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Wednesday 8 April 2009

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Mercredi 8 avril 2009

**Standing Committee on
Public Accounts**

2008 Annual Report,
Auditor General:
Ministry of Education

**Comité permanent des
comptes publics**

Rapport annuel 2008,
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Ministère de l'Éducation

Chair: Norman W. Sterling
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ASSEMBLÉE LÉGISLATIVE DE L'ONTARIO

STANDING COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC ACCOUNTS

COMITÉ PERMANENT DES COMPTES PUBLICS

Wednesday 8 April 2009

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The committee met at 1235 in committee room 1, following a closed session.

2008 ANNUAL REPORT, AUDITOR GENERAL MINISTRY OF EDUCATION

Consideration of section 3.14, special education.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Jerry J. Ouellette): I call the committee to order. Just again, an understanding of how the committee works is that during public accounts it's an opportunity for the ministry to respond to the reviews and the hard work of our Auditor General. It's an opportunity, after a presentation takes place, for each of the parties to question the ministry and the auditor regarding the issue before us.

We welcome all the individuals and we welcome you to the table. If you would be so kind as to introduce yourselves to the table, that way we have you on record for Hansard. Then I'll give you time for a presentation, should you like, and then open it up to the parties at the table for questions and answers. Once again, thanks for coming.

Mr. Ben Levin: Thank you, Chair. I'm Ben Levin. I'm the Deputy Minister of Education. I'm accompanied on my left by Barry Finlay, who's the director of our special education branch.

Ms. Gerry Connelly: I'm Gerry Connelly, director of education for the Toronto District School Board.

Mr. Gordon Campbell: Gord Campbell, director of education for the Simcoe County District School Board.

Mr. John De Faveri: I'm John De Faveri, director of education for the Thunder Bay Catholic District School Board.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Jerry J. Ouellette): Thank you for joining us. You may proceed.

Mr. Ben Levin: I believe members of the committee have the slides that I put together as background. I did want to take the opportunity to make a few introductory comments to put the issues that are in the Auditor General's report into a larger policy perspective.

What I would say about special education is that it is probably the most difficult policy area in the whole realm of education. I've had the opportunity through my other career experiences, mostly as an academic and as a consultant, to see education in a lot of different places around the world. The issues that we're struggling with

Ontario around special education are issues that are being struggled with worldwide. Those have to do with the steadily growing number of children or students who are being identified or seen as having some kind of special need. The rising pressure on special education expenditures and education budgets all around the world—there is hardly a jurisdiction where special education has not grown as a percentage of overall education spending. So no matter what happens to overall spending, the share of the pie that's going to special education has been rising everywhere.

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The problem is that although in some areas of special education we have some really quite substantial successes to show, in other areas it is not so clear that the additional work has actually led to the kind of success we want. If we go back, special education is now about 40 years old as a field. If we start thinking about where we started, which was around inclusion and improved education for students who were, say, blind or hearing-impaired or had mental disabilities of various kinds or other kinds of physical disabilities—wheelchairs and so on—what we can see is that that is an effort that has been, I would say, very successful. We have many students who, a generation ago or two generations ago, had very little access to education and were largely written off and regarded as ineducable—we are now doing a much better job with those children.

Barry's predecessor as director of special education for the Ministry of Education, a man named Bruce Drewett, grew up in a wheelchair and was not allowed to attend his local school because it was just known that children in wheelchairs couldn't go to local schools. I can tell you that Bruce's legs may not work very well, but his brain works perfectly well.

Those are things that I think we've made a lot of progress on and we have a lot to be proud about. You can take the example of Down's syndrome, where 30 years ago we basically regarded Down's syndrome kids as ineducable. It turns out that many Down's syndrome kids are very educable. We don't know what the limits of that achievement are.

I would say that much of the change has been driven by advocacy from parents and advocates. A lot of what's happened in special education, even though for those of us who work in the system, that advocacy makes our lives difficult, I think that, if we look honestly back, we

can say that a lot of improvement has been driven by very determined parents who thought that there was something that could happen in schools that wasn't happening and have pushed educators very hard to do more. When we look back we can see that, actually, in many cases that was right and we were right to do those things, even if at the time we didn't necessarily want to do them.

In the last few years, what has happened is that the areas of growth in what's called the incidence of special education, the number and proportions of students who are seen as having special needs, have been in areas that are much less clear and about which there is much more debate and disagreement. It's pretty easy to know whether a kid is or isn't in a wheelchair or can or can't hear at a particular level, but in the area of learning disabilities, which has had by far the fastest growth and now accounts for 43% of our total incidents, there is a lot of debate in the research community about what learning disabilities are; how many kids actually have them; how they're assessed; how real they are, as it were; and about what to do about them.

I think the critical point is to say that it's one thing to identify a need and it's another thing to know what to do to create an improvement for the student who has the need. We've perhaps been somewhat better at identifying what we regard as needs than we have been at being able to put in place programs and interventions that actually result in better outcomes for the students having the need. The danger there is that what we have is pressure to provide services as opposed to pressure to produce better results and better outcomes for students. We don't really want to be in a world where the service substitutes for the outcomes. We don't really want to be in a world where we say, "You may not actually be learning anything, but you have a service." So that's good and we're happy about that, because it is all about and we are all about better outcomes for students.

One of the big dilemmas in special education is around identification. Every system has some process for identifying children with special needs. In most systems, "identifying" is attached to getting more money to serve the students. The problem that brings with it is that you create a negative incentive. You create an incentive to identify more and more children because it's a way of bringing in more and more money. Especially in years when overall spending was limited in education, as was the case in this province in some years in the last decade and in other provinces and jurisdictions, the only way, in some cases, school districts could get any more money to run their programs was by identifying more children as having special needs. That's a negative incentive. It also involves a negative portrayal of children, because the way it worked in many provinces—and much of my experience around this was in Manitoba, where I was previously in the ministry, including as deputy minister—was that to get funding, you would have to show that a kid had really bad problems. Of course, that creates kind of a negative spiral also. It's very dispiriting for

everybody, but if you didn't show that the problems were really serious, you couldn't get approval, and then you couldn't get any more money. So there were some negative or perverse incentives built into the system.

One of the challenges we have in special education is that although we put it under one label, it's actually a lot of different things, and the parent advocate community has very different views both within and across what we call exceptionalities. There are people in the parent advocacy community who are very strong believers in inclusion, that every child should be in a regular classroom in a regular school. There are other parent advocates, sometimes of children with similar disabilities, who completely disagree with that and believe that particular children need segregated, special programs and even segregated schools. So we don't have a consensus either in the scholarly research community or in the advocacy community about what we should be doing for different kinds of kids with exceptionalities.

The capacity across our schools and districts is quite variable. As you know, Ontario's school districts range enormously in size, from a few hundred kids to a quarter of a million kids. The capacity of a board in terms of the expertise and the specialists it has or the access to people like psychologists or therapists, depending on where you are in the province geographically, is quite uneven across Ontario.

I was working in Ontario when Bill 82 was brought into place, which was the original special-education legislation, in the early 1980s. I have to say I didn't like the approach then, and I still think that in some ways it was a misconceived approach, because it put into place a very legalistic and formal system where a huge amount rested on processes around documentation. What happened in some cases is that dealing with the documentary and process requirements took precedence over actually thinking about what was the best thing for a student to get.

Because of the whole creation of the IEP and IPRC process, a student who maybe could have benefited a lot from 30 minutes of one-on-one time would never get that time because their need was not severe enough to get them through the whole IPRC process, which was the ticket into getting access to the additional services. So the issue is how to balance what we do around identification, which is important, and around due process requirements, which are obviously very important fundamental justice requirements, with not wanting to turn a system that should be educational into a system that is all about paperwork and process and justifications of actions as opposed to the results coming from the actions, and, again, whether it's about the services we provide or whether it's about the outcomes the students achieve. Those are difficult issues. I don't believe there's a right answer to them, but they continue to be dilemmas that we struggle with.

In the last few years in Ontario, in education altogether, I think it's been a fantastic five years, I have to say. Every student outcome in this province is up

significantly, and, at the same time, morale in the system has improved, so we have an awful lot to be proud of.

To a considerable degree, that is applied to special education. Altogether, our results for special education children have improved on the measures we have available. The gap has gotten somewhat smaller. It's still very large. I don't want to pretend for a minute that this is a problem that has been solved, but there has been a reduction in the gap in performance between kids in special education and other kids.

We've done a lot of work, starting with an expert panel that was around 2003 or 2004, somewhere in there, and then a working table that was established to look at special education issues. One of the big things we did in 2005 was to take away what was called the ISA, individual student amount, which was that process of writing long justifications for why kids really had very big problems and needed more money. We actually removed that, which freed several hundred person-years' worth of time across Ontario. Instead of filling in forms, people could actually be involved in providing services to students. We've said that you don't have to have an IPRC in order to provide services. If there's a judgment that there's a student—this is with parental consent. If parents want an IPRC process, they are absolutely entitled to it. But there are some cases where it makes more sense to provide a service now rather than go through a several-month IPRC process during which time everyone is waiting to see. We've done a lot of work on improving the quality of the IEPs, the individual education plans. Did we bring some of the documents on that, the IEP documents?

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Mr. Barry Finlay: Yes, we did. We have documents with us.

Mr. Ben Levin: Okay. So we have a lot of support documents for districts.

We've done work on mediation and partnering, because special education is an area where there continues to be a lot of conflict between parents and schools. Parents are, absolutely rightly, advocates for their children, and they are pushing the system all the time to provide what they regard as more and better, which is completely their duty and their right to do. I have no argument with that. But it does set up conflict situations, and so we're trying to help, for example, principals learn how to do conflict resolution in a more constructive way so we can work towards win-win solutions more often.

We've done a lot of work on improving teacher capacity, especially the capacity of what I might call regular classroom teachers, to feel that they are capable of working with a large range of students so we're not in a world where, if a teacher sees a challenge, they immediately want the child in a different program or removed or put somewhere else or they feel incapable of dealing with that child. That isn't to say that there aren't some children with very complex needs that are going to be beyond the reach of most classroom teachers to deal with.

We've supported a research program, because one of the critical areas in special education is learning more about how to do it well and learning more about how to get good results. We will learn that over time if we continue to try different things and study how they work.

So just to conclude where we are on this, we're waiting for the report of the Premier's early learning adviser, so there is a commitment to full-day education for four- and five-year-olds, which will help us be able to identify special needs earlier. On many issues—for example, hearing impairment or vision impairment—early identification is absolutely critical. Catching kids when they're a year old or a year and a half and not when they are six and realizing there's a hearing problem is fundamental.

I've talked about research on effective practices and capacity building. We're continuing to do that.

We've got a whole strategy around autism and providing better service to children with various autism spectrum disorder issues that we can speak to if members want.

Of course, there's the perennial challenge in government of working more effectively across the ministry boundaries with our colleagues in health and children and youth services, which we continue to work on.

Chair, with your indulgence, that's a very brief issues overview—it may not have felt very brief to the committee—of a complex field, and I'm quite happy to try to respond to any questions or issues members might have.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Jerry J. Ouellette): Thank you very much. Mr. Hardeman?

Mr. Ernie Hardeman: Thank you very much for the presentation. I do want to say that I appreciate it, because it's one of the areas in education, as you mentioned in your presentation, that's a big challenge. The curriculum for all students seems to work fairly well. The average student goes in and will go through the eight grades and there's nothing more special that's needed. With the special education, obviously, every case is unique, so it's very difficult to come up with something that fits them all.

One of the challenges that I see in the auditor's report, somewhat different than your presentation, is the satisfaction with the successes so far. When I read the auditor's report, that's not what I read in it. Yes, we're improving, but it's not really even measurable, because we don't know how to benchmark and how to say, "Well, this is where we started, and with what we've done for the students so far, this is the positive that has come out of it."

