made note of the fact or the recommendation that further clarification be given to what paraprofessional duties include and to communicate that to school divisions and stakeholders.

What are the responsibilities for educational assistants and how are those responsibilities communicated to parents in school divisions?

Mr. Farthing: I think the first point to make with regard to this is to be very clear what is not the responsibility of EAs and, in fact, is very clearly and in legislation, as it should be, the responsibility of teachers. Teachers are in—children are in the care of teachers when they're in schools, and teachers are in charge of classrooms. That's the beginning point.

* (19:00)

From there it needs to be worked out almost on a—you know, it needs to be worked out in general terms, and then it—those general terms need to be defined and specified for local circumstances as to what role the EA should play in the classroom, given that the teacher—the kids are in the care of the teacher and the teacher is in charge of the classroom and it's a teacher's responsibility for the implementation of the—and the teaching of the curriculum.

So we did some work a number of years ago that resulted in a document called Educational Assistants in Manitoba Schools, which lays out, to some extent, what should be the roles and responsibility of EAs. We think more work could be done to expand on that. We've recently started discussions with some of our partners about—and it's very early days or very early discussions—about building on some of that work. And we think that all of us need to have a fuller, clearer, more comprehensive understanding and a shared understanding of what the roles and responsibilities should be, of EAs in our classrooms.

That would be good not only for the EAs, but it would also be good for the other adults in the classroom that they work with, namely the teachers. And, of course, if that happens, it'll be better for the kids, too.

Mr. Friesen: Thank you to the deputy minister.

I agree that there seems to be a—some lack of clarity about the role of EAs, even in reading the Auditor General report, specifically on page 263, where, in their interviews with educational assistants, some told the Auditor General's office that they were, in their view, teaching students, and there seemed to be a lack of consensus over whether they were supporting the efforts of the educational direction of the student or whether they were delivering them vis-à-vis teaching.

And I just want to ask the deputy minister, then, how would we arrive at a fuller, clearer understanding that you referred to, as to the role of the educational assistant in the classroom?

Mr. Farthing: Well, I think there's, just in—there are three things, really. One is, is that we have to be very clear from the start, as I said earlier, what is—about what is not the role and responsibility of EAs. And then that's not normally how we do these things, but in this case I think that is the starting point.

The second thing is then we need to enter into some kind of long and comprehensive discussion, a fulsome discussion with EAs and teachers and school administrators and school division administrators and parents about what should be the role, responsibilities and expectations of EAs in the classroom. And that needs to be a long, a reasonably long or long enough and deep enough discussion so that we all gain some amount of shared understanding. And then we need to write that up.

We need to write that up into some kind of document that is written in plain language, that can be understood by everyone, whether they work in education or not. And that's the challenge: to write things so that people who don't do this or aren't working in this area every day can understand it, and then that information needs to be disseminated.

But there's no point in writing up a document like that unless you've had the discussion beforehand. That document can only work and have an impact, be useful as a guide, if there has been some kind of conversation or discussion, a good one, prior to that. My experience in education is, is that when we get into those kinds of discussions, we find out that we share more things than we thought we might have and the solutions to things—well, not always, but quite often—are easier to find than we thought they would be. And I think this'll be one of those instances.

Mr. Friesen: Yes, I guess the—I appreciate that explanation. I just—I want to draw attention to something that I notice that seems to be a lack of continuity, though, between what the deputy minister refers to in terms of just the need to bring clarity to this, and I believe that's indeed the case, to draw people into a conversation and to agree on roles and to agree on function. I notice, though, that in the Auditor General's report on this that educational officials told the Auditor General's office that there was, of course, some confusion arising from terms like "teaching" or "directing learning experiences," but they felt that it would be necessary that the system would have to tolerate some ambiguity.

What I hear the deputy minister say today, that perhaps clarity is preferable to ambiguity in this case, can you just comment on this for us?

Mr. Farthing: Not quite sure how to comment except, perhaps, maybe a little bit philosophically, and that is to say that in all aspects of our lives, private and professional, there's always going to be some amount, at least for most of us, of ambiguity, and we all have to learn to live with that. Having said that, what we should be striving for is as much clarity as possible, but we shouldn't have—we shouldn't set the goal for ourselves, you know, and the impossible goal of 100 per cent clarity. We should be striving for as much clarity as possible. In that way we're going to end up with exactly that and in a reasonable place where most reasonable people can coexist.

I think the goal has to be as much clarity as possible. I don't think there is as much clarity now as there could be. That doesn't mean that there's going to be 100 per cent clarity if we go through the process I talked about, but I'm pretty sure, pretty confident, that there'll be more clarity there than there is now. And we're going to maximize the amount of clarity that there can be. That's why I talked about having a long conversation and that's why I talked about whatever gets written up based on that conversation is in plain language.

So if you have understanding, shared understanding, and everybody using the same language and as plain language as possible, and where it—where we do have to use terminology, you define the terminology, you have a glossary or something like that, some simple mechanism like that to define the glossary. I think then we're going to be close to maximizing the amount of clarity that can be achieved. Then we're only limited by our—by the

limitations of language and by our own personal limitations.

Mr. Friesen: I thank the deputy minister for that philosophical response.

I wanted to ask, then, I guess the next question logically would be, where are we in this process? Is it something that the department's already undertaken to begin in terms of—I think what the deputy minister is talking about is developing like a guidebook or a handbook that educational assistants and other stakeholders in the system could refer to to say that's—that would clearly indicate the role in which the EA would serve. Have we initiated conversations like that at this point? Is there a timeline that the deputy minister could point to in terms of wanting to accomplish this and would there be at the end a date by which he would like to have this process completed?

Mr. Farthing: We went through this, something like I'm talking about, not nearly as comprehensive as I hope the next time will be, a couple of years ago. I guess it was in 2008-2009. What we want to do and we've just begun talking to some of our partners about this, not all of them, and it's just in the very, very initial discussions about resurrecting that conversation, but only doing it this time in a much more collaborative, co-operative way and in a much more intense way and agreeing to have a fuller and better outcome. So we haven't yet set timelines. We're only talking about doing this about, you know, agreeing to do this and then we'll start talking about exactly how we're going to do it.

Just to speculate, which is always a little risky, I would hope that we would have the conversation under way sometime in the early fall and that it would be wrapped up by the end of the next school year.

Mr. Friesen: Turning to recommendation No. 9 of the Auditor General, the Auditor General makes the recommendation that Education provide learning opportunities specifically for educational assistants in its PD calendar. Would the deputy minister indicate whether that has been undertaken and whether there's been specific learning opportunities made available for EAs?

Mr. Farthing: No, we are not doing that at the moment. That will though, of course, be part of that conversation I'm talking about.

Mr. Friesen: Could the deputy minister indicate how quickly he'll be turning his attention to this and

whether there be a timeline that he would indicate by which he would like to see opportunities for educational assistants at the normal PD intervals?

* (19:10)

Mr. Farthing: Difficult for me to do that at this time because right now we're not doing that, as I indicated earlier. Learning opportunities for EAs at the present time are established by the division. They happen at the divisional level. The department doesn't do that. Whether or not the department decides to do that is going to depend on what comes out of these conversations. We are going to give it serious consideration, but we're not going to make any decisions until we've had a serious conversation with EAs and others about whether or not we should be doing that.

Mr. Friesen: Recommendation 10 of the AG report finds that—or recommends, rather, that the department assess benefits and impediments to providing non-mandatory certification of educational assistants, and I know that a lot of the things that we've been discussing to date just in this committee have to do with the extent to which, you know, there are different ways by which an individual can get to an EA position, and there are different—there are different courses that are offered, some that are less long, some that are more extensive in terms of the time that's needed to be able to gain some kind of a certification in this area. There is a—in other cases, the—that is left to the discretion of the school division, and I wonder if the deputy minister could—would comment on this particular recommendation, and indicate whether there's been any activity in terms of starting to discuss whether or not it would be a good idea to move towards certification.

Mr. Farthing: There has been some thinking about that. There has been some internal discussion about that. We haven't had a good and proper discussion with our partners about this issue. We will, of course, be doing that as part of the process I outlined earlier.

There are three parts to this, I think. One is what is the—what kind of training should EAs have. Second is whether or not that training should be—and if it should be, how should it be certified, and the third part of the issue is whether or not it should be a requirement mandated by the department or something that employers might look for when they're hiring EAs.

