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Official Report of Debates (Hansard)

Wednesday 6 November 2013

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Mercredi 6 novembre 2013

**Standing Committee on
Public Accounts**

2012 Annual Report,
Auditor General:
Education of Aboriginal Students

**Comité permanent des
comptes publics**

Rapport annuel 2012, vérificateur
général : éducation des
élèves autochtones

Chair: Norm Miller
Clerk: William Short

Président : Norm Miller
Greffier : William Short

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LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF ONTARIO

**STANDING COMMITTEE ON
PUBLIC ACCOUNTS**

Wednesday 6 November 2013

ASSEMBLÉE LÉGISLATIVE DE L'ONTARIO

**COMITÉ PERMANENT DES
COMPTE PUBLICS**

Mercredi 6 novembre 2013

The committee met at 0833 in room 151.

COMMITTEE BUSINESS

The Chair (Mr. Norm Miller): I'd like to call the committee to order. I believe we have a motion that was filed by Cindy Forster, MPP, which I'll look to the NDP to move. Ms. Gélinas, go ahead.

M^{me} France Gélinas: I will try this.

I move that the Auditor General conduct a value-for-money audit on the Ministry of Energy's plan to build and subsequently cancel two nuclear reactors at Darlington nuclear generating station;

And that the audit shall include how much taxpayer and ratepayer money was spent prior to the cancellation;

And shall report on the government's estimated total cost of the projects if they had proceeded.

The Chair (Mr. Norm Miller): Would you like to make some comments? You don't sound that great this morning, Ms. Gélinas.

M^{me} France Gélinas: I feel even worse.

Some of the comments: You will remember that I had tabled a motion that was similar to this, then withdrew it and submitted—actually, Cindy did it for me last week—this particular motion. Basically, all that we're asking is to look at how much money has been spent so far. Certainly, we don't expect the auditor to suddenly come up with the N amount, but if, as she does her work, some of the government estimates are available, then she would share that with us. If you would allow, Chair, I would ask the Auditor General if she thinks that this is reasonable.

The Chair (Mr. Norm Miller): I'm sorry, I missed the last bit—if she can do what?

M^{me} France Gélinas: Tell us if this is reasonable.

The Chair (Mr. Norm Miller): Okay. Auditor General?

Ms. Bonnie Lysyk: The three items that are listed there are auditable. So we would be able to look at the plan and the cancellation costs. We would also be able to look at what money was spent prior to the cancellation. As you point out, we wouldn't be able to audit the estimate of something that hadn't proceeded, but we would be able to look at it from the point of what the government's estimates were from their work. So if we were requested to do it, we could do the work. I just wanted to point out that we do have four that we're working on right now, so it would be fitted into that schedule. If there

was a request down the road for another one, I would just have to sit back and think a little bit based on our resources, but it is a doable request.

The Chair (Mr. Norm Miller): Mr. Delaney?

Mr. Bob Delaney: Just before I go, Chair, Ms. MacLeod, is there anything you want to add on that?

The Chair (Mr. Norm Miller): Ms. MacLeod?

Ms. Lisa MacLeod: Thanks, Mr. Delaney. Thank you, Chair. I'm looking at this and I don't think we can support it based on simply looking at the build and cancellation of the two nuclear reactors. The only way, I think, we would support this is if we were to extend it into conducting a value-for-money audit on the government's Green Energy Act as well. I think that would be a much more holistic approach. It would make a lot more sense if we were asking the auditor to conduct an audit there. So we would be opposing this. We're considering an amendment, which would be the only way we would support it.

The Chair (Mr. Norm Miller): Did you want to move your amendment?

Ms. Lisa MacLeod: I'd actually like to hear what my colleague from the government has to say.

The Chair (Mr. Norm Miller): Mr. Delaney?