I'll just start with that. I've got it here that there was an organization that did a survey: 36,000 elementary pupils and 4,800 high school students are waiting for an assessment on whether they need services in the province of Ontario. I guess this isn't for the individual school board; this is for the ministry. If there are that many people waiting and the indications are that there's enough need there, that they need an assessment—it says here in the Toronto Star article that the student was in grade 8 and he's been waiting since grade 5 for this assessment.

It seems to me, if there's a special need there, that we've gone past the point of the need being there. If there's an accident, we look at the need and then we apply the solution as quickly as we can, and this seems to me to be one of those cases. Someone has identified that there's a need for an assessment; I think it's time to get on with the assessment. It almost starts to look like, in cases where this assessment is not being done, we will not be fulfilling the need, and that's a concern. Maybe you could answer that for me.

Mr. Ben Levin: Sure, and I think Ms. Connelly can speak to the particular case. Let me say first of all on your initial point that I don't want to suggest for a moment that we think we've got a giant success story in special education or that there isn't a lot more to be done. I don't want to suggest that. I think all of us would recognize that there is much more to be done. There is still a large number of students who are not reaching the level of performance that we know they are capable of reaching, so I don't want to give any implication that I would say that isn't the case. That is clearly the case; there's much more to do. What I would say is that we've had some success in reducing some of the gaps and that's fairly unusual when you look around the world at it.

On assessment, I don't recognize the number on waiting lists. We had a serious waiting list problem three or four years ago and we did actually put quite a significant additional amount of money through the Ontario Psychological Association to do additional assessments over a couple of years, and I think we've brought down that waiting list quite considerably. I'm going to ask Barry if he has more information on where we are with waiting lists in general.

We'd certainly agree on two things about this. First, we'd certainly agree that people should be getting assessments in a timely way—no quarrel with that. No one would say that three years is a reasonable time for that. But the other point I want to make is that we don't want the assessment to be an excuse not to do anything with the child, and I'm sure all my colleagues would say the same thing. We may have to wait a while for an assessment, especially in places where there aren't many psychologists who can provide them, but in the meantime we want to be taking steps that we know are good education practice to try and help that child succeed. So we would certainly not be saying, "Nothing is going to happen until there's assessment," and the assessment might take a year. There's lots we can do in the meantime. Barry, can you speak to the waiting list?

Mr. Barry Finlay: If I may, yes. Thank you, Deputy. The first thing is that in the results of the OPA project we did find that there were significant reductions in the waiting lists, as was already indicated, but not where we want to be, obviously. But 34% of 75 school boards reported reductions greater than 33% as a result of the OPA project, 20% of the boards reported an impact on wait times, and 3% reported no reductions in wait times, so we do have that statistical analysis. An important part of the OPA project for us was a realignment of the focus of

the assessments to directly instruct the classroom teacher with respect to instruction in the classroom. Often, psychological assessments did not speak directly to teachers and therefore they could not be implemented quickly in support of children. Part of working with the psychological association was for them to refine the nature of their assessments so that, in fact, teachers can grasp exactly what the needs of the child are and can begin to implement something.

Mr. Ernie Hardeman: I guess this study here in this newspaper article was in fact in 2008. So we're looking at the end of the improvement, not at the start of the process. Adding the two together, we're looking at some 40,000 students waiting for an assessment. Is that not a correct number, or do we not know what the number is supposed to be?

Mr. Barry Finlay: I would have to say that we will need to do further research and bring back that information for you so that we can look at that figure specifically.

Mr. Ernie Hardeman: Thank you. I'm not trying to find fault. I just read that article, and not being directly involved, one gets concerned if we have 40,000 students who need assessment. And we're happy with the results? I'm more concerned about being happy with the results, if that's the right number, than I am concerned with the number itself.

1300

Mr. Ben Levin: I'll just say again that I'm not suggesting that we're happy with where we are. I'm suggesting that we've made some progress and there's a lot more to do. Forty thousand—I don't know the source of it; I haven't seen the study. It seems a high number to me, given that we only have about—how many kids do we have in special education all together?

Mr. Barry Finlay: Two hundred and ninety thousand.

Mr. Ben Levin: Two hundred and ninety thousand. So this would be like a 15% increase, which would be larger than the increase we've had over the last five years in total. It just seems high to me.

Mr. Ernie Hardeman: I really appreciate that. I understand that one of the boards doesn't do as many formal assessments as the others do. Is there a quicker way? According to the auditor, it's a possibility that in fact it's more cost-effective to give treatment based on the initial assessment that can be done without the psychologist and provide treatment, rather than spending all our time and waiting for the assessment and then missing the treatment because we don't have the capabilities.

Ms. Gerry Connelly: Can I speak? First of all, we have about 2,200 students at this point in time, and we have 40,000 students having special education programs that are on the waiting list. That 40,000 does sound high for the province, because we have a significant number. However, I do want to say that we take that very seriously. With the addition of the OPA funding, we've been able to reduce the time from seven months to four months. So we have an average of four months in terms of our waiting period.

I'm sorry, the other question that you asked was about the—

Mr. Ernie Hardeman: About the full assessment or to do with the—

Ms. Gerry Connelly: Of the 40,000 students who are taking the special education programs, 20,000 of them have had IPRC. For a whole variety of reasons, parents choose not to go through the process, particularly many parents who do not have English as a first language. We have a lot of mobility in our system. There are many reasons why parents choose not to be identified, but whether or not they choose to be identified, during that waiting period we have special programs in our schools that have intensive resources so that, even while they're waiting to be identified, they have access to those resources, and that includes students who are waiting to be identified as well as students who aren't identified but have IEPs.

Mr. Ernie Hardeman: Go ahead.

Mr. Gordon Campbell: Thank you. If I may, in Simcoe county, I would suggest that our profile is very similar to Gerry's, inasmuch as we have about 9,000 students who are on IEPs, in a base population of a little over 50,000 students. So with 9,000 students who have IEPs, we're giving support and service—additional support. Of those, about 4,500 have been formally identified, which in many instances means that there will have been a formal process of assessment and so forth done by psychologists and so forth.

That being said, the moment we, within the school community, determine there's a need, we have strengths-and-needs meetings. We start programming immediately; we do not wait until an assessment has been completed formally to start providing support and service. Our wait period is just over three months at this current time, and because of the additional resources provided through the ministry, we've been able to reduce our wait time, too. So we're looking at just over three months at the present time, if it's deemed appropriate to do an assessment formally by a psychologist etc.

Mr. Ernie Hardeman: Did you say that the numbers—did I get that right? Nine thousand students, of which 4,500 have been identified?

Mr. Gordon Campbell: I said approximately just over 50,000 students in the system, about 9,000 students receiving extra help, and of that, 4,500—about half of those students—have a formal IPRC in place. I think that would seem similar to what Gerry had said with Toronto, inasmuch as about half of the students had a formal process and there were still additional students getting support.

Mr. Ernie Hardeman: I have a thing here on my desk that—I guess it must have been brought in by someone. Again, I'd just like some explanation. It's from a parent speaking of the Auditor General's report, "of the ineffective and poorly evaluated programs that now exist in the public school system in Ontario for learning-disabled children. As the Auditor General pointed out, even though the Ministry of Education has put many

more millions of dollars into the system in recent years, the programs still continue to be mediocre."

Can I get some comment on that from the deputy as to whether you agree or disagree, or why a parent—my big concern is not so much what is happening in the system, but that the message sure doesn't seem to be getting out to the parents about the improvements we're making.

Mr. Ben Levin: I would say that if we're talking about learning disability, I don't think you'd find anybody in the education system who felt that we were doing a fantastic job, because I think the reality is that we still don't actually know entirely—or let's say there is disagreement among experts as to what a learning disability is, how many students have them or how they are to be best managed from an education point of view. There is a group of researchers who believe that there is a physiological base to learning disabilities. There's another group of researchers who believe that there are hardly any children who have a learning disability that is physiological and that most of it is sociopsychological in some sense. Of course, the nature of the treatment is highly variable, depending on what you think is the organic or non-organic basis of the problem. So there's a lot of disagreement about that.

There is also a lot of disagreement in the parent community about what is the best thing for their children. There are parents of learning-disabled children who want those children in full-time special programs in separate classrooms, and there are other parents of learning-disabled children who want their children fully integrated in regular classes 100% of the time. So it is a challenge for schools to respond because we don't have a body of knowledge that says—let me use a medical analogy. If you have appendicitis, we know what to do about that. But if you have regular headaches, it turns out we don't know what to do about regular headaches, or chronic back pain, let's say. These are two very widespread ailments that we don't know what to do about. We don't know what the interventions are, so we have hundreds of thousands of people who suffer from regular headaches or back pain who go and see doctors and get told, "Try this and try that," and it doesn't work. You have lots of people saying, "I've got the cure for backache. Take my treatment; take my pill; do my exercises; follow my diet." The fact is, most of those have not been subject to rigorous evaluation and we do not know whether they are efficacious. But they are certainly being promoted and there are certainly people writing letters to the editor and posting on blogs, "If only the system would adopt my treatment, all would be well with the world." I'm very skeptical of those claims. I'd like to see them tested empirically.

There is a need to do more empirical testing and research on the various approaches we're using. I think we would all say that's the case. This is an area in which we need to do a lot more research. But I'm personally skeptical of claims, "We know what the answer is," because if we knew that—I'd want to see the evidence.

Mr. Ernie Hardeman: Thank you.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Jerry J. Ouellette): Mr. Marchese.

Mr. Rosario Marchese: I'm just going to review your presentation first and then, in the next round, I hope to be able to tackle all the questions that the Auditor General has provided, and it's rich in detail.

Your first page on special education, I'm not sure—is this a public document?

Mr. Ben Levin: I would certainly regard it as such.

Mr. Rosario Marchese: Okay. You say, "Steadily growing incidence rates and expenditure pressure everywhere."

Mr. Ben Levin: Yes.

Mr. Rosario Marchese: And the next sentence is, "Much less evidence of results." So you spent a great deal of money, which is bad, presumably, because the result is not there; and the incidence rate is growing, which is bad, because for some reason—we don't know why that's happening. And then your following remark is that there's less evidence of results. How do you know that?

Mr. Ben Levin: We know that in a number of ways. The first thing is, let's recognize that the 290,000 students who are currently receiving special education services cover a huge gamut of different kinds of care. We're talking from kids who have very severe multiple disorders—

Mr. Rosario Marchese: Yes, we have the whole list.

Mr. Ben Levin: That's right—to kids who are gifted, on the other hand, in fact. When we're talking about evidence of results, we're using the EQAO results in grade 3 and grade 6, and we're comparing whether kids who are in special education are making at least similar progress to the whole school population. That's one measure we're using.

1310

Mr. Rosario Marchese: I want to get to it later, because you say in your final page that, lo and behold, the EQAO results show better results. How did that happen? Magically? If this didn't work, how, all of a sudden, through your—I'll get to it; it doesn't have a page. It says, "Considerable success—better results," but if it was failing all along, how do you get a better result?

Mr. Ben Levin: My first slide is talking about special education internationally. If you look at special education around the world, this is the pattern you've seen over the last 10, 15 or 20 years, which is steadily growing incidence rates, pressure on expenditure and less evidence that we are actually able to create the improvements we want for those children.

Mr. Rosario Marchese: Okay.

Mr. Ben Levin: So what we want, for example, is, if we're identifying a lot of children as having learning disabilities—let's take that example—or having behavioural issues, and we're saying that we have something we're going to do with those kids, then what we would want to see over a period of time is that those disabilities did not interfere with their progress, that those kids caught up—

Mr. Rosario Marchese: I understand. I'm just trying to follow the logic of the argument you present, and it doesn't make sense to me. That's why I was putting it to you. There's much less evidence of results, and you said twice that there's success at reducing the gap.

Mr. Ben Levin: Yes, in Ontario in the last few years.