We'll be talking about all those dimensions as part of that conversation. It's my view that everyone

who is in our schools, regardless of the position they have, whether they're in the classroom or not in the classroom, whether they're an educator or not an educator, no matter what they're doing in the school—in our schools, they need to be as trained and as equipped as they possibly can be. That doesn't necessarily mean that we credential everyone. It certainly doesn't mean that we mandate certification for everyone. It has to be the right mix and balance. Obviously, we want every teacher in our school to be certified, and that's not optional and it shouldn't be optional.

With regard to administrators, for example, we think that school administrators should be trained, should have opportunity or access to training that one would consider to be necessary or important to be a good administrator. It's a whole 'nuther' matter as to whether or not we should credentialize that or someone else should do that. And then, again, it's a whole 'nuther' matter as to whether or not it should be required or only encouraged.

Same thing with EAs, same questions, and so we're going to be exploring those questions because what we want to get here is the right balance, and what we also have to remember is that when we're discussing all of these things, we are talking about how this works, you know, in the province of Manitoba, but we know it's not the same across the province. The needs in northern Manitoba and rural Manitoba and our cities are different, and the extent to which they can attract the employees that they need, that the system needs, is different. And we have to be very, very mindful of that when we're talking about certification and mandating.

Mr. Chairperson: Mr. Jha has been patiently waiting, so I'll have him ask a question.

Mr. Bidhu Jha (Radisson): I'd just—I'd like to really go back to all these things which we are doing as to have a performance, information and reporting system, which is on page number 280. If I'm looking at recommendation No. 18—sorry, I should have repeat, you know, for this—recommendation No. 18 to say: We recommend that Education work with school divisions to develop methods of monitoring the outcomes being achieved for students with special needs.

In this regard, a couple of questions. First is: are there any plans to collect additional information, such as what is collected by other Provinces, as indicated on page 282 of the Auditor General's report?

Mr. Farthing: Yes, there are. We have been working with some partners to develop a template that can be used to collect additional information with regard to this, with regard to outcomes being achieved by students with special needs.

What we have to be careful here about though is who are we—who we are collecting this information for and how it will be reported. Every child is different, particularly with regard to children who are—who have special needs. And so we should be talking a lot about the reporting of the achievement—on the achievement of specific students to their parents, to the students and to their parents. We should be talking a lot about that, and we could be doing more in that regard. We are working on being able to do more. We are planning on being able to do more.

It becomes very much more challenging, and we've got to be very careful if we're going to start talking about reporting on outcomes on a system-wide basis because it's kind of contradictory. If special needs kids have a lot of very, you know, pretty unique needs and the outcomes in their IEPs, their individualized education plans, are unique to them, how do you bring that all together into one or into a category and report it in any way that makes sense on a provincial basis or even a school or school division basis?

So we think that we could do more with respect to reporting on outcomes for students with special needs. But we have to be careful about we do it, or we could spend a lot of time trying to do something that's really not possible, you know, and worse than that even, end up not only talking about it but trying to do it, getting an unsatisfactory outcome, meanwhile diverting a lot of resources away from where they could be better used.

I, actually, when I was in the Schools Finance Branch, now turning out to be a long time ago, 15 years, held many discussions with superintendents and secretary-treasurers on how to do this at a system-wide level. And we finally figured—determined that really it was going to cost more than we were going to get. But having said that, I want to go back to my original point that shouldn't blind us to the fact that we can do better reporting on the outcomes of individual students.

Mr. Chairperson: Before Mr. Jha moves forward, I would just like to add to the deputy minister, that 15 years is only a long time if you're 16.

Mr. Jha: One more question. I really appreciate your answer. The reason I asked you this question is particularly in the context of new Canadians who come from a different cultural background and some of the things that they don't express. And I know, I have a family member who's a teacher in Ontario. And she tells me about the special needs children, how the outcomes are at times very difficult, as you said, to report because the cultural background is so difficult to say.

So I was encouraged with your answer. But I just wanted to assure that what is said here is that we have something going on in that field.

Mr. Farthing: We do, and if the emphasis—I believe if the emphasis is where I've indicated it—I think it should be, we will be able to address the needs of all our students, including new Canadians. And we will be able to not only address the needs, but address—provide what they need but to report on the outcome of doing that.

Ms. Braun: Mr. Speaker, just a question regarding the shortage of clinicians. And on page 272 there's a plan in place to try to alleviate that. Can you give us an indication how it's going and whether or not we're seeing an improvement in the number of clinicians available to school divisions?

Mr. Farthing: Yes, there is particularly, of course, or as you would know in rural Manitoba and it becomes more acute the further you are from major urban centres, Brandon and Winnipeg, and even more especially in the north. There are a shortage of specialists, a shortage of clinicians, and it's harder for school divisions in those areas to attract people and once—and to have them stay.

* (19:20)

We've tried to do—address that in a couple of ways. A number of years ago we were instrumental in getting the school psychology program reinstated at the University of Manitoba. We worked very hard to do that. It wasn't easy, but that has happened, and so that's been helpful.

More recently, what we have done is we've instituted a bursary program, and that is having some significant impact whereby those who are already in the school divisions can access some bursary money and go and get further training. And what's happening is, is that there are some people in northern and rural Manitoba who are doing that and, of course, they get that training and they go back and work where they live and—or stay where they are

working and are living—in fact, that's the point—and that's having some impact.

The other thing we're doing—and this doesn't—and this is, of course, a stopgap measure—but in instances where there is a dire need for a clinician to be in a school to address a—some serious situation, we will send one of our staff to do that. Now that doesn't address the problem you're talking about, which is school divisions being able to find, attract and retain clinicians on a permanent basis. But I do want you to know that we are very sensitive to this issue, and so we're taking a longer term view of it; the two things I mentioned earlier, particularly the second thing. But we're also mindful that when—as we're waiting for those things to have ever more impact and address the longer term issue, we are doing—taking the stopgap or short-term measures to help as much as we can.

Ms. Braun: Actually, I can say that the bursary system is working, because I know a friend of mine—their daughter has been hired through that program from—I think it's Fargo that has the program, and is very happy to be back in Manitoba working in the north. So, it is successful, and hopefully it will carry on and you'll have more folks doing that.

I have one more question, and that's looking at the graph that—or not graph, but the schematic that you have on 273. Your pie-shaped chart there, and it's got the 21 per cent that's other. And, in reading through the information there, I'm just wondering if you could give me a couple of the examples of students that might fall into that other category?

Mr. Farthing: Okay. So, other in—could you write a couple of examples of what the—other exam—other refers to where there's two or more coexisting diagnoses, and Joanna's going to give me some expert advice here on—or provide a couple of examples.

Could it be—okay, so, it—you know, generally speaking, some sort of mild intellectual disability or a mild physical disability, or it could be FAS or it could be ADD. I guess it could also be something like spina bifida; it could be something like Down's syndrome. But it's two or more coexisting diagnoses, is in other. But it could be a variety of things.

Ms. Braun: So they wouldn't be necessarily just level 2; they could be level 2 and 3?

Mr. Farthing: If it—sorry—if it—yes, if it's less—if it's a less of—you know, if the disabilities or the challenges are, you know, serious, but not terribly

severe, then it'd be level 2. If it's very, very acute—the challenges are acute, severe, then it's level 3.

Basically, the difference between level 2 and level 3 is the extent to which a student needs assistance. And some students need assistance, a lot of assistance, all the time, and some students need, you know, a fair amount of assistance, but only for part of the day. That's basically the difference between level 2 and 3.

Mr. Chairperson: Mr. Friesen, Mr. Gerrard, Mr. Allum.

Mr. Friesen, please.

Mr. Friesen: Turning our attention again to recommendation 11, I thought I would also make—or ask a few questions on that recommendation 11 with respect to wait times for clinician assessment services. Can the deputy minister just clarify for me—the answer might have been provided already, so, at this time, are wait-lists currently kept by individual school divisions?

Mr. Farthing: My understanding is that some school divisions will have wait-lists. The department doesn't, but school divisions, I think, normally would. They would know—well, they should know—who is waiting to receive a service. They should know how long it's taking to provide various levels of service. But we don't have that information.

Mr. Friesen: And to the deputy minister, and just as a point of clarification, when he says that they should have those lists, it is not, indeed, a requirement that they keep and maintain lists about wait times?

Mr. Farthing: No, at this point it's not a requirement, but I can tell you that it's my view that we should find out more about the wait-lists that school divisions have. I think that is information that we should be asking for.

Mr. Friesen: And, on the same point, for those school divisions that do maintain wait-lists, does the deputy minister know whether they would include the wait times broken down by clinical service areas, so speech, occupational therapy, et cetera?