Mr. Bob Delaney: Well, I may actually give you cause to do an independent motion. Chair, ultimately, whether or not the auditor chooses to undertake a project will be the auditor's decision, but on behalf of the Ministry of Energy, we'd like to try to make this task a lot easier. I've brought with me a document that I'm pleased to table with the Clerk, which you can either copy or make available to anybody on the committee, at your option, but this is a document that, in fact, talks about exactly what was spent. I would actually ask if the Clerk could distribute some of the material that I left.

Much of the information requested in the motion not only is online, but has been for some time. Some of the issues with this particular motion: It asks about a decision to build, but in fact no decision was made. And as no decision was made, there's nothing to cancel and there are no contracts, proposed or otherwise. In fact, Ontario Power Generation had invested some \$180 million in environmental approvals, in project planning and in public and stakeholder consultations around that potential new build, but that's all documented in the materials that I've distributed and in the documents that I'm going to leave with the committee. The auditor and the mover are

perfectly welcome to examine them at their will. The OPG costs for new nuclear planning are contained in rate applications that it routinely submits to the Ontario Energy Board, and the OEB decision papers, which confirm the costs submitted by Ontario Power Generation, are all available online and have been for some time. The committee members have the relevant links.

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With regard to the funds expended, a public policy decision needs to be made with the best evidence available. There were costs associated with ensuring that the government had that decision to arrive at the decision that it did. Each vendor was paid to execute the work, and it was made clear that the issuance of service agreements—which is what they were—did not constitute any commitment on the part of the government for construction of any new nuclear units, at Darlington or anywhere else.

With that, Chair, I'm wondering whether or not we have answered the questions raised by the mover of the motion.

The Chair (Mr. Norm Miller): Mr. O'Toole?

Mr. John O'Toole: Just in response to that, as I live there and attend meetings: I have been in meetings where commitments were made by your government, and I'll get you the clippings from those meetings, if you wish. I consider those words your bond, your commitment, and you could argue about whether it's a formal policy announcement or anything else. Those monies, by communities and companies, for RFQs and RFPs—all of those things were made in the contractual understanding that the ultimate decision on the date to start would be announced.

They had a complete process, and those cost millions of dollars, so for you to imply that there was no understanding—I think you're playing with words and manipulating expectation. I just think it's a false premise to start any discussion to say, "This is already answered. Here's some website you can look at."

I'll leave it at that. I'm very disappointed that you would try to, more or less, dismiss as irresponsible any resolution with respect to—the cancellation is a completely different part of it. Your word is your bond, but I find that that's now in question. Maybe that should be a motion in and of itself.

The Chair (Mr. Norm Miller): Ms. Gélinas?

M^{me} France Gélinas: I would say that our energy critic is fully aware of the information that is available online. As you know, this is a file that we follow step by step. This does not give us the answers that we would like the Auditor General to give us. Are she and her team going to look at those documents? More than likely. There are documents that talk to some of the issues, but are they the equivalent of an auditor's report that tells us how much money has been spent on RFPs, RFQs and the project so far? Absolutely not. Only an Auditor General's report will give us that information.

The Chair (Mr. Norm Miller): Ms. MacLeod?

Ms. Lisa MacLeod: I have great respect for my colleague Mr. Delaney. I know he tries to be co-operative,

and I appreciate this sheet of paper with public information on it. As I stated, this isn't my preference, this motion, to move forward, but I do have an amendment that I would like to make. My support or lack of support for this motion would be contingent on the PC amendment passing, and it would say this: I move—

The Chair (Mr. Norm Miller): So we'll pass it around. We do have copies, so we will pass that around to the members.

Ms. Lisa MacLeod: You do? That's great. I'll read the motion. I move that the motion be amended by adding, "Prior to conducting the value-for-money audit on the nuclear reactor cancellation, the Auditor General shall conduct a value-for-money audit on the government's Green Energy Act; and that the audit shall include, but not limited to, the Green Energy Act's impact on jobs, the cost of the Green Energy Act on ratepayers and the cost of feed-in tariff subsidies paid to date; and that the audit shall include how much the Samsung contract cost taxpayers and ratepayers and how much of that contract has been paid to date" after the paragraph, "And shall report on the government's estimated total cost of the projects if they had proceeded."