Mr. Rosario Marchese: So only in the last few years have we been able to be successful at reducing the gap because whatever we did in the past was bad, and we have evidence of it. It was not good, because we have evidence of it. It didn't work, because we have evidence of that.

Mr. Ben Levin: I wouldn't say it was bad; I would say that people were making their best efforts, given what they knew at the time. But we know more now, so I think what's happened is, we've looked at those patterns that were in place. We've tried some different things and we've found that some of the things we've done in the last few years had more impact.

Mr. Rosario Marchese: I want to get to that, because you say different things about that on page 3, and I'll get to that in a second. On your page which says, "Why?" it says, "Early successes in defined areas—physical and mental disability—where it was clear what the problem was and we had approaches to improvement." I'm assuming here that what you're saying is, in some areas, physical and mental, you've had successes without an IPRC—I'm assuming this is what it means; right?

Mr. Ben Levin: No. This goes back to even before Bill 82, but certainly most of those students would have been IPRC'd, yes; in fact, all of them, essentially.

Mr. Rosario Marchese: So it says, "where it was clear what the problem was." How do we know where it was clear? A regular teacher doesn't have a good sense or the knowledge—because I didn't—to understand a special education problem. Regular teachers do not have that training, although you say along the way that teachers are getting it. I don't believe that, by the way.

Mr. Ben Levin: Well, I can't agree with you on that, I'm afraid.

Mr. Rosario Marchese: I knew you wouldn't, but my sense is that you don't have the resources to give individual regular teachers the ability to recognize a disability of sorts, mental or physiological.

Mr. Ben Levin: I think that depends enormously on the nature of the disability. It doesn't take a huge amount of skill on the part of a teacher to recognize that you have a student who can't see. We know that when you have students who can't see, you can provide support for them, you can provide Braille, you can provide assistive technologies, and those kids now do much better than they used to because we provide those supports.

Mr. Rosario Marchese: You're quite right. If someone is struggling with their eyesight, most of the times you can see it, although with my step-grand-daughter we didn't recognize it. It took some time.

Mr. Ben Levin: Exactly.

Mr. Rosario Marchese: Maybe a teacher might be able to see it—I don't know—but we didn't see it.

Mr. Ben Levin: That's right. That has improved. I'd use another example with physical disabilities—

Mr. Rosario Marchese: But some instances are obvious to us. As teachers, we know, for example, that there's a problem. I don't know what to do, but I recognize there's a problem.

Mr. Ben Levin: Right.

Mr. Rosario Marchese: So unless a parent initiates an IPRC, and I as a teacher don't insist or don't call the parent and say, "By the way, you might want to do this," or, if I don't tell the principal, "By the way, there's a problem. We should do an IPRC because I don't know what the problem is, but there is a problem," that problem could persist for quite some time. Is that not true?

Mr. Ben Levin: It could, although I would say that the case now is that teachers are very sensitive to the fact that they have students who aren't performing well. When students aren't performing well, they call in their support team—and my colleague could speak about this—in their districts and they start to say, "I'm not having success with this kid. Help me understand what I need to do."

Mr. Rosario Marchese: Quite right, except in his report—and I'm going to get to it when I have some time—he points out something we're all aware of: that some students don't get any help for four years. So you say this and I understand it intellectually, but we know that there are huge problems out there, in spite of what we say in this room.

But moving on to the trending, because I want to challenge some of the things you say: "Areas of incidence ... are vague, [there is] disagreement as to what they are, whether they exist, how to measure them..."

"In many cases they don't have effective interventions, raising [the] issue of how valuable the diagnosis is" even, and, "Puts pressure on having services instead of results." Your last point, "Puts pressure on having services instead of results"—are they not connected?

Mr. Ben Levin: That's the issue: Are they connected or are they not? Because it is quite possible to give people services that don't produce any results.

Mr. Rosario Marchese: So how do you have an outcome without a service?

Mr. Ben Levin: Well, the outcome could be, for example, through a different way of teaching a student in a school. The outcome could be about modifying some of the curriculum expectations. That isn't what I would call a service—

Mr. Rosario Marchese: It could be.

Mr. Ben Levin: It could be.

Mr. Rosario Marchese: But are kids getting it? I understand you make the point about results and outcomes, and I just don't know what it means. I understand what you're saying in terms of what people could or may be doing, but in some cases with special education, I think a lot of these poor kids are struggling on their own, including parents. I put to you that if we provide the services that we hope are effective through an IPRC, we will get the better outcome, particularly in the IEP; if we continually follow it, the result, hopefully, will be better.

Mr. Ben Levin: Well, it's a reasonable, logical case. I wonder whether there is a lot of empirical evidence for it.

There are certainly parents who feel that they are not being well served, parents of special education children. I'm sure all of my colleagues—I should ask them to speak to this, because they're on the ground dealing with it. All of us know that there are parents who feel the school is not sufficiently attentive to the needs of their children, and I have no doubt that sometimes—at least sometimes—they are correct in that; I have no doubt about that. That remains an issue; how well, how quickly, how positively we respond to parental concerns absolutely remains an issue. But it doesn't follow that because somebody says, "My kid should have an aid," giving that kid an aid will result in any better outcomes or learning from the student.

Mr. Rosario Marchese: That I understand. But if in IPRC, the identification, placement and review committee, you have the various people there—the parents, the principal and/or supervisor, the psychologist, sometimes, if you have them; if not, you use someone else—presumably you get to a close understanding of what the issue might be, and then there's a plan and you work toward it. They may be wrong, is what you're saying; I understand that. But if we don't have that tool, we have nothing else.

Mr. Ben Levin: I would say—again, I'm going to ask my colleagues to respond to this too—that we have things that help us understand students' needs that do not require an IPRC. There are many student problems where we have a level of expertise and we do not need, necessarily—now, if a parent wants an IPRC, they are entitled to have one, and we provide one.

Mr. Rosario Marchese: I understand. Some parents don't understand the whole notion of IPRC so some parents don't even ever get to it. But I don't mind the other experts commenting as well, to help out, because I want to get to that issue, because I find it troublesome, by the way; I really do. And it's identified in the report, so I will get to it.

But you talk about this debate. We had the Auditor General do a report in 2001. We've known since 2001—this is an old issue—that we've got problems. He points out that there's some improvement, but overall the problems are the same. So you might argue, "Oh, the debate continues. It rages on. Parents disagree, perhaps educators disagree, experts disagree as to whether or not problems are physiological or socio-psychological, how you do an assessment, what is a learning disability"—all these questions. At some point, if we don't have any sense of clarity as a board, as a ministry—and I speak to the ministry, because I'm not fond of boards doing their own thing; I really am not. I think it's a mistake. Even where they do it better, I think it's a mistake. I believe that the ministry has to have a sense of what needs to be done and then prescribe through boards what must be done. If we don't have that, we have a problem.

So we've had this debate for quite some time: "We need to do more research"—and on another page you talk

about doing more research. I think to myself, “This will never end.” We’re going to research ourselves to death in terms of what we can and should be doing.

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Mr. Ben Levin: Yes, it will never end, that is true, because we are constantly learning about what constitutes effective practice, just as the struggle to learn more about how to provide effective health care will never end. It’s not like we now know. Let me use health analogies again. We have people who are receiving treatment for various health problems. Sometimes we know what to do and we do it. Sometimes we don’t know what to do, so we try the best thing we know, right?

Mr. Rosario Marchese: I understand.

Mr. Ben Levin: That’s where we are in this field. There are a lot of areas where we don’t know what the best thing is, but what I would say is that the practices that we’ve had in place in Ontario in the last five years have been the practices which the available research and evidence suggest are the most effective practices to produce good outcomes for children. I wouldn’t say that’s the case for every single kid; of course not, but that’s been the approach.

Mr. Rosario Marchese: So let’s try to be clear: Past practices, whatever they were, were not as effective as they should be. Is that a fair statement?

Mr. Ben Levin: Some of them, yes.

Mr. Rosario Marchese: Have we moved to a different practice in the ministry?

Mr. Ben Levin: In some areas, of course we have.

Mr. Rosario Marchese: Vis-à-vis special ed?

Mr. Ben Levin: Yes.

Mr. Rosario Marchese: What are these practices now that are different from before? Because it’s not clear to me.

Mr. Ben Levin: For example, we’ve changed the way in which we think about the IEP/IPRC relationship. We’ve changed the content of what we want in the IEPs. We’ve changed the way in which we expect schools and boards to interact with parents. We’ve changed the role of resource teachers, to a considerable extent. We’ve put in much more assistive technology, which didn’t exist at all 10 or 15 years ago. There’s a whole variety of things.

Mr. Rosario Marchese: Okay. So let’s talk about your first point: the IEP, because—

Ms. Gerry Connelly: If I may add, one of the things that is helping us is the ability to collect, analyze and use information. The government has recently provided significant dollars to help us set up databases. We feel that being able to provide information not only to our teachers—our teachers are becoming much more sensitive to and understanding of the special needs of kids; they’re much more focused—but the other thing is that we need good information and we need to be able to share it with parents. One of the biggest challenges we have is being able to give parents honest, transparent information that’s useful—

Mr. Rosario Marchese: Right. Let me ask you, Gerry—I understand the point. I wanted to get to the

auditor’s report in the questions, so I’m going to try to link it here, because both of you mentioned this. In terms of different practices that you didn’t have before: You changed the content of the IEP. The Auditor General says that when they looked at some of the evidence in terms of what is contained in the IEP, in some of the cases you don’t have any clear follow-up about what should be done on a regular basis. Is that correct?

Mr. Jim McCarter: Yes, we found cases in the IEP where they had improved since 2001. We did find a number of cases where we felt they should be better documented, and also more tracking as to the progress a student was making to reduce that gap.

Mr. Rosario Marchese: Right, but that problem still continues to be serious, is that not correct, based on your evidence?

Mr. Jim McCarter: Yes, there’s still some evidence of that.

Mr. Rosario Marchese: So you’re saying to me that you’ve changed that. Since when?

Mr. Barry Finlay: If I may respond to that: Actually, it has been an iterative process probably for the last seven or eight years in terms of continuously improving both the content and, I would say, the process for the delivery of IEPs. Most recently, we have now established a website with the Council of Directors of Education where we have a series of examples in both French and English of what we believe to be effective IEPs that in fact will address a number of the issues that you have identified. We are planning to do another review of all boards, as we did a year ago, including parents—

Mr. Rosario Marchese: But Barry, you admit that the Auditor General finds that this is still a big problem, that there’s a big gap between 2001, when we did that study, and 2009. In that eight-year period, our success has not been that huge in dealing with that. Is that a fair assessment, or no?

Mr. Barry Finlay: What we would admit to is that we still have a long way to go to really improve our IEPs and make them as effective as we want them to be as instructional tools.

Mr. Rosario Marchese: Okay. I know you have a website, and I’m not a big fan of these things, because people say, “Oh, it’s a 1-800 number,” and, “We’ve got a website,” but you’ve got to know how to get to it. If you don’t know how to get to it, you’re never going to get to it, which means that this useful information may or may not be seen and/or used by teachers who could be using it. Do you have any other mechanism, through supervisors and/or principals, to make sure that this actually happens?

Ms. Gerry Connelly: If I could speak to that: One of the big advantages of a lot of the council of directors initiatives that were funded by the ministry is that it’s allowed—and we know that we need to do a lot of work on our IEPs, and we believe we have improved. But it really requires a teacher to understand modifications and to modify results. The way to understand and improve is to share best practices, to actually look at things that are

working and then have conversations, to build networks of teachers and help teachers and principals understand.

One of the things that has been happening in the last few years that has been really significant in this province is the ability to develop and to share best practices, because that's one of the major ways we could look, but we recognize we have more to do.

Mr. Rosario Marchese: I understand the notion of best practices intellectually. I just don't know how it trickles down. It's like the trickle-down economy, where people say that the wealth trickles down, and it usually doesn't. But I understand the notion of best practices. The question is, how do we make sure that every teacher gets it?