Mr. Farthing: Yes, if they have wait-lists, they would be broken down in some fashion, probably as you are indicating.

Mr. Friesen: And how would students be prioritized for assessment when there are waiting lists?

Mr. Farthing: Well, they would be—it would be based on the needs that the students have and the

urgency and the immediacy of the need. If all students—if all the needs of all students can be met right away, then there's no wait-list; there's only a wait-list if that's not the case, and then school divisions have to prioritize about who's going to get the service when, and that would be done on the basis of who needs it most and most urgently.

Mr. Friesen: And on the same subject then, if urgency of need is the motivating factor or the primary concern then, could it be the case then that level 1 students often go for longer periods; they could almost languish on these lists before their concerns are met because the urgent need is constantly been given the priority?

Mr. Farthing: Well, I would hope, and that no student is languishing. I hope that's certainly not the case. What I would expect and hope and what I assume is that in most of the time, if not all of the time, school divisions and schools are addressing the needs of students as quickly as they possibly can.

With regard to what you refer to as level 1 students, it is quite likely that if there is an issue about, you know, that not all students' needs can be addressed immediately, that level 2 and level 3 students' needs will likely be addressed as a priority because it's level—by definition, level 2 and level 3 students have the most challenges. But I'm hoping that that doesn't mean that those kids who are, what used to be referred to as level 1 students, are left to wait any longer than they absolutely have to be and that they never end up in a situation where they are languishing. That's just—I'm just hoping that that's not what's happening in our schools.

Mr. Friesen: Thank you for that response.

The deputy minister mentioned as well that there are provisions in place where there are dire need, where the department will come by and directly deliver supports to help address needs, and I appreciate that explanation.

* (19:30)

I'm wondering if, with respect to other rural and northern school divisions who might be experiencing significant wait times for processing students, for them to receive clinician assessment services, does the opportunity exist, perhaps, or maybe already school divisions avail of themselves of this opportunity and that would be to go to third-party service providers and perhaps use clinical counsellors or other experts in the field who may reside in the community who could on a contract of

per-fee basis deliver those same services to the community? Is that done? Is there a model in place for that kind of thing?

Mr. Farthing: Yes, they do do that. Some school divisions do do that. That's not the preferred way of providing the service because oftentimes it's not as regular and readily available as it could be otherwise and the other reason is that's an expensive way to do it and we know that, and so that's why we put into place a bursary program. That's why we will go and do what we can although it's limited how much we can do. We're not set up ready to provide that service. We do it on a sort of off-the-edge-of-the-table kind of way, so there has to be a better solution than that.

But in some cases it might make some sense in a smaller division where there are—there isn't a regular need for a particular kind of clinician service, so it might make sense there. In most cases the best solution is to have someone on staff and—but perhaps that person could be shared between two or three school divisions but still an employee of the school divisions.

But to answer your questions, yes, sometimes these services are contracted, but it often is expensive.

Mr. Friesen: I wonder, as well, if there's an opportunity for a partnership and another way as well. I'm thinking about the resources of the RHA and even if we consider, for example, a speech therapist who already delivers services for the RHA, and a speech therapist may have been able to identify the need for speech therapy in, let's say, maybe a three- or a four-year-old who's in a daycare program.

Now, I've heard anecdotal reports from parents about a child who might, you know, receive those services through the RHA and then, of course, transition into kindergarten, but there—and no supports might be available because that particular school division might be experiencing a backlog with respect to processing assessment services. Now, in that case that student might enter grade—or kindergarten and only be assessed, and that—the then extent of their need for speech therapy would be more fully understood maybe nine, 10, 11 months into their program, if not the next year.

Why not accept, you know, the ongoing work of that speech therapist already who's worked with a child previous to kindergarten and previous to school

intake, or is that, in fact, already being done in some cases and if it is, could it be applied elsewhere?

Mr. Farthing: It is being done in some cases. We encourage that. We certainly support that wherever we can. We allow the funding that we provide to school divisions to be used to—for school divisions to use that to enter into relationships with RHAs and others. By others, I mean other service providers or even other school divisions. So we encourage school divisions and RHAs and other service providers to work together and, in fact, we have an initiative called the Children's Therapy Initiative that takes an organized approach to this.

It's probably the case that this could be going on and happening more than it currently is, but we're certainly supportive of it and we certainly encourage that approach. We always encourage people to work together and share resources wherever that makes sense. You know, that's—it's one of those things where there's probably always more of that kind of thing that can be done, and so we're always encouraging it and trying to—and then supporting it wherever that's helpful.

Mr. Friesen: In the department's response to the Auditor General's recommendation No. 11, the department indicated that this recommendation with respect to students receiving timely access to student support or to clinician assessment services was being addressed to the Clinical Outcomes project. Could the deputy minister comment on the status of the Clinical Outcomes project?

Mr. Farthing: Yes, the Clinical Outcomes project is in its first year of implementation. Training sessions have been offered and provided in every region of the province. There are currently 222 users. A report on the outcomes will be available at the end of the second year of implementation when there is enough data to provide some meaningful analysis. The project is available to Manitoba clinicians in the disciplines of speech-language pathology, school psychology, social work, occupational therapy, and physiotherapy.

Mr. Friesen: I wonder if I could trouble the deputy minister for just a little bit more explanation, though, as to what the clinical outcomes project actually does. Does it second resources from the department to go into school divisions? Or, you mentioned there was 220 users at this point, does it provide for resource material to existing clinicians? I'm not exactly sure what the mechanism is by which this program operates. And then, I'm wondering, as well,

that if this program is right now in place at what point will it be reporting back?

Mr. Farthing: Yes, as I indicated—I think I indicated earlier—it was going to be reporting back after the second year of implementation. We're in the first year of implementation now. And really, what this is about is it's about good caseload management and it's about making sure that people are working together when they should to get the kind of outcomes that we're looking for.

Mr. Friesen: I don't think we're quite there yet in terms of just my understanding about the way this pilot project, or this project, functions. So I wonder if the deputy minister could just indicate who are the 220 users? Were there target areas for this project? Or perhaps, he could just provide a little more information with respect to is it specifically identifying rural and northern regions and developing those processes in those areas, or does it extend throughout the province, and whether it also involves departmental personnel at this point to come down and provide assistance with this—these services.

Mr. Farthing: Okay, first of all, it definitely involves the department, because it's our initiative and we're managing it. The 220 users, as I referred to them, and I probably should've used the other terminology, this refers to clinicians who are part of the project. Did I say it earlier? It's about caseload management and about outcomes: making sure that we have the data; that we're tracking the work that's being done in collecting the data to measure the outcome of the efforts that are made by, being made by, these 220 clinicians that are working together in various ways in a caseload management kind of a format. Is that right?

Mr. Friesen: What does the deputy minister hope to take away from the exercise of the clinical outcomes project? Could he comment on how he believes that the work of this initiative might have an impact on reducing those wait times?

Mr. Farthing: I'm hoping for three outcomes actually. One is, we're going to find ever more ways and better ways to work together and to have clinicians work together. Secondly, we are going to find better ways to report on what the impact has been of our efforts, whether or not we're actually providing the service in a way that gets the outcomes that we're looking for. And if we can do that, we are going to be—find ways to work more efficiently,

more effectively, and, hopefully, that's going to reduce wait-lists and wait times.

Mr. Chairperson: Mr. Friesen.

Floor Comment: It's really—

Mr. Chairperson: Oh, I'm sorry, Mr.—[interjection] Yes, I'm sorry.

Mr. Farthing: It's really part of what we were talking about earlier, only with a more, sort of, lasered approach, where we're really bearing down and focusing on the work of a particular group of clinicians to be able to figure out if there are indeed ways in which we can find ways to work together that are more effective, more efficient, that produces better outcomes.

* (19:40)

Mr. Friesen: Thank you for that additional explanation. I understand that the deputy minister is talking about how to create and how to increase efficiencies within the existing apparatus, and I appreciate that and I think that there's a—there are always advantages to turning your attention to that area.

I'm wondering whether it would be appropriate for the Auditor General to perhaps comment on whether she feels like we can get there, we can get to the heart of the concern of the Auditor General's report through a pilot project such as this or whether she feels that it might fall short of getting to where she would actually like to see education go with reducing wait time for student services and assessment.

Ms. Bellringer: We didn't look at it. The—I just want to emphasize we're not—I mean, not to suggest it isn't a good thing, but to be cautious to stay on my side of that policy line. We're not actually saying that you should reduce wait times. We're saying that you should have the information to know what they are, and then you can develop your policy from there.