The Chair (Mr. Norm Miller): Debate on the amendment? Mr. Mauro.

Mr. Bill Mauro: Thank you, Mr. Chair. A bit of an administrative process piece, I guess: I hope I'm still talking to the amendment, because I guess that's where we're at right now, but I'm just interested—from the auditor: You mentioned that there are four other audits going on right now. This would be the fifth, I think you said. I'm just trying to recall—it's been a while since I've been on public accounts. But I'm just trying to remember when we go into the next round of each individual party being able to request what comes forward in the next year of your work.

There are two questions there, I guess, and I'm interested if you can clarify for me, because—I understand your challenge here, Chair. I hope that you'll see why that information is important to me in terms of the amendment.

The Chair (Mr. Norm Miller): In terms of the selections, the parties select from the report that has been already tabled, so that would be like last year—typically, all the parties make selections from last year's report.

Mr. Bill Mauro: That's correct. My point being two things, obviously, because all the parties are going to have an opportunity—if this motion were to fail, all of the parties represented here are going to have their opportunity to make selections again. So this could obviously be selected by either of the three parties represented here today. I'm also interested in what the other four are that are in the queue already.

The Chair (Mr. Norm Miller): So the special reports.

Mr. Bill Mauro: Yes.

The Chair (Mr. Norm Miller): I'll pass it on to the auditor.

Ms. Bonnie Lysyk: Yes. If a motion was passed in this committee for us to do some work, obviously we would take that seriously and integrate the work into our plan. Historically, the office has produced between 10 to 14 value-for-money audits every year, and those are audits in the past that have been chosen by the audit office.

You'll find that in the one that is going to be published in December, we're reporting on 10 value-for-money audits, the reason being is there was the Mississauga gas turbine request audit, there was the Oakville request that was being worked on and the ones that are in the queue.

The ones that are in the queue are the OLG and the ONTC, Ontario Northland. A few weeks ago, this committee passed a motion for us to look at the difference in the costs associated with the labour agreements and then the cancellation of the circumstances around the labour agreements. And I misspoke. This one would be four. If we did this one, this one would be four.

My comment in terms of the workload: Basically once a value-for-money audit is started in the office and a special request comes in, then there's a choice that's made. That value-for-money is put aside and the request is worked on, or we see what can—you know, in the past, the office saw what could be done and maybe chose to staff up.

Mr. Bill Mauro: That was going to be a follow-up for me: What does it do to you in terms of the work that's already ongoing? Does the committee assume that if this motion were to pass this would go at the end of the line and it would be done, or would it all be done concurrently with the other work that's going on now? Or is it implied that it goes to the end of the line and the work—which takes us almost into the year where you're beginning your new work again and then we get to choose out of what you've chosen, so to speak.

Ms. Bonnie Lysyk: Now, we've known about this motion for a couple of weeks.

Mr. Bill Mauro: Sure.

Ms. Bonnie Lysyk: We've gone through the planning process for the audits that we'll be working on the next year, so we did take into account in our planning that this motion might pass, which is why I said that if it passes, we'd be able to work on it, because we're at the point right now where we're starting on audits. The specials that we're working on are different teams than the team that would be working on this request, if the motion was passed.

If the motion wasn't passed, we would continue with what we had normally planned to do—other audits. If there was another motion on the table down the road, we would still consider and integrate it. I have great respect for the committee and for the choices made at this committee. I do feel that we work for you, so—

Mr. Bill Mauro: Thank you, Chair.

The Chair (Mr. Norm Miller): Mr. Delaney?

Mr. Bob Delaney: Thank you, Chair. France, you've either got a very bad microphone or a very bad cold.

M^{me} France Gélinas: The second.

Mr. Bob Delaney: Okay. We'll try and ensure that the use of your voice is as limited as we can get.