Ms. Gerry Connelly: We do it in a variety of ways. One of the things we've learned about professional development is that it doesn't help to haul teachers out and deliver messages to them; what works is to have what we call learning coaches. In our schools we have what we call learning coaches and resource people, who actually work with individual teachers. Gord has done a wonderful job with his IEP. I'm a new teacher, and we have a lot of them: Out of our 17,000 teachers every year, we have about 1,200 new teachers. I'm a new teacher, so I'm going to go and take time—I have the time now—to sit down and talk to him, and he's going to explain to me, and I have an expert coming from the office who has been trained and worked with the—

Mr. Rosario Marchese: I understand the concept. My daughter is a primary teacher.

Ms. Gerry Connelly: So she does the same.

Mr. Rosario Marchese: I haven't talked to her much about this, but she's not getting any of this expertise. I just put it out, because I know what you're saying and I believe that in some cases it's happening, but I believe that in a lot of cases it isn't. I don't mean to criticize; I mean to say it because I think a lot of these kids who desperately need help are not getting it. That's my point.

If I can go on—because there's just so much and we never have enough time. “Divergence”—

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Jerry J. Ouellette): You have about one minute, Mr. Marchese.

Mr. Rosario Marchese: How many?

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Jerry J. Ouellette): A minute.

Mr. Rosario Marchese: Good heavens.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Jerry J. Ouellette): In this round.

Mr. Rosario Marchese: “Access to specialized staff and resources is uneven.” I believe that. So if that is true, what are we doing about it?

Mr. Ben Levin: It's a very difficult challenge, because it's the same issue as we have in all specialized professions across Ontario: It is very hard to get highly skilled professionals into the more rural and remote parts of the province. We make continued efforts around that, through advertising, through sharing resources across boards, through salary agreements, but in fact it's the same challenge we've had in this country about physician supply, and I haven't seen anybody figure it out yet.

Mr. Rosario Marchese: I have to tell you, I went to Windsor many years ago, and they couldn't do the IPRCs in most cases because they didn't have the specialized staff. I'm sure that continues, like in the north, where there is unevenness. Unless we deal with that, that means that a whole lot of people are not going to get the help.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Jerry J. Ouellette): Thank you, Mr. Marchese. Mrs. Sandals.

Mrs. Liz Sandals: I wonder if we could think for a minute about how special education is delivered, because in the vast majority of cases, students who either have been identified or who have an individual education plan are placed in the regular classroom. There are some kids who are in self-contained classes, which would normally be taught by people with special education specialist qualifications. But most of the kids are placed in the regular classroom, and it may be the regular teacher who works with the SERT on modifying the program. There may be withdrawal; there may be some support from an educational assistant. I wonder, given that that's the front line of people who are dealing with the child in the classroom, if you could talk a bit first of all from the ministry's perspective on initiatives that we've taken to provide more professional development at the classroom level for how to manage various exceptionalities, and then perhaps the directors could talk about how that's played out in some of their own boards.

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Mr. Ben Levin: Sure. Let me just make a very quick comment and then ask Barry Finlay to respond.

The Ontario education system is a big system: two million students, roughly, and 120,000 teachers. So when we talk about trying to change practice across that big system—and that is what we're talking about—we are talking about a big, complicated, multi-year endeavour. I think all of us would recognize that this is not a matter of giving people a new booklet or a new policy memorandum. We have many expectations for our teachers: We expect them to be excellent at teaching kids in their basic subject areas; we expect them to be respecters and understanding of diversity; we expect them to be able to work with special education needs; we expect them to deal effectively with parents and communities; we expect them to be good communicators in the public and through their report cards—it's a challenging job. When we ask thousands and thousands of teachers to change their practice in significant ways, that's a very complicated undertaking. I don't think any of us think we're ever entirely successful with it—which isn't to say that we haven't made some useful steps.

Barry can respond more specifically on the question.

Mr. Barry Finlay: Thank you. Let me start with the significant gains we believe have been made in the system as a result of the Council of Ontario Directors of Education projects. Every board in the system, in fact, embraced that, and we had over 72 projects involved over a period of three years. As a result of those, there were two symposia that took place where sharing took place, where the individual boards provided the evidence

to demonstrate to the other boards why the practices that they put in place were effective. Therefore, they were able to take them away with them. So the CODE projects actually function very well for us.

We have now instituted compulsory PA days, professional activity days, for special education for each board annually. Most recently, we provided supports in two areas: one with respect to the implementation of fundamental practices of the Education for All document, which has been very well received in the province, to facilitate the implementation of that document not only in our elementary schools, but also in our secondary schools. The other, specifically, was strategies with respect to improving individual education plans. This was an opportunity for us to get to every teacher through the professional activity days. Now that they are in fact legislated, we will continue to use that process.

A very important area is the area of assistive technology. We really believe that this is an opportunity for us to provide supports for a number of children with whom we have not been really successful in the past. The symposium that we had two years ago we believe has been very effective. We had a number of presenters at that symposium, as well as different programs that have been embraced by the province and are being utilized in classrooms now.

The focus for us really, very importantly, as has been identified earlier, is around improving IEPs. We believe that they are a critical, levered opportunity for us to improve instruction for children, and we will continue to provide additional supports in that area.

Mrs. Liz Sandals: Okay. I must comment that—those of you around the table know that I have a past life as a school trustee and I actually spent, I don't know, six or nine years of that as a member of my board's SEAC, special education advisory committee. The number of times that people advocated to find some way of educating every classroom teacher about special education—I mean, this was the grand wish. To have a legislated directive that every teacher needs to participate in a professional activity day that's focused on special education is huge in terms of what we all advocated for, for years and years and years.

So maybe now the directors could tell us how those projects are falling out on the ground in your respective boards, which are actually quite different.

Mr. John De Faveri: Thank you. I'll give a couple of specific examples, but perhaps I'd like to start off with just a general comment in terms of what I believe are some significant changes in terms of disposition of teachers in general across the province with respect to special education, because as long as we continue to view special education as an isolated entity, we get into the continuing challenge that we've had around separate silos. I think what we need to really do is to say, "What is the reference to special education?" Special education, in my mind, at least, is about giving every single teacher in the province of Ontario a skill set that will allow them to be the absolute best, precise person that they can be in

intervening with any student who happens to be in their classroom.

There is, in my mind, a growing sense of shared ownership, accountability and responsibility for the performance of all students. In our board, and Barry mentioned it, we did have our special education day rooted around the Education for All document. We had specific things that we wanted to do within the context of that day, focusing on two very concrete areas.

One of the things that we wanted to do was to set the framework for what we are rolling out in Thunder Bay Catholic in September of this year. One of the strategies that was identified within the document was called PALS—peer-assisted learning strategies. Our attempt was not to make it look like it was an isolated special education initiative; rather, we took concrete steps at the consultant and coordinator level to ensure that when we were wanting to implement PALS for September it was rolled out to the system not as an isolated entity—one department within the board has an idea that we want to roll out to our kindergarten to grade 3 teachers. It was done to say, "This is a joint initiative of a special education curriculum." We're rolling it out as an initiative, a tier-one, early intervention strategy, which is what we're looking at as a board and focusing our energy on, to say, "If we can capture the students at the entry point, we believe that the long-term benefits are going to be there." Taking that approach allows us to expose each and every single one of our teachers to the precision that we're looking for in terms of their interaction with students. So when we take other initiatives—and, again, that's why it's difficult for me to look at special education as just an independent silo.

The ministry has undertaken, through the Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat, things like moderated marking, and teaching and learning critical pathways. Teachers are engaged together daily in terms of how they can develop a much greater, a much more precise assessment identification mindset. If we can do that with all of our teachers, then it isn't what was around—when I started teaching 30 years ago, it was very easy to say, "I'm a classroom teacher, but I don't have the skill set to be able to deal with this, so it's going to become the responsibility of the special education teacher," as if they had something magical in their arsenal that I didn't know about. That has changed dramatically. There are more classroom teachers—at least I can speak to you about Thunder Bay Catholic—who are on the road to improving their assessment techniques. They're on the road to improving their early intervention techniques so that, at the end of the day, our hope is that fewer students would require such invasive strategies, and it will be the few we really need to attend to.

I can give you some stats on our board; in fact, we support more non-identified students than we do identified students. For all of us in education, we've heard the message of the moral imperative to our students. Just because there are some roadblocks, either with a parent or wait lists, the question is not about when the assess-

ment is happening; the question should be, “What are you doing as an educational institution in that intervening time, when you recognize that a student needs support, in terms of those intervention strategies?”

In our board, there’s a difference of—and we don’t have many—20 students—560 versus 580 students—whom we are supporting through our special education funding. But the imbalances are with those who are not identified, because we recognize that if we don’t intervene now, we’re going to pay the price for that further down the road.

I guess, in a nutshell, my caution is always to not look at special education as an isolated entity. It is about the rest of the teachers. There are other branches of the ministry that are doing some remarkable things in terms of improving the skill set with our teachers, and I think that’s where we’re going to see the most significant change and the most significant improvement.

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Mr. Gordon Campbell: If I may, unfortunately, I have 38 years in now. “Thirty” sounds so young.

Mrs. Liz Sandals: White hair’s a good thing.

Mr. Gordon Campbell: Yes, it is.

I might just bring some quick reflections on what I have experienced over 38 years, when I reflect back to what it was like in 1970. There have been huge shifts in the province in the last five to 10 years. One of the most significant shifts has been our ability to use, collate and collect data in a meaningful way. When I was a teacher in the 1970s, it was not uncommon for the teachers in the staffroom to talk about what was happening, or so they thought. On occasion, we would read an article that was put on the staffroom wall, or not. When we got to the 21st century, suddenly, information was being shared—research information, information that was happening in other countries and other jurisdictions. Best practices became widespread knowledge. So we’ve had the ability for a number of years to be aware of the cutting-edge best practices. Are they always best practices? Sometimes they’re opinions of what might constitute a best practice, but we’ve been able to avail ourselves, through professional development and various learning communities, of a lot of new information. That’s one thing that has really changed in the last 40 years.

But equally important to me is not just that we have new information, but that we can apply the new information in a meaningful way. So as a director of education, I dare say that 40 years ago I would not likely know how each and every child was doing if I asked for that information each and every day. We are now moving toward that point in time when, through the use of technology and data collection, we are able to access information about students. We can track students, and because we are able to track information on students routinely and in a meaningful way, we can look at trend data over time. The net result of that is that we can have more informed discussions with our teachers, principals and supervisory officers.

One of the things the ministry has done in the last few years that I think is exceptionally significant—I’ll say that there are two in particular. One is the coordination of the student information systems through OnSIS and MIS and so forth, which has allowed school boards to share information not only with the ministry but also with one another. That has been most helpful, so that we can make the transition for students leaving and going from one system to another more transparent. That has been a huge saving in educational time.

The second thing that I would suggest that the ministry has done has been to focus on professional development for directors. I dare say, at a point in time, directors may have been perceived as people who coordinate the organizations as business managers, but I think that there’s an expectation from the ministry that directors now are educational leaders, and as such, I would suggest that directors spend a significant portion of their day on the educational side of what is a best practice.

Supervisory officers who are responsible for education within the schools and work with the principals spend much more time than I did as a superintendent on going into schools and supporting principals, and similarly, principals working with teachers. That is the result of the ministry putting the focus on changing practice in a K-to-12 environment. We no longer just talk about special education as an isolated silo, as was mentioned; we talk about students progressing through the K-to-12 continuum. A student may have special needs, that is true, but we’re looking at the K-to-12 curriculum as a package because there are expectations to meet the ministry targets of having a higher proportion of our students graduate. Whether or not you are special needs, there’s still an expectation that we are going to do everything we can to support you in graduating.

Mrs. Liz Sandals: Gerry, did you want to dive in too?

Ms. Gerry Connelly: I do. I will reaffirm and endorse everything my colleague said, and I will try not to repeat it, but I certainly would like to point out that one of the major things that we’ve done is break down the silos and work together.