Mr. Chairperson: Yes, Mr. Friesen and then Mr. Gerrard.

Mr. Friesen: I would like to turn to—our attention briefly to recommendation three, where the Auditor General recommends that Education work with school divisions to develop processes to monitor and verify the school division compliance with special needs regulation standards and guidelines. And would the deputy minister be able to indicate what

has been done to respond to this concern of the Auditor General.

Mr. Farthing: Well, the first thing is, and I won't repeat myself too much, but I'll just reference what I said earlier about this three-year cycle of review that we have under way, where at least—and I want to emphasize at least—once every three years we meet with the school divisions to talk about this very issue about what they're doing with the funding we're providing, the kind of programming they're providing, the compliance with not only regulation standards and guidelines but also with expectations, expectations that parents have, that students have, that the general community has. And so we have been doing that for a number of years. We're getting ever better at it. Of course, the more conversations you have, the more useful those conversations are, because every conversation builds on the last one.

And I said earlier, I said at least because where we see a need to have more conversations more often than once every three years, we do that. And, in fact, we do this with all the categorical funding that we provide, whether it's for Aboriginal education, whatever it might be.

The second—the next thing is that, as of the 2011 school year, we initiated a review and reporting process that follows up on a sample of students who receive special needs funding. And the last thing I'll reference is the—something that I referred to earlier, and that is that we are developing—we have developed, actually, we're going to be piloting, implementing it soon, a template that is going to be there for school divisions to use to report back to parents on the outcomes of the implementation of the individual education plan for each student. And that's going to provide, primarily and most importantly, more information for parents, but it's also going to be another discussion point that we're—that we'll have with school divisions about the use of that template, you know, how effective it has been, how helpful it has been for them to be able to better track and better understand—it's not just about tracking. It's also—you know, you track for a reason. You collect data for a reason: it's to better understand and to do an ever better job of addressing the needs of special needs kids and hopefully get the outcomes that we want and that are possible.

And I just want to note that, that, you know, with these kids—well, with every kid there are possibilities. With every kid there are possibilities, and what we are trying to do in Education is make

sure that we help those kids realize as much of the possibility as possible. And this goes for every single kid in the school system, whether they're what you would refer to as a child in regular programming or a child who is the recipient of some sort of special, different kind of programming.

Mr. Chairperson: Yes, Mr. Friesen, and then I'll go to Mr. Gerrard.

Mr. Friesen: And thank you for detailing those strategies that the department is using at this point to address the lack of compliance by school divisions. What I would ask about these things, then, is the deputy minister indicated that as of 2010-11 there is that review and reporting process that's following up on a sample of students who receive special needs funding. So do we have results at this point from any of these measures, and if those results have been collected from any of these mechanisms, then, have steps been taken to incorporate these results to improve the level of compliance of school divisions?

Mr. Farthing: We're in the second year of what is a three-year project. There have—there are some results. We have reported those back to school divisions and we have discussed the results of individual school divisions with them. Not with all school divisions, but with some.

The goal, certainly, in the future, will be to have these kinds of—or to provide results back to every school division and have a discussion with every school division about what comes out of the review and reporting process. And I don't know at this time—perhaps, there will be a report that talks about this on a province-wide basis, but I'm not sure at this point whether or not we're going there.

I'm told that, actually, we've done this with more school divisions than I had indicated. We've done this with two-thirds of the school divisions. So there's another third yet to go through this process. Of course, if it turns out the way we hope it does, this will become a regular process. Right now it's not because we're in the implementation stage.

Hon. Jon Gerrard (River Heights): My first question is to the Auditor General. When I read this report, I was really very surprised that there—I could not find any reference to one of, what I see as one of, the most important issues today in dealing with special needs kids. And that's Jordan's Principle, that the child should have equity of service no matter where they are in this province, without regard to

some of the jurisdictional issues. And I wonder if the Auditor General would comment.

Mr. Chairperson: Auditor General Bellringer, do you have a comment on that? I—

Ms. Bellringer: Sorry, when we—I mean, what I'm trying to avoid getting into is we can't comment on merit of policy. And that's right in The Auditor General Act, so I don't want to—you know, I think there's a certain amount of—there are certain number of things that when we're doing a value-for-money audit that we automatically are not looking at because we consider them to be policy issues.

Equality isn't necessarily a policy issue, and delivery across a vast geographical area is going to involve inequality from time to time. So what we would have done in—like, when we do any of the value-for-money audits, we're starting with a blank page and we decide what areas we are going to look at. We don't have a checklist and we don't have a standard set of areas that we look at with every audit. We design it individual to each of the audits that we pick.

* (19:50)

We do have a variety of consultations, and we take into account those areas that both the department think are of significance and they'd like to have some further information about, because what we do bring is, through our act, the ability to access information that isn't otherwise available to just anybody. We have legal access to information, both documents as well as interviews with people, with the powers of the evidence act. And so we're using that to see what information we can bring to the table so that you can have those policy discussions, so that you can determine whether or not the delivery is meeting the areas that you think are important.

So we believe we have built into the audit areas that get to information about whether the—we did in selecting, for example, the schools that we visited: two were in Winnipeg, one was rural and one was northern. So we find ways to weave in those elements so it's not ignored, but it wasn't specifically identified as an area that we would look at.

Mr. Gerrard: Okay, thank you.

And one follow-up question, and that deals with the fact that there's been such a large increase in the number of children with specific special needs. And in the report it says that this is primarily due to a

broader definition of autism spectrum disorder and more students identified in the emotionally or behaviorally disordered and multihandicapped enrolment categories.

You know, basically, we've gone—because there's been a reduction in the overall number of children in school—we've gone from 2 per cent to 4 per cent of kids with special needs. And if that were to be, you know, primarily in the area of autism spectrum disorders, and we've got an increase in more than 3,000 kids with special needs in Manitoba over this period, I mean, does that mean that we've had an increase of 1,000 or 2,000 or more kids with autism spectrum disorders? Can you break that down a little bit more?

Ms. Bellringer: So, in terms of providing—we're providing that particular piece of information within the background. We get that information from the department and we provide it just as a setting for the rest of the audit. We didn't do an audit on determining what the cause of the increase was. Having said that, the department may wish to provide some further information because they would have that.

Mr. Gerrard: Yes, well, let me ask that question to the department.

Mr. Farthing: I can answer that question in general terms and later I can get more specific answers. We need numbers for you—numbers of kids in particular categories. But the general answer is, is that there has been a large increase in autism and there has been a significant increase in emotional behavioural disorders. It's those two categories over the last, for sure, the last two or three decades, even within the last decade, that has increased more than the other areas.

This is very concerning to us. We're not sure of the reasons why, but we're trying to address the problems and the challenges that these things present.

Mr. Gerrard: Yes, I notice at one point in the report there's a reference to 505 children with FASD, and I wonder if that group of children has increased in number or not.

Mr. Farthing: Well, see, we don't have a—excuse me one moment—this is a—this is one of those areas that it's a bit difficult because, on the one hand, we have kids who present, as they say, with certain—present in a way that one would describe as being FASD; on the other hand, we don't have a clinical definition of

FASD. So we normally don't talk about having a certain number of FASD kids in the system because of, you know, for the reason I just outlined, because we can't be as specific and precise as we would like to be.

We also know that not all kids who present in that kind of way or may actually be—have the disability are diagnosed. That's another problem and so we don't—we know that there are a lot of kids who are what one—or what people refer to as FASD kids, but we don't officially report on them.

What we do do, though, is we—that—are those kids, when they, because of the way they—as I say—accused of jargon, I guess—the way they present or, better put, the way they act or if they have special learning needs, but when those kids are identified we try to put into place supports. And a more precise way to say it is that schools try to provide support and they try to put in place programming that addresses the needs of those kids. What we try to do and what we're trying—what we think we have found a way to do is to provide funding in support of those efforts.

And so while we can't in a very rigorous way report on the number of FASD kids in our school system, that doesn't stop us from trying to—doing what we can to support schools when they try to address the challenges that these kids have, these kids that we're talking about. And they're in the system. I mean there's no argument about that. Really, the challenge is how to, I guess for a lack of a better way to put it, how to talk about them. But that's not stopping us from trying to, at schools, and us helping them address these kids' needs.

Mr. Gerrard: There's been some quite interesting and, perhaps, relevant to the issue of behaviour conditions work which has found that children are much more likely to be labelled as having attention deficit hyperactivity disorder if they are in the younger quartile of their class. And, you know, I'm just wondering whether the department has, you know, looked at this issue or considered how to deal with, you know, this, you know, potential for labelling younger kids as emotional problems and, you know, how you deal with this circumstance and what you do in terms of the classroom.