Chair, in response to some of the comments that I've heard, in 2011, in order to provide greater certainty in the support of decision-making, representatives from Infrastructure Ontario, Ontario Power Generation, the Ministry of Finance and the Ministry of Energy established what was called the government nuclear team to develop a framework for assessing new-build nuclear as an option for long-term baseload supply.

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In June 2012, service agreements were issued to two reactor vendors for possible new-build nuclear at the Darlington site. These service agreements required the vendor to provide detailed information on construction plans, schedules and cost estimates for construction of their respective designs at the Darlington site—

Ms. Lisa MacLeod: A point of order, Chair.

The Chair (Mr. Norm Miller): Yes?

Ms. Lisa MacLeod: Just with respect, we have an amendment that we're discussing. Could we either—

Mr. Bob Delaney: Actually, I want to stand that down because it's the amendment that's on the table and not the original motion.

Ms. Lisa MacLeod: Yes.

Mr. Bob Delaney: So we're dealing with the amendment, and I quite agree with you.

Ms. Lisa MacLeod: Could I put the amendment to a vote?

The Chair (Mr. Norm Miller): No. We're discussing right now, so continue.

Mr. Bob Delaney: The comments I have relate to the original motion and not the amendment.

The Chair (Mr. Norm Miller): Okay, so we'll go to France. We're dealing with the amendment.

M^{me} France Gélinas: Yes, I'm dealing with the amendment. The first thing I would like to ask you, Chair, is that, although I fully understand the spirit of the amendment, it has nothing to do with the original motion, so I would ask: Is it in order?

The Chair (Mr. Norm Miller): I will turn to my Clerk for that advice.

Interjection.

The Chair (Mr. Norm Miller): It is in order, is the short answer.

In light of what's going on today, I'd just like to remind the committee that we do have a value-for-money audit planned. I'm a little sensitive to time, especially this afternoon, when we have people coming in from Thunder Bay etc. Just keep that in mind.

France, go ahead.

M^{me} France Gélinas: Then I would say, although what she's asking for has merit, that I don't see it as an amendment to the work that we had already asked for. We will be voting against the amendment but not the spirit of what she's trying to do. If it was to come in its own motion, this is certainly something that I would be willing to support and consider, but I don't think the two have to be lumped in together. One is looking at some-

thing that is clearly defined: a set of RFPs and RFQs that have gone on. The other part of the work, I'm guessing, is a lot more substantive in the amount of work that we're asking our auditors to do. I would like to turn to our auditor again so that she can tell us a bit as to how much work the new part adds to what we had submitted some weeks ago.

The Chair (Mr. Norm Miller): Yes, and thank you for that. I think you are correct in that it is essentially another audit; the amendment is another audit. Auditor General?

Ms. Bonnie Lysyk: To be honest with you, I'd have to sit back and have some discussions in the office around some of this. Some of what's requested in the new motion, I think, might have been covered under some of the work that was done on the renewable energy audit report that was put out before. I think, basically, I'll maybe need to discuss this a little bit more in the office in terms of the level of work. Having said that, it is a value-for-money audit. We would be able to do it. I just need some more discussion back in the office, I think, around it if it's a new motion.

The Chair (Mr. Norm Miller): Okay. Thank you for that. Are we ready to vote on this?

Mr. John O'Toole: I have just one more comment: I do believe it's very much connected. I really think the long-term energy plan is out there being discussed and should be tabled, and the consideration of all of these things—green energy, renewable energy and nuclear energy. Then all of a sudden, they cancelled the plant, which made the whole plan that was existing—so I think it's very much related, looking into why we got into this problem of cancellation.

The Chair (Mr. Norm Miller): Okay, thank you. Are we ready to vote on the amendment? All those in favour? Opposed? The amendment is lost.

We move to the main motion. Any further discussion on the main motion?

Mr. Bob Delaney: Just a concluding comment, because I think we may be ready to vote on that as well.

The Chair (Mr. Norm Miller): Mr. Delaney, sure.