I just want to provide some context, because I think the deputy talked about choices in a system. In our system, we have multiple choices. About 78% of our students are integrated into our regular classes. I understand that the provincial level is about 80%. We have what we consider to be congregated sites with students with multiple exceptionalities, and there are about 360 of those students in seven sites. Then we also have sites that are not congregated, but they’re designated for students who may—very often, parents would choose to send their students to these sites. We have about 1,500 students in these. The rest of the 40,000—and as pointed out, only half of them are IPRC—are in regular schools in a variety of models of integration.

One of the things about which I totally agree with my colleagues here—and we actually haven’t talked about this before, so it’s interesting to hear—is that we are

committed to making sure that every single teacher is sensitive to and understands what best practice is.

We have in our schools a program that we—first of all, in some of our schools we integrate the students for half a day, and for half a day they're in a special program with trained people. We also have teachers who are taken out of the school once every two weeks and given special in-service training so that when they go back to do the half-day, they have the luxury of the best practice. That's part of our training.

We also have regular professional development. We have a consultant assigned to every single one of our family of schools. We have special training in areas like autistic etc.

But the one thing that I do as a director is I have conversations with my superintendents. I ask them to identify all of the students in their family of schools who are not performing at the provincial standard, and that includes students with exceptionalities, IEPs. Some of them actually come with names of students, because they go into the schools and find out who they are. We look at what you can do between September and January to move the students: what's working and what isn't working. I have 24 family-of-school superintendents. We sit in groups of six and talk about that. If they're not moving, then the question is, why aren't they moving and what do we need to do that's better?

The other thing we ask the teachers is, "Do you think that these students can move at least half a level in six months?" If a teacher says no, we talk to the teacher and say, "Why are you saying that?" Because if we don't believe a student can learn, obviously they can't learn.

One of the things that has been very advantageous in the province is that we've been able to learn about and share effective instructional strategies. We have a list of instructional strategies that have been demonstrated to be successful. So the superintendents work with the principals and ask the teachers, "How many of these instructional strategies are you using on those students who are not moving? If not, why not? And are there other things you could do?" Sometimes we find that teachers—and I'm going back to what Mr. Marchese said—are not doing this for a whole variety of reasons, maybe because they don't know about it. The question is, let's be strategic. Let's find out which teachers are not doing this and let's work with them.

What we're trying to do—I think you both talked about how the ability to have the conversation in a meaningful way is a major breakthrough. Thanks to all of the work that has been done in the province, it has given us a way of having the conversation. When you have a conversation that's meaningful, you have to start with data; otherwise, it's not meaningful. So the superintendents come with data. The superintendents go to the principals and ask them about the data. Then they use that as a starting point for the conversations. That has been extremely valuable, and that has worked very well in all of our schools, because we expect improvement in each

and every one of our schools, whether they're congregated sites or in regular classrooms.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Jerry J. Ouellette): Thank you, Mrs. Sandals. Mr. Hardeman.

Mr. Ernie Hardeman: Thank you all for the very good presentations. I'm not nearly as qualified to speak about the intricacies of special education and the needs and challenges that you face. I guess I'm just a politician who gets to ask questions related to what the auditor found when he looked at how our program was working on behalf of the people of Ontario.

We were told that from 2001, when he looked at it last time, to 2008, when he looked at it this time, there was "some" improvement—not significant improvement, but "some" improvement.

I guess my first question would be, what about all the students who were missed in that time? We're getting better, but how long can we just keep making one step at a time and watching all the students get missed who need that special help? Because seven years later, there's a whole new group of students.

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We talk about the waiting list. We've made it shorter, but what do we need to do so we don't have a waiting list? Obviously, the people who are on the waiting list are missing out on services they need to fulfill their full potential in life. So what do we do? I guess that's the question. That's why we're here discussing this, not to see whether education is working well and whether the school boards are doing everything they're supposed to generally. We're talking specifically about what we need to do as a society to make special education more responsive to the students who need it.

From the auditor's report and from what I'm hearing today, I'm hearing an awful lot of, "We're working on it, but we don't know exactly what to do." At some point, we have to decide at least what it is we're going to do to try to make it better or to make it as good as it can be made.

Mr. Ben Levin: I think we actually have quite a clear strategy for improvement that we've been carrying out over a number of years. Now, I do want to say in regard to the auditor's report that there isn't anything in that report that says there is a problem with teaching or with outcomes, because the review is really primarily a review of documentation. We would all say that the outcomes aren't where we want them to be, but primarily what the auditor looked at, which is his mandate, of course, is the documentation. They did not observe teaching practices. They did not observe interactions between teachers and parents. So we're inferring from what's in the files about what's the actual practice, and that's always a bit tricky to do, because of course people may be doing lots of things that aren't actually written about in the file. So I need to make that as a starting comment.

In terms of strategy, I think I've tried to outline what our strategy is. The main element of our strategy is to help every classroom teacher get better at working with

diverse students. That's the single most important thing to do.

The second thing we're trying to do is learn more about what effective practices are, so that we can give our educators better guidance and direction on what practices they should be using and which practices will be most effective with students.

The third thing is—

Mr. Ernie Hardeman: If I could just stop you for a moment there, there's an old adage about, "If you don't know where you're going, every road will get you there." One of the things that's very specific in the auditor's report is that we don't have a measurement of success. We don't know how well we're doing except that in certain cases the test scores have gone up. An awful lot of the special needs in our special education system are not measured by test results. As we have the ability to instruct and help the instructors get the message across, there must be some way we can measure success and where we're getting better.

Mr. Ben Levin: I want to say about that that for the vast majority of students in our special education system, the outcomes ought to be the same outcomes we expect from all students; that is, we expect them to develop literacy and numeracy skills and we expect them to graduate from secondary school.

The number of students for whom those expectations do not apply is really quite small. We're talking there about students with very severe, typically multiple handicaps. But I personally do not want to budge off the expectation that the vast, vast majority of students in special education can meet our normal curriculum requirements. For a small number of others, that is the case, and there we do have problems around what those measures are because they're very specific, and I'm going to ask Barry to comment on that.

Mr. Barry Finlay: Thank you. Actually, in response to the Auditor General's report, we are in the process right now of gathering practices around the province used by boards to recognize and be able to communicate with parents learning and achievement for all students. So for those students who are not accessing the provincial curriculum, they too need to have a regular recognition of the learning that's taking place for them. We plan to have that in place for September 2009.

Mr. Ernie Hardeman: I guess we could all agree that one of the things in the auditor's report is the issue of measurement. Obviously, the whole report is about value for money, and it's hard to talk about value for money in educating special-needs kids, but that's what it's about. For the extra that the province is putting in, are we getting enough results? Are we getting results to compensate for that?

We will, a year from now or two years from now—I think it's two years from now—get a review of this and how we're succeeding with the recommendations in the auditor's report. What are we doing right now to get to that review, two years from now, so we don't end up with a report that says exactly the same thing: that we still

can't measure where we're going? What types of things are we doing in the system?

Mr. Ben Levin: I don't accept that we can't measure where we're going. I think that it is certainly the case that there are some students, as Barry has suggested, for whom the regular curriculum outcomes are not the applicable measures, and we have work to do with that relatively small number of students. But for the vast majority of students, the measurement is their ability to meet the regular curriculum expectations. That's why we can say that that gap between special education students and regular students is too big, because we know what those outcomes are. So I cannot accept, sir, that we don't know where we're going on this.

Mr. Ernie Hardeman: Maybe I'm using the wrong words. It's not that we don't know where we're going. We know where we want to be, but we don't seem, from the auditor's report as I read it, to know where in that road we are, how fast we're moving. We can't measure individual success stories. Maybe I'm wrong, but that's—

Interjection.

Mr. Ernie Hardeman: It'll start automatically.

Mr. Gordon Campbell: Oh, I'm sorry. It will. Very nice technology.

Mr. Ernie Hardeman: Oh, we have real technology here. You bet.

Mr. Gordon Campbell: I would suggest that—again, I'm going to reflect back. When I look back, and I'm talking that 38-year continuum, there was a time when we had one document that was valuable to a teacher from year to year, a document called the OSR. Within that OSR resided the report card and so forth for students and sometimes the notes and so forth, but that was basically the repository for knowledge about the student, other than, perhaps, some notes that might be exchanged from teacher to teacher, if that happened.

Because of the new technology, because of the data warehouses, because we're now able to digitize a lot of information, I would suggest that teachers of today actually have the opportunity to exchange more information. We're at the early stages of learning how to share information. I hear reports that the knowledge of the world is doubling every four or five months, which means that we're all buying more and more storage space on our computers. But as we go forward, teachers are learning and starting to say, "What type of data is helpful to pass on to the next teacher? What data from the last teacher would help me in best practices? What things worked and what things didn't work?" So I think it's these efficiencies that we'll find with the use of data, with the exchange of data, and I think that's going to be the tool to help improve and measure outcomes over the long term.

As a director, as a school principal—I'll go back 15 years ago. Fifteen years ago, as a school principal, if I wanted to know how a student was doing, I would have had to go to the file cabinet, look in an OSR, pull out an individual OSR and then go through paper for the next 45 minutes to an hour. I am now able, because of our

collection of data and data sets, to perhaps go back and look at the career of a student since kindergarten or grade 1, for eight or nine years, and from that maybe look at some trend data and ask them specific questions. So I think part of the answer to where we will go forward is the use of data, the training of teachers and staff on how to collect and analyze data. That's going to require professional development, which the ministry has supported a great deal of, because we are in a data-rich world and we have to learn how to manipulate and use that data to our advantage to support the students.

Mr. Ernie Hardeman: I'm not arguing that there's a lot of data. What I'm saying is that the auditor's report said that there wasn't enough data for his purposes, to come to the conclusions that he wanted to come to, and I just want to impress upon everyone that that's the type of data that needs to be collected and carried forward so that next time, when he goes in to audit, to see whether things are getting better, he doesn't say the same thing: "You have a lot of data, but not that which I need to deal with special education and how it's improving or not improving within the system." That's the challenge, I think.

The other thing I would just like to ask is if the committee, after this review—and our purpose here is not to find fault with what people are doing; our purpose here is to come and make recommendations to government, to the Legislature, of what we need to do to make the system better. If I were to ask you what that should be, what recommendations we could make—and most of the time, as we have different departments before us, it's, "Put in more money and the world will be a better place," but it sounds to me that with special education, that's not the answer. So what should we do to recommend to government that would help your situation in improving special education?

1400

Mr. John De Faveri: If I could just start with a few points that I would really like to make: Before you today, I believe that there are correlated data sets that aren't here that would help answer the question, because as I see it, we're talking about two different things. We're talking about whether there is evidence that the documentation around special education is appropriate versus whether we are seeing demonstrated improvements in student performance in general terms. I don't have the data here with me, but I am pretty convinced that if you were to ask other questions, the evidence of what are the improvements that are happening provincially with our special education students and all students would be there. For example, if we were to analyze when EQAO first started, how many students that were identified as special education students were exempted from those provincial assessments? How has that changed over the interval of time that EQAO has been here? Because I believe that the answer to that question is, there are more and more students participating today than there would have been five years ago who would have been identified with an exceptionality.

Mr. Ernie Hardeman: Again, we can get way over and have a debate where I would be unarmed because I don't know how to debate that, but all I do know is what the auditor says in his report. I expect that in preparing his report, he decided what was necessary in order to report to the Legislature of what the challenges were in special education. Now, if he didn't gather the right information, I expect, likely, that will become part of the debate when we review his performance, but right now we have to deal with what he has in his report. That's the challenge: What do we do so that he doesn't have to report the same thing again, because we have solved or at least produced the evidence that it didn't need solving before he does his follow-up review?