Mr. Farthing: Well, one thing we want to be very, very careful about is labelling kids. Another thing we want to be very careful about and which we're concerned about and which I'm personally concerned about which we need to look into more and which

really should be part of some kind of deep conversation about whether or not we're overdiagnosing kids, whether or not at times we're overreacting to some of the behaviours that we see and whether or not sometimes we're actually overmedicating kids.

And I'm not—we're—I don't think we're in any kind of a crisis situation, but I think we are in a place where we in the education community—well, no, not just us—we in our community, let me put it that way, need to talk about this. And I think that we need to be very careful that we don't do those things: that we don't overdiagnose, that we don't overreact and we certainly don't overmedicate. And, in fact, medicating should be an absolute last resort and, you know, being kind should be the first thing we try to do. Being understanding should be the first thing we try to do. I think that most of the time that's what happens in our schools.

Having said that, we always must be mindful that that's where the focus is and that we don't—and that because we have to do some of these other things that we don't end up doing too much of those other things.

Anyways, I'll end by saying, again, that I think this is something that is worthy of more discussion.

*(20:00)

Mr. Gerrard: I mean, I think it will be worthwhile to probe a little further into the reasons for, you know, the increase in the numbers and I would be very interested if you have more of a breakdown on some of the reasons for that.

I mean, one of the things that we should be doing is looking at how we decrease the numbers of kids with special needs, and, you know, I mean, one of the ways may be through better screening of hearing problems, universal newborn hearing screening, for example, so that some of the kids are identified and helped early so they don't need as much attention when they're in school.

I was rather struck, I must admit, by—on 262, the—where it was found that a report card described a student as 'responsil' and mature, an independent learner and a pleasure to work with, but the funding application to 'geducation' described the student as verbally and physically assaulting staff and students several times a day, and displaying dangerous behaviours towards self and several others.

This is pretty disturbing if there's—you know, you've got such different descriptions of the same

child, and I'm just wondering what you're—you know, what you're doing about this. To the deputy minister.

Mr. Farthing: Well, all I can say is that I share your concern. I mean, this is a very disconcerting thing to see, and if I knew specifically or it came to my attention specifically who this was about, where it happened, what I would do, either personally or have staff do, is go and talk to the people involved and look into this matter further and find out what's going on.

This, of course, should be a concerning thing and shouldn't be happening. There shouldn't be this in kind—this kind of inconsistency. I can't see how this kind of thing happening can be good for anyone, particularly the student involved, and it's probably a student who doesn't need this kind of inconsistency in his or her life.

So, no, we would become concerned about it and we would look into it, try to find out what happened and if we or others had to do something differently in the future to avoid this sort of thing, that's what we would try to make happen.

Mr. Gerrard: Yes. On page 265, there's a description of the consultants and clinicians; 34 staff. What surprised me a bit was that 18 of these 34 deal with two conditions: that is hearing problem and vision problems. And that those two make up 9 per cent of the students with special needs, and so that you've got less than half of the consultants dealing with the problems of 91 per cent of the students with special needs. And it just seems that the proportions, you know, are off, and maybe, you know, you need to—would seem to me that you would need to have a look at the ratios of consultants to special needs kids in different areas to make sure that you're adequately addressing, you know, autism, for example. How many of the consultants have got expertise in autism? How many of them have expertise in the behavioural problems that seem to be increasing?

Mr. Farthing: Well, I think you raise something that we should think about, that we should take a look at and think about and make an assessment as to whether or not we're deploying our staff in the proper way, whether or not we're addressing the needs where they—in the best way that we can be. So we'll do that. There are a lot of—you know, with regard to deaf and hard-of-hearing students and blind and visually-impaired students, there is a lot of need out there. We are doing a lot for those students; we wouldn't want to do less for them, actually. But it

does beg the question as to whether or not we're doing enough for other students.

And so we'll take a look at that. We'll give it some thought, and if we think we need to redeploy in some fashion in the future, as resources allow, we'll do that. But it is a—in my view, a legitimate question about how we're allocating the staff that we have.

Mr. Gerrard: You know, I'm not in any way advocating that you do less for children who are, you know, hard of hearing or have got vision problems, but I think that it just struck me as that there may need to be some look here.

On page 278, there is a reference here to the fact that educational—education officials don't require copies of clinician reports to be submitted with applications because of privacy concerns related to The Personal Health Information Act. And it seems to me that one of the issues here is being able to get the sufficient information that you're able to provide the appropriate response. And it seems to me that the—you don't necessarily want, you know, the complete breakdown of an individual child's, you know, medical history, or something like that but, you know, in order to, you know, be responsible for the whole system, you probably need some way of being able to get a better handle on issues related to, you know, particular medical or psychological or issues which are the reason that these child have special needs.

Mr. Farthing: Well, there is a—there's a tension here. Not all tensions are good ones, but many are. And many are naturally occurring and the point isn't that—to get rid of the tension. The point is, is to properly manage it, and this is one of those instances.

On the one hand, we need information in order to make the right decisions, and we also need information to be able to properly verify things so that we and others are properly accountable. There's no question about that.

On the other hand, we don't want to be getting—first of all require—well, no, actually, first of all to be knowing things about students, particularly when it's a difficult situation, when it's an emotional situation for the student, the parents, and the teachers, to have to have them tell us more than we need to know.

In addition to that, we don't want to ask for more information than we need to have to verify the first—or to address the first set of requirements, because that—to provide that information takes resources. And

when people are using resources to do that, they're not using those resources to do other things.

And the third thing is, is that we do have to respect the privacy of people. We have to respect their expectations about privacy, and we also have to respect the law that has to do with privacy concerns.

So, we try to manage the tension between these two things. Right now, it's our view—although, if challenged—and I guess we'll—I guess we are being to some extent challenged to reassess, but—and so we will—but it's our view that we're getting the information we need to be able to verify the information that is provided to us that we use to make decisions and which is used to hold everyone that should be accountable.

It may be that, you know, we'll reassess that position—or that view, I should say—and if we need to ask for more information, we will do that. But we are certainly not going to ask for more than we should ask for, then, and more than we need. Because if we do that, then we're not properly managing that tension, and we're not being properly respectful of one side of the equation or the other. And what we want to do is take a reasoned, sensible and balanced approach. We don't always hit that mark, but that's the mark we try to hit.

And if someone is suggesting at this time that we're not there, we'll reassess. We'll take a look at what we're doing, and if we need to move one way or the other a bit, we'll do that.

But there's always going to be the tension. There's always going to be our need for information versus other people's right to some level of privacy and confidentiality that has to do with—and we need to be mindful of this, because if we're not, we're—we become bureaucratic in a negative way instead of a positive way. We need to be mindful that what we're talking about here is information that, to some people, is difficult to—is difficult for them and causes an emotional response. And we want to be mindful of that.

Mr. Chairperson: Yes, Mr. Gerrard, Mr. Allum, Mr. Friesen.

* (20:10)

Mr. Gerrard: My last question for you, and that—on page 272, the report indicates that you're working with Manitoba Speech and Hearing Association to respond to the shortage of speech-language pathologists, and I wondered if you would just be

able to comment and give us an update since that was, I presume, several months ago.

Mr. Farthing: I can't provide specifics at this time. I can later, but I can tell the honourable member that we are working with the Speech and Hearing Association around recruitment issues, and we're trying to help them recruit people to Manitoba and in our schools and school divisions who can work with kids who have speech and hearing difficulties. At this point I can't be more specific than that.

Mr. James Allum (Fort Garry-Riverview): Like my colleague from River Heights, I was also struck by the changes between 2000 and 2010. Enrolment increases by 86 per cent, as Dr. Gerrard noted, and funding doubled from \$40 million to \$82 million during that same time, and I'm inclined to ask you what happened after 1999 to change that, but I think we know the answer to some of that.

What I would like to ask about, though, is we've talked about clinicians, and we've talked about EAs, we haven't quite talked about teachers, and, clearly, this change in the demographics created different dynamics in classrooms, so what have we done to prepare teachers for this new dynamic within classrooms?

Mr. Farthing: A few things. I'll speak to the most obvious, and, actually, the easiest, in a way, first, and that is that, you know, we have steadily increased the funding in support of special needs programming in our classrooms. That means there's more resources in the classroom for the teachers to use.

It also—we've also increased the—steadily, over the last number of years, increased the funding for professional development. Some of that is being used to—by teachers to learn how better to meet the needs of all kids in our classrooms, in particular, the—well, not in particular, but also, of course, those with special needs.