Mr. Bob Delaney: Just to make sure, Chair, that we have on the record a couple of last points: The service agreement process was used to provide the vendors, which are Westinghouse and SNC Candu Energy, an opportunity to provide detailed information on costs to construct two nuclear units at Darlington, the construction planning information on the construction in order to provide confidence to the schedule, and, of course, construction schedule. I have to reiterate again that each vendor was paid to execute the work, and it was a service agreement, not a contract. It was made clear that the issuance of a service agreement did not constitute any commitment on the part of the government to construct new nuclear units at Darlington. For the benefit of the auditor and the committee, although it is available, I'll table with the Clerk a very extensive Ontario Energy Board document that largely answers the requests made in the motion itself.

The Chair (Mr. Norm Miller): Okay. Sorry, yes?

M^{me} France Gélinas: I'm calling for a recorded vote.

The Chair (Mr. Norm Miller): Recorded vote. Okay.

All those in favour of the amendment?

M^{me} France Gélinas: The motion, not the amendment.

The Chair (Mr. Norm Miller): Sorry, just the motion.

Ayes

Campbell, Gélinas.

Nays

Delaney, Jaczek, MacLeod, Mauro, McNeely, O'Toole.

The Chair (Mr. Norm Miller): Okay, the motion is lost.

Very well. That is, I believe, all we have to do in open session. We're going to be going into a briefing on today's value-for-money audit. We're in camera.

The committee continued in closed session at 0857 and resumed at 1231.

2012 ANNUAL REPORT,
AUDITOR GENERAL:
EDUCATION OF ABORIGINAL STUDENTS
MINISTRY OF EDUCATION
ALGOMA DISTRICT SCHOOL BOARD
KAWARTHA PINE RIDGE DISTRICT
SCHOOL BOARD

LAKEHEAD DISTRICT SCHOOL BOARD

Consideration of section 3.05, education of aboriginal students.

The Chair (Mr. Norm Miller): I'd like to call the committee to order and welcome Ministry of Education staff and also representatives of Lakehead, Kawartha and Algoma district school boards. You have up to 20 minutes for a presentation, and perhaps you could start by all introducing yourselves for the benefit of Hansard and committee members, please.

Ms. Mary Jean Gallagher: Okay, let me begin with the introductions. My name is Mary Jean Gallagher. I'm the assistant deputy minister of the student achievement division in the Ministry of Education.

Ms. Alayne Bigwin: Good afternoon. I'm Alayne Bigwin. I'm director of the Aboriginal Education Office for the Ministry of Education.

Ms. Mary Jean Gallagher: And on my left.

Mr. Rusty Hick: Good afternoon. My name is Rusty Hick. I'm the director of education for the Kawartha Pine Ridge District School Board.

Ms. Catherine Siemieniuk: Good afternoon. I'm Catherine Siemieniuk, and I'm the director of education with the Lakehead District School Board.

Ms. Lucia Reece: Good afternoon. I'm Lucia Reece, director of education for the Algoma District School Board.

The Chair (Mr. Norm Miller): Welcome. Go ahead with your presentation.

Ms. Mary Jean Gallagher: All right. Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Good afternoon to the members of the committee. First of all, as you know, our deputy is unavailable today because of the passing of his father last evening. He did pass on some comments for me to share with members of the committee today. This is in his voice:

"As the former assistant deputy minister for student success and Deputy Minister of Children and Youth Services, I've seen what happens when we're not there for our aboriginal children and youth and what we can do when we are there. Despite more focus and more resources than ever, we must do more. I can assure this committee that you have the commitment from the Ministry of Education and myself personally that we will expedite the sharing of successful evidence-based practices and instill a greater sense of urgency in the education sector not to let these children and youth down."

"Once again, I apologize for not being there, and I will now let Mary Jean and the directors deliver their remarks."