Mr. John De Faveri: I've had a conversation at our board with our superintendent responsible for special education, as well as the rest of the special education staff. So I can tell you, and it's been referenced in the auditor's report, that if I were to identify what the biggest, singular challenge we face is—we have resources. The question becomes, do we expend those resources on the teachers working with the students, or do we expend those resources on the paper trail, on ensuring that the data—where do we do it? Because we can't do both.

I would have to say that we at Thunder Bay Catholic tend to err on the side of saying, "We will be able to show results for our students because we've invested in the front line, the teachers working with the students." We acknowledge that in doing that, we have some things that we have to do in terms of: If an auditor comes in, do you have all the documentation? Is it in the OSR? Is it in electronic format? Where is it, so that we can feel comfortable? But to me, the question is, what's the threshold? What's the comfort level of paper evidence versus that we're making a real difference for students? For us, in a board of our size in northwestern Ontario, that is our biggest, singular challenge. Together with the other part that I mentioned earlier, just because a student hasn't yet been identified, do you deny services or do you not intervene where appropriate?

Mr. Ernie Hardeman: If I could just go there for a moment and then we could get back: On the identifying, is there any evidence, shall we say, that deals with those that you give the treatment to and help along without the identification? Is there any negative impact on that and those that were identified and then start the treatment? How often are we right and how often are we wrong without the assessment?

Mr. John De Faveri: I'd be able to answer that much better in a year's time because, as I did mention, one of the things that we are doing as a school board is acting on the singular strategy that was identified in the Education for All document, and that's the PALS, the peer-assisted learning strategy. So our intent is that we are working on data collection from K to 3, which is where we are rolling out the program, to find out what that early intervention, tier-one strategy—which will be used by not just the special education teacher but by a variety of teachers—does in terms of the profile and the success that

we're seeing. What will it do five years from now in terms of the number of students that we've actually been able to prevent from the potentially significant interventions that might otherwise occur? For us, it's a work in progress. We're excited about it, but for us the answer will come in time to find out if it was successful or not. Our preliminary indication from Vanderbilt University and other sources says that it will make a huge difference.

Mr. Ernie Hardeman: Very good; thank you. I think the deputy had a comment.

Mr. Ben Levin: I wanted to say something on the outcome issue. On page 368 of the auditor's report, he provides the outcome data from EQAO on key measures for students with special education needs. What you will see there are very significant improvements in the proportion of students reaching our standard. Now, there is nobody in my ministry who would say that those numbers are something that we can rest on our laurels about and they're high enough. I'm sure that none of my colleagues at the table and no one who works in the special education system would look at those numbers and say, "Hooray, our work is done."

What they do show is that we have made some significant improvements of 50%, 100% and, in some cases, 150% increases in the number of students achieving that standard. I can tell you that in Ontario the number of students who are below level two on EQAO—level two is a basic level of competence; level one is students who are not at a basic level of competence in reading, writing and math—the number of students below level two has fallen by 50% in the last four years. We are now at fewer than 5% of students in Ontario who are below level two.

In most countries, level two is what they use at their competence indicator, not what we call level three. So when Australia reports that they're at 88% of students competent, that's level two. We're at 95%. Ontario students are among the highest performers in the world on all of the last three or four recent international assessments that have been done. Those are eight-year-olds, 12-year-olds and 15-year-olds.

I want to say that I accept fully the auditor's concerns that there is much more work to do around IEPs, around good educational practices and around tracking outcomes for students. I fully accept that, the ministry fully accepts that and I'm sure my colleagues at the table all fully accept it as well. I am very proud of what we've done, but I don't think anyone here would claim for a minute that we're close to where we can be, because the history of education is that every time we raise the bar, we find out that more people than we thought could jump over it. So we need to continue doing that.

Mr. Ernie Hardeman: I want to assure you, I'm not condemning the successes. My job is to find out whether there aren't solutions to the failures. I may very well be talking about the minority of all the children with special needs. I do believe I am talking about the minority, but the minority also have a right to be heard from. That's why I want to focus on that area where we're not meeting

the challenge that we had hoped to meet. That was the reason about the success rate, whether there's a difference. I agree with the previous answer to the question that it makes much more sense to be putting the services into the children than into the paperwork. I'm not trying to say that I want to divert money to the paperwork, but at the same time, if that's what the auditor says we need to look at, then I think this committee could make the recommendations that we do less paperwork and he should quit worrying about that, right? That's why we're here. We're not here to condemn anyone. I'm looking for solutions.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Jerry J. Ouellette): Thank you, Mr. Hardeman. Mr. Marchese?

Mr. Rosario Marchese: I just have to tell you that I'm a fan of the paperwork and I'm a fan of the paper trail. I think that the paperwork and the paper trail allowed us to understand what the problems were.

I recall the Oshawa trustees, who were conservative-minded people—after all, they brought this in—saying, "Please don't take it away now. We like it now." They didn't like it initially because it meant more work for the teachers, but by the end of it they said, "Please leave it alone." You might argue that they had different reasons for it, but for me, once you have a paper trail you know what the problem is and then you apply for money to be able to get the help. I don't agree with your director from Thunder Bay when he says that you could spend money in the comfort of paper evidence or you could do something else. He suggested that whatever else is being done is much more effective, and I don't agree with that.

A quick question to the directors: Do you support EQAO tests? Just a yes or no.

1410

Ms. Gerry Connelly: Yes.

Mr. Gordon Campbell: Yes.

Mr. John De Faveri: Yes.

Mr. Rosario Marchese: You all talked, including the deputy, about best practices; learning achievement for all students; special ed being not a silo but a continuum; directors of education who are leaders in education; and that we apply new information in a different way. You talked about data collection and data technology. One of you talked about correlated data sets. If somebody has correlated data sets—do you have a copy of such things?

Mr. John De Faveri: No.

Mr. Rosario Marchese: Who does?

Mr. John De Faveri: I believe that through the ministry—

Mr. Rosario Marchese: You do? Gerry, could I get a hold of that correlated data set? It sounds interesting.

Ms. Gerry Connelly: I assume that by correlation, we're correlating different factors to—

Mr. John De Faveri: Yes, precisely.

Mr. Rosario Marchese: So you have it.

Ms. Gerry Connelly: Yes.

Mr. Rosario Marchese: Okay. Does the ministry have any correlated data sets?

Mr. Ben Levin: I'm not exactly sure what is meant by that, but—

Mr. Rosario Marchese: Okay, well, when I get it, I'll share it with you.

Mr. Ben Levin: Good.

Mr. Rosario Marchese: Okay, so we have—

Mr. Ben Levin: The ministry has a lot of data.

Mr. Rosario Marchese: All right. It's instructive, I'm told, so I'd like to see it.

All the directors have read this report, correct?

Ms. Gerry Connelly: Yes.

Mr. Rosario Marchese: The main points are:

"Inadequate information collected by boards" regarding "exceptional students: While there had been some improvement ... , information collected by school boards about exceptional students was insufficient to support effective program planning, service delivery, oversight, and the identification of effective practices.

"Quality of learning goals/expectations in IEPs: For exceptional students working toward modified curriculum expectations, the IEPs examined by the auditor had learning goals and expectations that were generally measurable for literacy and numeracy, but were often vague for other subjects. Schools could, therefore, not measure the gap between performance of exceptional students and regular curriculum expectations, and as a result could not assess the appropriateness of the change in the performance gap between reporting periods....

"Identification, placement and review committees ... lack documentation of decision-making: IPRCs make significant decisions regarding the education of exceptional students, yet do not adequately document the rationale or the evidence upon which they rely." This is tough stuff.

"Regulation 181/98 ... : This regulation requires school boards to consult with parents in connection with IPRCs and the preparation of IEPs. The student files examined by the auditor did not have sufficient evidence to demonstrate compliance"—although some of you talked about how much work you're doing with parents these days.

"Allocation of resources: One of the audited boards decided to conduct fewer formal assessments and IPRC meetings in order to help offset the cost of additional special education teachers." "To offset the cost"—I'm assuming that someone might argue that it's not to offset the cost but because you could do it better, doing something else. "The ministry needs to determine which strategy—additional direct service or formal assessments and IPRC meetings—yields the better student results."

I'm going to ask the deputy later about this, but I read this out for the directors so they can comment about your reaction to this, based on all the things you said earlier on.

"The provincial report card is not geared to exceptional pupils....

"Report cards lacked candid portrayal of student's performance: Particularly at the elementary level, there were examples of report cards discussing the student's positive

attributes, but not their performance relative to curriculum expectations....

"Planning form lacked essential documentation: A form to plan the transition of exceptional pupils from secondary school to work, community living or further education—though completed by schools—lacked an indication of whether the actions on the form were completed, and to what degree of success."

Finally, "The ministry does not require school boards to establish quality procedures"—I was going to ask the deputy that, after you've been able to hear this and give your assessment of what you just heard. "Procedures are necessary to assess the qualities of the schools' special education services and supports, and whether the schools complied with legislation, regulations and policies. None of the audited school boards had established such procedures."

Given what you heard, could I get a brief comment from all of you with respect to what you told me you were doing, and all the knowledge you have, and what you've heard the Auditor General present to you, and your reactions?

Ms. Gerry Connelly: Can I start with the report cards? I happened to have been the director of the curriculum branch when we developed the curriculum, under the Conservative government, with the Ontario report card for the first time. Since then, there have been modifications. Right now, the report card is under review and the process is to look at some changes, because clearly over time we listen and learn. So the government is looking at the report card. We would agree with you that there needs to be some work, as a result of using it for many years. Mr. Marchese, when you were a trustee with the Toronto board, there were 200 report cards in one school board. There's now one standard report card. Clearly, we've learned from having one standard report card across the province, and the government is looking at that.

I want to talk about modified expectations, because that is something that in our board—

Mr. Rosario Marchese: Just before you go on, because I know you'll want to tackle individual areas—

Ms. Gerry Connelly: Right.

Mr. Rosario Marchese: I just want your general impression about all of these things that in my view are quite critical of what is not happening, rather than taking one issue and telling me what a board is doing about it or—

Ms. Gerry Connelly: The general impression is that the quality assurance that you talked about—I would say that we do have support around quality assurance and we are setting up mechanisms and processes to deal with it. Clearly, we know that we need to improve, and we welcome the recommendations from the Auditor General on that. Our quality assurance is something we take very seriously—not so much putting it in words, but actually doing it and having the teachers understand what it means in areas outside of literacy and numeracy. We agree that we need to do more work in that area.

Mr. Gordon Campbell: I'm supportive of what has been reported by the Auditor General. I believe that there are areas that we as a board can improve on, but I anticipated that we would hear that there are areas that we could improve on. I believe that as an organization, we have been improving. The student achievement results for our board have improved and continue to improve. As we work with the teachers and with the staff and we organize our strategies in a meaningful way, I think we will address the issues of the compliance with paper.

One of the areas that stood out for me in the report talked about smart goals. Our focus on literacy and numeracy for the last number of years has been working with staff to develop what we call smart goals, where they're very measurable. That's a new way of looking at the strategy of outcome. It takes some time for people to learn how to write them and how to measure them and to be that focused. That being said, I've watched as our staff has learned, and they've embraced that concept.

So I would say that there's a lot to be learned from the report, but I think that the report also acknowledges that there has been improvement.

Mr. John De Faveri: For us, we've embraced the auditor's report because it allows us to have a look internally and identify our own strengths and weaknesses, and where the work is that we need to do. Again, we have already begun to look at those recommendations and have set up a multi-year plan to tackle what's within our capacity to do immediately. Do we just have to say, "It has to wait. It's got to be year three of a five-year plan"? So we've taken the report, welcomed it, and we've already started to act on it.

Mr. Rosario Marchese: Thanks very much.

Deputy, first question: "Procedures are necessary to assess the qualities of the schools' special education" services and supports," and the audited school boards are moving on that, but what about the other boards?

Mr. Ben Levin: We do have a process of working with all boards on this. We did a series of reviews of special education practice in—12 districts?

Mr. Barry Finlay: Eleven districts.