We, not too long ago, mandated that all teachers going through teacher education would have to take a three-hour credit course, at least one three-hour credit course, on teaching kids with special needs. And so, every teacher now gets that training.

We recently introduced the class-size initiative, we refer to it as 20K3, where, within five years, all the classrooms in Manitoba, or the—nearly all of them, in K to 3 will be 20 students or fewer. And of course, that will create some room and space for teachers to give additional help to those students who

need it. All students will benefit from that. All students should—you know, if you were—all students that were—would have been in larger classrooms, I should say, would benefit from that. If a teacher was in a classroom of 28, obviously, if they—down the road, they're in a classroom of 20, there's going to be more time for every student. And of course, those students that need proportionally more time than others will get that and they'll get proportionately more. And so, that should also help a lot.

Mr. Allum: Yesterday, just quite by coincidence, I went to visit a constituent in relation to autism spectrum disorder, and—mostly, because I wanted to see, and they invited me to see, how applied behavioural analysis works in the home and, I think, probably, works, as well, in the classroom. Obviously, these are super—a super kid and super parents and they're—the parents are super advocates. How do we ensure that parents are full partners in the—sort of, the development of curriculums and the planning for the day-to-day stuff that happens in the classroom for students with special needs?

Mr. Farthing: There's two or three parts to the answer to that question, and one is—I'll start with the part that could have been part of the answer to my former part of—my former answer—previous answer, and that is that we have, for a long time now, and we promote this all the time, and we know schools and school divisions do as well, the principle of inclusion. You know, we just have a mindset that says we're there for every kid. We don't—it does not matter where that kid is from, what their background is, and it doesn't matter either how hard the child makes it for us to be there for him or her. We try to be there. And it's real simple why we do that: They are kids and we're adults, and they're students and we're educators. And as adults and educators that's what we sign up for. And I think that the vast majority, if not all the teachers and administrators in our schools and school divisions believe that as deeply as we do. So that's one thing.

The second thing is that with regard to the funding, a certain amount of the funding, the core amount of funding is there's something there for everyone. But we provide the funding on a proportionate basis. That is, those who need more get more. We need to be there for every kid. That's the starting point, but we also know that some kids need us to be there more for them than others, and so we try to be there more for them than others, and we try to provide resources to schools and school divisions

so they can do that. And so our funding reflects that. We also provide a lot of professional development opportunities for teachers to learn how to more effectively, in a more satisfying way, work with not only the students but with the parents. We emphasize parental involvement in all dimensions of education. We have brochures that are there—out there for parents written in plain language, and I think the first brochures were for parents with kids with special needs. We talk to parents about this; we talk to teachers about this; we try to have as deep an understanding of that as possible.

On a more formal level, we used to have five—four partners we talked to all the time just as a matter of course. It was the superintendents, the trustees, the teachers, of course, and the Manitoba business officials. Now there's five, and the fifth is the parents. And it's no longer—the parents are no longer there as, you know, an afterthought or an add-on, which was the case, say, 15 years ago, or even 10 years ago. The parents are just automatically there. So if you look at our oversight committee, for example, parents are there.

And, of course, the—you know, with the parent groups, a lot of the issues they deal were—the Manitoba Parent Association and parent groups—not all, of course, but a lot of the issues they deal with have to do with the provision of special needs, or the meeting of special needs—the meeting of the special needs of kids in our schools. And so they had a very sort of organizational, institutional level, you know, or mandated by their constituency to bring those concerns to our attention. And they do that.

So it's a kind of an up-down-and-across approach that's based on and starts from the, you know, the idea that we're there for all kids, and we're there to the extent that we can be and to the extent that we should be, and that means being there in significant ways for every kid, but it also means being there more for some kids than other kids.

Mr. Allum: Just very quickly. In the home that I visited yesterday, the parent was quite pleased with the classroom that they had at Churchill and the school that they went to, but they advocated, of course, for earlier interventions and maybe a little bit longer time period as the kid go through adolescence was a bit of an issue, and so those seemed to be quite reasonable, although they understood the limitations around resources and she said the emphasis in the classroom was really around life skills, and the report talks about the emphasis in the curriculum for life

skills, but she said she would never want us to lose sight of the academic side either.

So I just wanted to ask you a little bit about how we make—how we balance those two things.

* (20:20)

Mr. Farthing: Well, I couldn't agree with that more. I think that—but, having said that, it is—it's a question of balance. I think we need to recognize where we need to put an emphasis on life skills. Some kids need us to do that more for them than for other kids, but it's also my belief that, with regard to every single kid, there has to be some proportionate, proper emphasis on academics. We have to believe—I do believe, it's not because I have to—I do believe that every child is capable of learning things. Some kids can obviously learn more than other kids, academically speaking and otherwise, but I don't think—I think we'd be—any one of us would be hard-pressed to find a situation where it's an absolute either/or. It never is an either/or. It's a question of both and how much of each. Some kids need more help in training with life skills than other kids, and those kids who need less of that, of course, you're going to put more emphasis on academics and those kids who can achieve more academically you're going to—as we talked about earlier—try to realize that possibility and potential. But the starting point is, is that every kid has some possibility and potential in any of those spheres—either of those spheres or any other sphere you want to talk about. The question is to recognize that, to see that, to find it and then you build on it.

Mr. Allum: Thank you, deputy minister.

Mr. Reg Helwer (Brandon West): Mr. Chair, through you to deputy minister. There's often been discussed that there are areas of clusters of special needs children in Manitoba, and Brandon is one such—if you want to call it a cluster. But parents tend to move to those communities where they believe there may be more opportunities or more support for their children. How many of those do we tend to have in Manitoba or within Winnipeg? Is it—are they distinct anymore or is it more broadened now that you've moved funding out to other areas?

Mr. Farthing: It's much broader than it used to be. There is some of that but a lot less than there used to be, and the reason for that is because we operate based on—we operate according to that principle of inclusion. Our attitude is, is that every kid that can be

in a regular classroom should be in a regular classroom. We have to be realistic, though, and we realize that sometimes that's not the best place for a child. But the first question always is: Is that the best place for the child? And if it is, then we find ways to have that child be there, provide the supports that allow for that kid to be in the regular classroom. But where it's clear and it's not—has to be—should—it's not about being clear to any particular person, it should be—this should be a discussion amongst all the interested parties, particularly the parents, but, of course, also the teacher, also the administrator, also the school administrator, then clinicians, where it becomes clear and there's some consensus that all of the time perhaps, although rarely is that the case, but maybe some of the time that's more frequent, the kid would be better served. It would—we could do more for the child if the child was outside of the regular classroom in a different kind of setting, then we try to make that available.

But the first principle is, is that if the child can be in the regular classroom, that's what we try to do and that's where we try to—and that's where you want the child to be, but we're not going to be silly about it and we're not going to be doctrinaire about it. You know, the question is what's best for the child, and that's the question to be answered.

Mr. Helwer: I should've disclosed before I asked the question: I have a daughter that's an EA. I don't know if it matters anywhere down the road but just want to be clear.

An Honourable Member: Conflict of interest.

Mr. Helwer: I have a conflict of interest? No, I don't think so.

Is there anything you've done in the last couple of years that's removed that clustering intent or anything, to try to make it so that the parents are more comfortable staying in their own communities, as opposed to, say, moving to Brandon or Dauphin in terms of funding or, I don't know, is—it seems to be lessening now is my—what I've seen, anyway.

Mr. Farthing: Well, yes, probably the biggest thing we've done—and it's not just over a couple of years; it's over a last decade or more—is, is that we have been talking in the way that I just talked, expressing that point view, encouraging people to think about these kinds of things in the way that I've tried to express them. We've been very clear and out front that we, you know, what we think the principle of

inclusion means, what it should mean in practical terms and so on.

On a more practical level, we have provided funding in support of what I'm talking about, and a good example is with kids who are deaf and hard of hearing. We have a lot fewer of those kids now in the Manitoba School for the Deaf than we used to have, and that's because we're encouraging them to go to school in their community school, and we're providing funding in support of that.

In fact, right now, we don't have any kids that are resident in the Manitoba School for the Deaf and, as I said earlier, we have a lot few who are in the classroom in the Manitoba School for the Deaf, because we've taken active—we've actively been promoting and supporting having those kids, where it's possible and where everybody thinks that's the best thing for them, to go to the—to go to their community school, so that they don't have to be in that institutionalized setting, away from their community, away from their friends and, most importantly, away from their family.