Mr. Ben Levin: Do you want to say something about that?

Mr. Barry Finlay: Yes, I do. Actually, we—

Mr. Rosario Marchese: Not too long. If you've got a process in place and there's a timeline, that's great.

Mr. Barry Finlay: We do. We actually went in and spent four days in 11 different district school boards across the province with a team of people. There were program and financial reviews. We met with parents, we met with SEAC members, we met with the administration of the boards, we met with teachers, we met with educational assistants, and we've gathered all that information to identify effective practices.

1420

Mr. Rosario Marchese: So the timeline is?

Mr. Barry Finlay: We actually have completed those reviews and we are now doing more specific reviews in

the areas of two components of the grant, in the special instances portion and the special equipment allocations.

Mr. Rosario Marchese: Regarding quality procedures. We're talking about quality procedures, right? The ministry does not require school boards to establish quality procedures: That was the question.

Mr. Barry Finlay: That was part of the process where we were gathering the information when we went into the boards, and the ministry has just released dollars to boards to support the ongoing audit process. But we're aware, as a result of the IEP process that we put in place, that boards in fact have implemented quality procedures around their IEPs and as part of the PA day.

Mr. Rosario Marchese: But my question is, does the ministry require school boards to establish quality procedures, yes or no?

Mr. Ben Levin: Not at this point.

Mr. Rosario Marchese: Are you planning to?

Mr. Ben Levin: Yes, because we've accepted all the recommendations from the auditor's report.

Mr. Rosario Marchese: And what's the timeline on that?

Mr. Ben Levin: I can't tell you exactly what the timeline is because that's a process in which we have to find out more about what boards are doing and what that would look like.

Mr. Rosario Marchese: Okay. Regarding the intensive support amount funding, I recall when I was dealing with you and Monsieur Kennedy the last time that \$950 million was spent as a result of the ISA funding. That's the figure that I saw in your document.

Mr. Ben Levin: It seems about right.

Mr. Rosario Marchese: What happened to that intensive support amount funding that was not converted into enrolment-based special education funding?

Mr. Ben Levin: It was all converted.

Mr. Rosario Marchese: All of it?

Mr. Ben Levin: Yes. The total amount of money for special education has continued to increase. There was no money taken out.

Mr. Rosario Marchese: And we can track that easily?

Mr. Ben Levin: Yes. We can show you the amounts, because in each year's GSN, there will be a total amount that would have been called ISA which then became called high needs, so we can show you what those amounts were for each year.

Mr. Rosario Marchese: Okay. If you could show me, that would be helpful.

Mr. Ben Levin: Certainly.

Mr. Rosario Marchese: But not now; just send it to us.

Mr. Ben Levin: Yes.

Mr. Rosario Marchese: On page 5, around identification and placement, there is—

Mr. Ben Levin: Sorry, page 5 of what?

Mr. Rosario Marchese: The report. They don't have that report? Of course not. Sorry.

Mr. Jim McCarter: No, they don't have that report.

Mr. Rosario Marchese: I beg your pardon; it's not helpful to you. It says here in this report, it shows that "about a third of students receiving special education services have not been formally identified by an IPRC." We all know that; it's part of the figures. "This occurs for several reasons:

"—schools may have already started providing programs and services to the student before formal identification has been completed;

"—parents may be unwilling to have their child identified ... ; and

"—both the school and parents may decide that formal identification is unnecessary as the student's needs are being met by the school's current special education program."

My question is, without a formal IPRC and regular reviews, how do we guarantee accountability?

Mr. Ben Levin: We guarantee accountability through the measures of outcomes that we do for every other student: report cards. If students are progressing well in their report cards, that's our measure of accountability. If we went to an IPRC and the IPRC concluded that all the program requirements as set out in the IEP were met but the student was not making any academic progress, none of us would say we had met an accountability requirement.

Mr. Rosario Marchese: Except, Mr. Deputy, "The provincial report card is not geared to exceptional pupils," it says here. I just read out, "It does not report to parents or students on the achievement of the various learning expectations in the IEPs of students being assessed." So how could a report card help us?

Mr. Ben Levin: Because the vast majority of students who are in special education, we believe, are able to meet and should be meeting the normal curriculum requirements which are in the report card.

Mr. Rosario Marchese: You see, I don't buy that. This is where they have identified a serious problem, and I think we're not dealing with it properly. You see, in my view, if you have an identification placement review process in place and then you have the IEP, it means you identify a problem and you identify steps to be able to deal with it. Without it, I have absolutely no way of knowing—absolutely none, other than your word—which says, "We're dealing with it."

Mr. Ben Levin: No, I don't agree with that. I would say that as a parent or an educator, if what I see is that my child is meeting curriculum expectations and is progressing at the rate we expect children to progress, that is the accountability indicator. I am not interested in having somebody tell me, "Your kid may not be learning anything, but we did everything that was in the IEP, so we wash our hands of it." I am completely committed to curriculum outcomes for all children, as are my colleagues here. There are a very small number of children in special education who, I think fairly, cannot meet those.

Mr. Rosario Marchese: I think we have a serious problem in that regard; I really do. I just wanted to

identify it. I hear what you're saying. I believe this is a huge problem, but I don't have time to delve into it too much because I've got a few other questions.

"The audit team found that 11% of the exceptional pupils in their sample, who had started school at the board by the beginning of grade 1, had not received their first IEP by the end of grade 4, and there was no explanatory information in the file....

"John McNamara, a professor who specializes in learning disabilities at Brock University and a member of the Canadian Association of Education Psychology, was quoted in a recent press report on special education as stating that, 'For many kids, the help comes too late to catch up.' The Learning Disabilities Association has publicly requested 'universal screening' of primary students for learning disabilities."

Any reaction to that, by any one of you, I guess?

Ms. Gerry Connelly: I can speak to it for our board specifically, which may be useful. First of all, we have a large number of students who come into our system who do not have English as a first language, and so it takes a few years, or at least two or three years, before we know that the challenge is language or a learning disability. Very often, we have a significant group of parents who feel that we inappropriately place students in special education and they regard it as a form of streaming when it should be really an issue around language.

We also have a significant amount of mobility in our system—

Mr. Rosario Marchese: I understand.

Ms. Gerry Connelly: Those are the kinds of reasons. It's not because it's a lack of—but we also—

Mr. Rosario Marchese: Okay. But if you could just—"The audit team found that 11% of the exceptional pupils in their sample, who had started school at the board by the beginning of grade 1, had not received their first IEP by the end of grade 4."

Mr. Barry Finlay: If I may, Mr. Marchese, we may not assume from that that they haven't received additional supports because, in fact, boards provide supports for children and they don't have to be identified.

Mr. Rosario Marchese: How do we know?

Mr. Barry Finlay: We know because we have a number of processes in place and our elementary teachers do a great deal of informal assessment in order to diagnose the needs.

Mr. Rosario Marchese: If that is true, would you not have picked that up in the audit?

Mr. Jim McCarter: We basically said that 89% did have it documented properly. We said that 11% didn't have it, and we went looking for documentation as to a reason why this hadn't happened. Again, it was kind of the issue with documentation, that it wasn't there, and we thought that would be a question for someone to ask if they were coming into a quality assurance review—how come it wasn't there?

Mr. Rosario Marchese: So how do we get that?

Mr. Jim McCarter: I think that was the issue that we were raising on that particular point.

Mr. Barry Finlay: How we get there is, we've already put a memo out to all boards that all students receiving special education programs and services will have an IEP after an appropriate period of assessment. What we don't want our boards to do is trust to judgment on behalf of children who are three and four years old and when they're still developing. We are working on that and we'll have something in place.

Mr. Rosario Marchese: If we could get whatever information you have in response to that, so that we have a copy of it, that would be helpful.

Mr. Barry Finlay: Right.

Mr. Rosario Marchese: Did you get a report? Did you distribute the report, by any chance? Is that what somebody did, or no?

Mr. Ben Levin: Yes.

Mr. Rosario Marchese: Yes? Yes. On page 7, at the top of the page:

"Information in the audit and the press states that about one third of students receiving special education services have not been formally identified as having an exceptionality. While there are several reasons for this, does the ministry keep track of the number one reason behind the 30% of pupils who do not undergo a formal identification?"

Mr. Barry Finlay: I would say that the ministry does not keep track of that because that is a process the boards govern with respect to their own processes. Once again, they're dealing with individuals who may or may not want to be identified. It's a parental choice whether they wish to be identified, but the boards continue to provide programs and services for them. We still request boards to report on the utilization of their dollars; however, it is not mandated that all children who receive special education programs and services must have a formal IPRC.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Jerry J. Ouellette): Mr. Marchese, you have a minute left.

Mr. Rosario Marchese: One minute. Do we have a chance to come back? Do we have enough time?

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Jerry J. Ouellette): I don't think so.

Mr. Rosario Marchese: I can't believe it. Thank you very much, Deputy, and directors.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Jerry J. Ouellette): Mrs. Van Bommel?

Mrs. Maria Van Bommel: Thank you very much, Chair. Everyone agrees that early detection, identification and intervention lead to much-improved outcomes. I know there's a large network of Early Years centres and Best Start centres throughout the province, and in my riding, the Best Start centres are actually sited at schools. Part of it is because of the situation, the natural linkage with the schools, but also because in rural areas, that's a natural siting for that kind of endeavour.

Do you have any data, when children are identified through an Early Years or Best Start centre, as to how many of the children coming into the school system at JK and SK are identified as having special needs?

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Ms. Gerry Connelly: Let me just speak to what we do know. Through the Atkinson Foundation, we have done research on our parenting or family literacy centres, and we have found that when students have that kind of experience—and I know the government is funding more and more of them—they have significantly fewer challenges and do much better in kindergarten.

The government also funds something called the EDI—early development indicator—that measures five different levels of development. We've been able to track that to EQAO scores and even up to grade 9. One of the things we find is that in certain parts of our community where there are not the kinds of services that are needed to support certain areas, the students do not do as well. So the onus is then on the school as to what we can do to help our students who require those kinds of significant additional supports. Those kinds of early interventions and early diagnoses are really useful to help us as we work, because those are critical years. I know my colleagues can speak to those as well.

Mr. John De Faveri: We certainly do use the same. The EDI data is basically some information that we use in terms of who, by population and geography, we believe are most vulnerable, most at risk. That information was also used in Thunder Bay by the local DSSAB in order to make a determination as to where the placement of the Early Years centres would be. In addition to that, one of the things that we've really started to move on quite intensively is the expansion of an instrument called the Web-based teaching tool that we have rolled out. As a matter of fact, prior to the auditor's report we had set that as an expectation for ourselves as a board. Before, we did not roll it out in all of our schools with all of our students. Now, we do. Again, it goes back to that issue.

The full implementation of the Web-based teaching tool, together with the peer-assisted learning strategies, is how we believe at Thunder Bay Catholic that we're going to make some significant inroads in terms of early identification, early intervention and much shorter interval times in terms of gathering data points on progress for students around some key indicators. So we're extremely optimistic and hopeful about what we'll be able to do for our student population.

Mr. Gordon Campbell: If I may, Simcoe county is an urban/rural mix, about the size of Prince Edward Island.

Mrs. Maria Van Bommel: So's my riding. How did that happen?

Mr. Gordon Campbell: That's why I gave that reference.

What I've found is that we have not had a lot of supports in certain parts of our community because of the geography, I would suspect, and the population density. We also have used information we've gathered through EDI. We've used census data and Trillium data that was provided, and we work with a group called the Simcoe County Coalition, where we work with the various agencies and other ministries to look at how they can provide

services and supports to children and families before they start school. The early data would suggest that those connections are helping the families feel much more connected to the school because children with needs are being identified and flagged earlier, so we have a smoother transition for a child entering the school system. But it's an area that we're trying to develop and grow by working with the various ministries.