So, we think that it's because of the belief system that is in our province, not just in the Department of Education, but in our—in the department and in our schools and in our community. And, because of some of the practical steps that we're all taking, that we're getting less of what you're talking about.

Mr. Friesen: Turning briefly to just the area of individual education plans. And, of course, IEPs are in place for students who need additional props to help them meet the learning outcomes, and IEPs are required for level 2 and 3 special needs funded students.

And in the Auditor General's report, it seems that they sampled 78 level 2 and 3 students from four divisions and found that when it came to expected learning outcomes, really there were any number—I think almost 80 per cent of the ones that they reviewed where the outcomes were vague or they were unchanged from the previous year or they were missing entirely, and that of the files reviewed that had IEPs with outcomes, they really found that only 24 per cent had what the Auditor General's office referred to as robust progress reporting directly linked to the expected learning outcomes outlined in the IEPs.

And, of course, we know that, you know, reporting is critical on IEPs. I wonder if the deputy

minister would indicate with respect to learning outcomes and IEPs that are vague or unchanged from the previous year or that are missing completely, how are these concerns being addressed or how have they already been addressed?

Mr. Farthing: Well, let me say that they're going to be addressed, because we are going to be looking into this. As I indicated earlier, though, we're going to be careful about that; serious, but careful—and careful.

I want to know more about what we're talking about when we say vague. Why are we talking about vague information? Some of what us—we're talking about may or may not be measurable. Not everything is measurable. Let's take a look at that and figure out whether or not we are truly talking about things that aren't—that are important but aren't measurable or quantifiable, and that's what I mean by measurable here.

It may be that there are a number of kids who we're doing a lot for, but there isn't a big change in the outcomes. Let's take a closer look at that. I think what we have to do, and with regard to these things, is be prepared—well, first of all, let's just—let's take a look at it and make sure we clearly understand what we're talking about. But the second thing, I think—and this is not to make excuses at all, or to undermine the first thing, which is taking a serious look at this and figure out exactly what it is we're talking about and whether or not something needs to be changed—but we have to be prepared for, perhaps, some disappointment. We have to be emotionally prepared for that.

What I'm more concerned—so I'm concerned about that, but what I'm more concerned about is where there is no reporting at all, where there isn't the documentation that there should be, and things like that. That, in my view, is not acceptable. If things aren't happening, it needs to be stated clearly, and no matter what is happening or not happening, the whole process needs to be properly documented.

Mr. Chairperson: Just before we proceed in—we've reached 8:30, and I know our committee had agreed to review at 8:30 what they wish to do in regards to proceeding. And so I ask the—what is the will of the committee?

Ms. Braun: I would say we continue until Mr. Friesen's concluded his questions. Is that reasonable?

* (20:30)

Mr. Chairperson: It's been suggested that we proceed 'til Mr. Friesen is finished with his questions. I don't want to exclude anyone else either. Yes, so is the will of the committee to go 'til he's finished, or 9 o'clock, and we'll review at that point? *[Agreed]*

We will proceed 'til 9 o'clock and review at that time if we're still here. Mr. Friesen, proceed.

Mr. Friesen: To the deputy minister, he indicated that this issue will be addressed, and I just wonder if he could briefly, for the sake of committee, just indicate, then, how would the department go about addressing what seems to be a substantial breakdown in the reporting of learning outcomes?

Mr. Farthing: The first thing I'll say is it may or may—in my view, and with respect, it may or may not be a substantial breakdown. That has yet to be determined, and we will take an honest and close look at that. And if it is a substantial breakdown, we'll address it. If it's something less than that, we'll address whatever that is. We've already started doing that partly through what I referred to earlier, which is a review in reporting process and also through the development of that template that is going to provide better reporting on the outcomes of the IEPs. We'll look at other ways to address this. I mean, some of it might just be a communication, some communication around expectations.

I think, as I said earlier, things should be sensibly but properly documented. And by sensibly, I mean let's not go overboard, and, you know, have people spend all day documenting things that don't need to be documented, but they need to properly document things. Where details are required, they should be provided. And I am quite partial to the idea of robust reporting, but I use robust in—you know, I try to think of that in a sensible kind of way, but to me what that means is full and meaningful reporting on the outcome of whatever was attempted.

So we're going to take a look at this and determine the extent to which changes are going to be needed. I mean, it would seem to me, on the face of it, that there are obviously some changes that are required. The question is just how big are those changes.

Mr. Friesen: I think that I would agree with you that we'd all be after robust progress reporting. In fairness to the Auditor General's office, they do indicate that they would see that as reporting that's directly linked

to the expected learning outcomes outlined in the IEPs, and I think that would be a fair measurement.

The question I'd have is, does the new report card format—or the new standardized report card, does it go any distance towards also helping this situation? I notice when I think back to those standardized report—oh, I'm not supposed to call them the standardized report. I've been told by the minister it's not the standardized report, but the common report card format. I stand corrected. Now, I remember that on that common format, there is a box whereby the teacher can check mark whether this student has an IEP. Now, is there a provision whereby, then, an additional page will be attached and that will be exactly that document of which you speak related to the IEP, or are we getting a little ahead of ourselves?

Mr. Farthing: No, I don't think we're getting too far ahead of ourselves. But the report card goes some small way to addressing what we're talking about, but, in particular, with respect to kids who are referred to as level 1 kids. The level 2 and level 3 kids, of course, have IEPs.

What we are talking about is doing something that's not part of the report card, but that is in addition to the report card. So what the report card has actually—the report card exercise has actually done is led us to this place. And I should be—I should actually compliment staff and the people they've been talking about, because it's actually the staff in the department, in conversations with partners, who have gone to this place that I'm talking about, which is the work that will be done in addition—not as part of, because the report card is the report card, okay, but in addition to that, we will be looking at the IEP. We will be looking at the reporting on the IEP. What's important, I think, and interesting to note, is it was the work on the report card that has led us looking more closely at the IEP and the template for reporting on the outcomes that are hoped, that are outlined in the IEP.

So we want to be careful here because it's not part of the report card; it's in addition to the report card, but it was work that came out of that exercise.

Mr. Friesen: Recommendation No. 8 from the Auditor General, recommended that Education investigate potential cost savings and benefits, a centralized purchasing of assistive technology. I know that you referred to that just briefly earlier in your remarks this evening, Mr. Deputy Minister. I wonder if you could just indicate, please, what is the

nature of the equipment that we're talking about when we talk about assistive technology for school divisions?

Mr. Farthing: Assistive technology can be a range of strategies and resources, which include services and tools used to enable students to meet learning outcomes by providing easier access to materials which support curriculum. Some examples of assistive technology are: software such as Clicker 6; WinReader read–WinReader; Read & Write Gold, which are literacy tools that enable students to develop their reading and writing skills; Kurzweil 3000, which is a premiere access tool for students struggling; MathPad Plus to support essential math skills; also Ipads and UDL for universal classroom support for learning.

I want to note that these items are available in our assistive technology lending library. And these are examples. There are many others, but these are some of the ones that we make available.

Mr. Friesen: So the Auditor General recommended that the Education look into saving money, perhaps, by looking into whether there be a benefit of centralizing the purchase of these technologies. Is that something that the deputy minister has given consideration to, and does he see some possibilities in that area?

Mr. Farthing: We're doing some of that right now just in the fact that we have a library. So we're doing the centralized purchasing ourselves, and then through this library we make these technologies available. We are, though—we are exploring doing more of that, and, in particular, though, we're looking at the costs of provincial licensing, and we've done some of that in the past. We'd like to do more of that in the future as resources permit. There's actually two components to this. One is, do we have the budget to do that, but the other is how many school divisions want to be part of the licence. Unless we have a fair number of divisions who want to be part of the licence, it doesn't make any sense for us to do it.

But where we can do it, where it makes sense for us to do it and where we can do it, it does turn out to be quite a bit cheaper to have a provincial licence than individual school divisions licensing some sort of technology or software or whatever.

Mr. Friesen: I made notice of the fact that in the Auditor General's report on page 266, it indicated that officials from one Province indicated they had purchased some software at 70 per cent cost savings.

That's substantial. Of course, I know that that might be a jurisdiction with a larger number of students; I'm not sure which province they were in contact with. Has the department been in contact with other provinces, with other jurisdictions, to see what has worked in other areas of Canada?

Mr. Farthing: We have, and I think the jurisdiction that the auditor's referring to, I'm not positive, is BC, and we've looked at what BC is doing. We've looked at whether—or done an assessment as to whether or not we can do the same thing. At this point in time, we're not convinced that we can. Based on what the Auditor General is reporting, we'll take another look and a closer look and reconsider, but I can tell you that we have taken a look about, you know, at that, and we didn't—we haven't acted on what—or we haven't tried to copy what BC is doing, but we'll take another look.