Mr. Barry Finlay: I'm in support of a tool that was conceived through co-operation with the Ministry of Education and the Learning Disabilities Association of Ontario. Over 30,000 students now have benefited from that tool. It is an early assessment tool. The real value of it is that it also recommends instructional strategies to meet the needs of the students who have been identified through that assessment. We will continue to support the growth of the use of that tool in the early years.

One other piece that's important, I believe, is that in 2005, the minister released the Planning Entry to School guide. So transitions for children with special education needs is a critical area that we're focused on and one that was mentioned through the Auditor General's report. This focuses on the initial entry into school, but in fact we're moving to support all transitions for students with special education needs.

Mr. Gordon Campbell: If I may, can I just add one more comment? I'd like to comment on the effectiveness and the power of our local SEAC in supporting the school board and the children within the community to ensure that we provide those services and connect the dots, because it's through our local SEAC that we're able to provide a more balanced and equitable delivery model throughout the county.

Mr. John De Faveri: At Thunder Bay Catholic, we're also one of the sites in the province where the collaborative services project has been funded. What we're doing is taking much of the learning around how effectively we're able to meet the needs of a growing number of students within the autism spectrum disorder, taking the learning from that specific project, but then extrapolating it into a much broader context—so a greater ability for us to interact, particularly in our local circumstance, with the Thunder Bay District Health Unit when children are very, very young, when they're still in the home, information that we're now able to exchange so much more freely and that prepares us for not having to be in the home when the child is one year old. We know that we've linked up with agencies that are there to provide those students with support, so that when they start school with us, we've got three years of significant information that we can use. We're looking at that model to say, "Gee, I wonder how we can extrapolate that to the greater population that we're serving." There may be opportunities there that we just don't see yet.

Mrs. Maria Van Bommel: This is addressed to the deputy minister. The Early Years centres and the Best Start centres are the responsibility of the Ministry of Children and Youth Services, and in your presentation, on the last page, when you list the next steps you refer to

a collaboration with ministries like health and children and youth services. Can you detail some of the things that you're doing across ministries right now to assist with improving the outcomes for the children?

Mr. Ben Levin: Yes, and I'll ask Barry to say a bit about this. Autism is one example where we're working very closely with the Ministry of Children and Youth Services. But I would say around early learning that there are a number of ministries involved in this. The Ministry of Education also funds a variety of parenting and family literacy centres across Ontario, which are a vehicle to bring very young children and their parents into a school environment and support a very informal approach to literacy. So we're talking with MCYS and in fact the Ministry of Health Promotion, which has also got a set of programs that it now wants to run around after-school and preschool programs, about making sure that we're coordinating the location of those through the community use of schools program. And we're making space available to external groups that run those programs at no cost in schools because we provide funding to boards to do that.

As we work towards the release of the report of the early learning adviser, we're in a lot of discussion with MCYS and Health, in fact, about how we are going to be more coordinated around existing services; how those are going to fit in the new early learning model, whatever that turns out to be; how we're going to ensure that we do a good job on the early identification side—I'm pretty sure that Mr. Pascal will be recommending that we do something better in that regard; and how we share the results more effectively between the agencies that are funded through MCYS to deliver these services and between the school districts.

It's important to recognize that MCYS funds services but doesn't deliver them; they're delivered by independent agencies. We fund boards, but of course the boards are also independent agencies. So the collaboration has to happen at the provincial level, but it also has to happen at the local level, and of course sometimes the local people are better at it than we are at the provincial level, I have to say.

Mr. Barry Finlay: If I may add to a couple of pieces—and I would ask my colleagues who are directors to speak to their own local arrangements that have been made, because they in fact have been doing this for a number of years and have some wonderful relationships with their local agencies.

Specifically, there are three areas beyond the area of autism, which, as the deputy indicated, is a significant relationship we have right now in support of children transitioning from intensive support funded through the autism intervention program into our schools. We also have a very good relationship now, the student support leadership initiative, where community clusters have been funded to identify leaders to facilitate the kinds of relationships to which you alluded in support of children. In fact, there are a number of projects on the go right now across the province. Very effectively, many of them

focus upon meeting the growing children's mental health needs that we're seeing in the province.

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We have always had a relationship with the Ministry of Health with respect to school health support services. We are in the middle of a process right now of reviewing those supports. As we've seen, the advancing technology certainly allows parents, and therefore potentially schools, to provide services that were not available 20 years ago when some of our policies were in place. Those are just three of the areas, but I would encourage the directors, who, in fact, have established many relationships, to respond if they can.

Ms. Gerry Connelly: One of the things we did recently is bring together a meeting of all of the folks out in the community whom we are working with. It was quite a large group, and one of the things we wanted to talk about was, how can we be more strategic in using our services so that not only is there not overlap but they're being located in all parts of the city? Those are the two areas that we're really focusing on as being more strategic and so that we can be more efficient, but also that we could be more equitable in how we use our services.

Our trustees have taken a lot of leadership in trying to bring about what they call integration of services. We're working with our health units—we have several of them, and I imagine you would too in your areas—and we're working with folks at the hospitals. For example, we have a meeting on Friday afternoon at the Hospital for Sick Children. So we have a strong commitment to working with partners, because we believe that working with the community not only helps us develop good relationships but also makes it better for our kids.

Mr. Gordon Campbell: I would suggest that one of the more intriguing projects that we've just started is working with our county office and the 32 mayors and deputy mayors in the two cities of Orillia and Barrie as a collective. Most recently, the warden visited our board offices and talked about how they are an agency to deliver service to the entire county, as we are. We've talked about what partnerships we can establish to provide greater service and easier-to-assess service for members of our community. I think that those types of relationships are the ones that will move us forward as we try to utilize resources very wisely during some difficult times.

Mr. John De Faveri: It's interesting to hear what's happening in Simcoe. About four months ago in Thunder Bay, we had our very first gathering. We don't even know what we're calling ourselves yet, but it is elected city officials together with the three boards that service the city of Thunder Bay. What we're trying to recognize is that we have an opportunity to maximize on each other's strengths in terms of the facilities and services that we're able to provide. We met the last time probably about three weeks ago and decided on a mandate for us that's actually going to look at a much more transparent, much more amalgamated ability to provide service to our students but also to the rest of the residents of Thunder Bay.

Barry referenced the student support leadership initiative. It's true in a variety of places in the province, but probably more so predominantly in northwestern Ontario—if you look at the latest census data, we've had a rise of 26% in our aboriginal population. So one of the things that we are really working hard at is to engage our aboriginal First Nation community. We are one of the locations, together with our coterminous board, to engage Dilico child and family services, who are a service provider primarily for students who are identified as First Nation. We're in the process of developing some incredible resources that we will be able to roll out so that all of the partners that are involved in that project are going to be able to benefit, to learn from one another and to actually start to look at some differentiation of what it is that we really need to provide based on what we know of the demographics of our own population.

As I mentioned, we are one of the sites in the province who run a collaborative services model. I'm proud to say that we've actually been acknowledged as a leader in the province, in particular because of the work with the consultant that we have working on that. There's just some phenomenal growth that's happening, and before long we'll be asked to present in a couple of other venues to share our successes. So I'm extremely proud of our board for that.

Mrs. Maria Van Bommel: Thank you. My colleague Mrs. Sandals wants to add, and so does—

Interjection.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Jerry J. Ouellette): Mrs. Albanese?

Mrs. Laura Albanese: Thank you. I have a couple of clarifications that I wanted to ask. In the response to the Auditor General's recommendation, the ministry says that it "would like all students receiving special education programs and services to have an individual education plan ... after an appropriate period of assessment." How long is that? What is appropriate? We've talked about wait times, but we have not indicated what "appropriate"—

Mr. Ben Levin: It's not so much a matter of wait times; it's a matter of students' situations varying.

Mr. Barry Finlay: Exactly; yes. So our concerns, as I expressed earlier, I believe, were that, although we want all children to have IEPs, we don't wish people to rush to judgment with respect to identification of needs.

A fundamental tenet of special education is that it is individual. Whenever we look at any kind of expectation that, in fact, is universal, we will miss some children. This provides some balance with respect to doing appropriate responses to intervention techniques—teaching strategies and assessing whether they're effective or not before you move to an IEP, if in fact that isn't necessary.

Ultimately, though, our goal, generally, in discussions with the boards, will be around grade 3 or grade 4 if we've had the child in the system for the entire period of time. Of course, there are huge transitions in the province, and kids move all over. They move from board to

board, and therefore we need to build in some flexibility for that, but that's what that statement means.

Mr. Ben Levin: Can I just say on that, to come back to something I said at the beginning about the variability in what parental desires and expectations are, that we have a group of parents—and we heard about some of them today—who feel that their children have needs that are not being acknowledged and addressed, and they are pushing hard to have an earlier, faster identification. We have another group of parents who are exactly the opposite, where the school feels there is an issue and wants an identification and the parents absolutely refuse to do it. It's a complicated matter. We do not want to be forcing parents into going through an identification process, as Ms. Connelly said, where they're very resistant to it. On the other hand, we have concerns that in the other case, the opposite may be the case. It's just very difficult to give a general, applicable-to-all answer on these issues, because the disabilities differ greatly, the special needs differ greatly and the parental attitudes differ greatly, and all those need to be respected.

Mrs. Laura Albanese: Going to Ms. Connelly: You were mentioning that many kids whose first language is not English belong to certain communities that are concerned with streaming. ESL is not part of special education—

Mr. Ben Levin: Right.

Mrs. Laura Albanese: I was one of those kids. I have certainly heard about preoccupations with streaming, especially in years past. Could you clarify where we stand today, in your view?

Ms. Gerry Connelly: Can I give you a very specific example? I know the community won't mind, because I've been working very hard with the Portuguese community over the years. They had tremendous angst about the fact that we were not serving their kids well. We were disproportionately putting them into special education. They argued that the issue really was language. We looked at research with Jim Cummins from OISE, for example. We've looked at the data, and the kids were not as successful. We collect data on the basis of race and ethnicity in our board, so we know which are low-performing groups, and they are correct.

I think it's also important that high parent confidence and trust in us is an important measure of success. Over the years, I have found, in our regular meetings with them, that there's much more of an understanding. We work with them, because we do not identify if they ask us

not to, but we do IEPs and we do look at individualized support. We're finding, in working very closely with the parents—not only with individual parents, but with the organization of parents, the Portuguese group and the Hispanic group, for example, and Tamils and Somalis. I don't mean to generalize, but basically they come as a group and talk about the fact that they feel it's inappropriate to put their students through an IPRC, but they do want their kids to succeed. Every parent wants their child to succeed, and they see it as streaming and inappropriate. We have to be very sensitive to that. We have to acknowledge, and that's why we look at the first few years: "Is it a language issue or is it a burning challenge?" We try to work really closely with the parents, and we've learned such a lot from listening to the parents about what we should and shouldn't do, and I think that's really important.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Jerry J. Ouellette): With that, that concludes the hearings at this particular time.

Just before we conclude, I'd like to thank you for your presentations.

I would ask committee members if they could stay around just so that we can discuss how we intend to proceed with report writing and with anything else that'll take place with this particular issue.

Before closing, I would give the Auditor General, Jim, an opportunity to respond.

Mr. Jim McCarter: I just want to put on the record to express our appreciation. We really did get good co-operation. [*Inaudible*] call from the auditor saying, "We're coming in to do some work," but they were receptive and I think they felt that the area of special education was challenging and it was a good area for us to look at. To the three directors, I would say: We really did have excellent co-operation at the schools that we went to. They almost welcomed us and said, "Come on in. We'd like to show you what we're doing. We know we're not perfect." But I would like to pass along our thanks.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Jerry J. Ouellette): Thank you, Auditor. For those attending, thank you for showing your interest in attending today. Anybody wishing to find out the end results of the recommendations of this committee can find them on www.ontla.on.ca under "committee reports."

This concludes this committee until 9:30 of the clock on April 22.

The committee continued in closed session at 1454.

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