Mr. Friesen: And I'm just wondering—because the deputy minister said that they've already done some of this already in Manitoba; they've done some centralization of purchase of resources in this way—those purchases that the department has made with respect to these technologies or this equipment, has that been on a basis of, like, a sole source, or has that been a tendered process?

Mr. Farthing: It's been a tendered process. I can tell you that we almost always tender and occasionally we don't, but when we don't, we have very good reasons not to. So if we don't have very good reasons not to, we tender. And with regard to what has been talked about now, it was a tendered—through a tendered process.

* (20:40)

Mr. Friesen: Turning briefly to recommendation 13, where the Auditor General recommended that Education, that a document in their files—the logic and rationale for special needs funding decisions—including the justification for providing, altering or denying the funding requested by a school division and the reason for that—I have a question for the Auditor General, and that is with respect to this study: Did the Auditor General's office also consider the application process that's—that a school division undertakes, in her examination of special needs education?

Mr. Chairperson: Mr. Farthing. Ms.—no, pardon me. Wasn't paying attention there.

Ms. Bellringer.

Ms. Bellringer: No, we did not.

Mr. Friesen: Perhaps a question for the deputy minister: With respect to the schools' application process, I've heard reports from individuals who've indicated from a variety of school divisions that there might be some duplication that occurs and some inefficiencies that exist, and maybe you could just provide a brief explanation of—if that's your understanding as well, whereby you could have an application made first by a resource teacher for support for a student, but then there's a subsequent or a second time assessment undertaken by divisional staff before it's finally all submitted to the Department of Education. Is that common or is that not a common practice?

Mr. Farthing: I don't believe that is a common practice. I think where that does occur now, there should be some explanation about that. It might be that we require additional information, or it might be that we've denied a request and there's an appeal which generates additional work and information. We have tried very hard for a number of years to streamline the process as much as possible to avoid duplication, to certainly avoid people—school divisions having to provide more information than we need to make proper decisions.

And we've also moved to multi-year funding. By that, I mean if a student has a disability that is not going to go away—we all know that—we don't ask the school division to keep telling us about it. We'd—well, we will ask for some verification that things haven't changed, but we don't keep asking for the same information over and over and over. And it's for two reasons: one is it's a waste of resources to do that; and, second of all, it has to do with what I talked about earlier, and that is, is that asking for this information—forcing people to provide it to us—can often generate a pretty unhappy emotional experience for the people involved, particularly the parents. And if we don't have to do that, we're not going to.

So, I think what you're talking about, while it may happen, it's probably fairly rare. When it comes to our attention, we try to rectify it.

Mr. Friesen: I was intrigued by the note that Education had begun a three-year pilot project with one school division to circumvent the traditional process by which all these applications are made for funding and try to make the—I would imagine that the intent was to try to make the whole process more efficient by circumventing that and putting in place a

funding allotment for that school division, based on traditional granting levels and based on a—probably a projection of need.

Could the—while I believe it was not part of the Auditor General's examination, could the deputy minister provide an update as to where that pilot project is at, and what have been the findings?

Floor Comment: I would do that—

Mr. Chairperson: Mr. Farthing.

Mr. Farthing: But I'm going to defer to the Chair as to whether or not in this forum it's appropriate—for me to do so.

Mr. Chairperson: Yes, does—would the minister like to answer that question as well? Or—

Ms. Allan: I just feel this is a question that doesn't have anything to do—is not in the Auditor General's report. And we made a commitment to answer the rest of the MLA's questions, so I think I would prefer that we stuck to the OAG's report, instead of questions that are outside of the report.

Mr. Chairperson: I've been advised and I can see here that some of the direction of the question is in the report, and so I don't know whether the Auditor General would like to make a comment on that, or not, but, certainly, it is a part of the report. Maybe Mr. Friesen would like to ask that question to the Auditor General.

Mr. Friesen: To the Auditor General, then: Could you provide just an explanation whether this was part of your study and, if so, specifically what did you undertake to examine with respect to the three-year pilot project with one school division?

Ms. Bellringer: So just to confirm, yes, it is in the report, but we did specifically say in there that we did not assess this pilot project. We were providing it as information.

Mr. Chairperson: Okay, thank you.

Mr. Friesen: That's fine, and thank you for that explanation.

Then just briefly to wrap up, I just wanted to end by asking the deputy minister perhaps to come back to exactly where we began, and of course the Auditor General's examination of this area was of course predicated on the very significant and dramatic

increase in enrollment for student-specific special needs funding and the increase of students and also the increase of funding that actually doubled that area from about \$40 million to \$82 million. And I'm wondering if the deputy minister can perhaps do just a very little bit of trending with us and indicate if we think that we've hit the top of a very sharp increase or whether the department projects that this increase to student-specific special needs enrollment is going to continue for the foreseeable future.

Mr. Farthing: I don't think we're going to, in the foreseeable future, see dramatic and sharp increases. I think what we're going to see is a steady increase in the number of special needs students and the funding that is provided. I don't think though it's going to be dramatic. I think—and I think it's probably going to be a flatter curve in the future than it has been in the past. Of course none of us can know but that's what I expect to see.

Mr. Friesen: And just subsequent to that, I note as well when I look at that figure one from page 251 of the Auditor General's report, it seems that the steepest increase occurred perhaps between 2004-5 and 2007-8. And so there seems to be already a bit of a plateau indicated on that graph. Is that because it was exactly at that 2004-5 point at which some of the definition of funding changed, and so what we've seen in the system is kind of a correction? Or maybe a more accurate depiction of the true extent of the need and that's why we've also seen the levelling off now, would that be an accurate description of the trend that's been taking place?

Mr. Farthing: I think that's fairly accurate and I think that's a reasonable way to put it. I think what has happened is that we've become more diligent about recognizing the needs of students, and we'd be—developed ever more resolve to find the resources to address those needs. And so I—and that's all consistent with the principle of inclusion. That's consistent with the attitude of being there for every student as much as we can be, and so I think there was kind of a community, if you like, correction. And that's in part why you saw—and that correction had to do both with attitude and practical measures, and practical measures has to do with identification and providing the resources that are needed. And so that's why you see somewhat of a more dramatic increase in the curve there and a levelling off later on.

Mr. Friesen: I have just one last question for the deputy minister, and it probably might have been something that would be better asked at the very outset, but I just wondered, on the basis of all that we have heard and considered this evening, I wonder if the deputy minister could just sketch out for this committee the process or just the steps in an application from attempting to obtain the diagnosis to the steps that the school and the school division take to apply for funding. I'm just wondering if he can comment on that. What are the steps in that process?

* (20:50)

Mr. Farthing: The thing is that we indicate to school divisions when they should be telling us about the students that they think we should be providing level 2 and 3 funding for, and they submit that information to us. We do an assessment of it. We ask for additional information if we need it. We then give them a decision. Quite often we are in agreement with them, but when we're not, we tell them so.

When we tell them we're not, they have an option of appealing our decision. If they appeal our decision, then we take another look. We try to be—we try to take a third-party look. We try to take an objective look. We listen to why it is they think that we should have said yes when we said no.

After having taken another look, we then decide whether we made the right decision in the first case or we should change it. And if we should change it, we do change it.

I really like what John Maynard Keynes said to someone once, which is: When the facts change, I change my mind; what do you do, sir? And that's what we do here. If additional information comes to our attention, the facts' change indicating that we should change our mind, we do so. Sometimes we do, sometimes we don't. It does boil down to a matter of judgment.

We—when we do make those decisions, though, we try to make them, you know, of course, we try to make them on the basis of being fully informed and after listening to what others think the decision should be. And that's what those in schools and school divisions are telling us.

Mr. Chairperson: Are there any further questions of the committee?

Seeing none, I will ask the committee if they agree that we have completed consideration of chapter 6. *[Agreed]*

This concludes the business before us this evening, and the hour being 8:52 p.m., what is the will of the committee?

Some Honourable Members: Committee rise.

Mr. Chairperson: Before we rise, I'd appreciate it if everyone would leave the reports on the desk for use at the next committee meeting that we have in regards to this full report.

And I announce that committee rise.

COMMITTEE ROSE AT: 8:52 p.m.

The Legislative Assembly of Manitoba Debates and Proceedings
are also available on the Internet at the following address:

<http://www.gov.mb.ca/legislature/hansard/index.html>