Moving now into my own voice rather than our deputy's: My name is Mary Jean Gallagher, as I said. I'm the chief student achievement officer of Ontario and assistant deputy minister in the student achievement division. With me today is Alayne Bigwin, who is the director of the Aboriginal Education Office, and three of our colleagues from the field, whom you've been introduced to earlier.

I would like to begin by thanking the Auditor General for the valuable recommendations on how to enhance the outcomes of our aboriginal education strategy. I'm pleased that the Auditor General shares our commitment to improving educational outcomes for aboriginal students.

I appreciate the time the Auditor General has taken to review the ministry's activities in aboriginal education to inform the five recommendations. The ministry has taken these recommendations very seriously. We're using the Auditor General's report and subsequent discussions to inform how we improve aboriginal student achievement even further.

As you know, addressing the education attainment gap is a top priority for the government of Ontario. The Ministry of Education is committed to raising the bar and closing gaps in student achievement. We want to ensure that all aboriginal students in Ontario have every opportunity for success and to reach their full potential. We also want to ensure that all educators and students build greater knowledge and awareness about aboriginal histories, cultures and perspectives.

I'll begin by providing you with a brief overview of the aboriginal education strategy, and then I'll move on to a review of the audit findings and indicate the progress we've already made since the report was published.

More than ever before, we are taking both a proactive and comprehensive approach to improving academic outcomes for all aboriginal students.

In 2006, the Aboriginal Education Office was created to provide ministry-wide leadership on aboriginal education issues and initiatives. We do this by working in collaboration with aboriginal communities and organizations, school boards, post-secondary institutions, other ministries and the federal government.

In 2007, the ministry launched its Aboriginal Education Strategy with the release of the Ontario First Nation, Métis, and Inuit Education Policy Framework. The framework provides the strategic policy context within which the Ministry of Education, school boards and schools are working to improve the academic achievement and learning outcomes of the aboriginal students who attend Ontario's provincially funded elementary and secondary schools, and to raise the awareness and knowledge of all students about First Nation, Métis, and Inuit peoples' cultures, histories and perspectives.

Significant work has been done since the release of that Ontario First Nation, Métis and Inuit Education Policy Framework in 2007. During this time, relationships with school boards, schools, parents, teachers and aboriginal communities and organizations have become stronger. Activities have enhanced targeted supports for students and educators, and knowledge and awareness of First Nation, Métis and Inuit histories, cultures and perspectives have increased throughout the provincial education system.

In the framework, the ministry made a commitment to release a progress report every three years. The ministry released the first progress report, Sound Foundations for the Road Ahead, in 2009.

In December 2012, the ministry released a preliminary report, Continuing the Journey. This document served as a tool for dialogue and invited input from all of our partners in education into the second progress report and the development of an implementation plan through to 2016 and beyond.

This past August, the ministry released the second progress report, entitled A Solid Foundation: Second Progress Report on the Implementation of the Ontario First Nation, Métis and Inuit Education Policy Framework. The report highlights the framework implementation successes to date, and identifies priorities for continued framework implementation and next steps for advancing the critical goals of Ontario's Aboriginal Education Strategy.

The second progress report also includes Ontario's first baseline data on aboriginal student achievement, for the 2011-12 school year. This valuable information is based on voluntary, confidential aboriginal student self-identification.

While the six years since the launch of the strategy and the framework have seen many accomplishments, I realize there's much more work to do. Many First Nation, Métis and Inuit students are excelling academically, and we will continue to support them in their success.

However, preliminary analysis of this new data reveals a persistent achievement gap between aboriginal students and all students. The ministry is committed to continuing to provide the support needed to help students who are struggling and close that gap.

I would like to now focus more specifically on the findings of the Auditor General and highlight our plan of action and the progress we've made to date. You have before you a status report that describes the ministry's completed and planned undertakings with regard to the auditor's recommendations. I trust that this provides confirmation that we've given thoughtful attention to the auditor's report. We have taken concrete steps to address all five recommendations.

But what is also important to note is the ministry's commitment to continue this work. Our work in this area has been and will continue to be an ongoing priority as we work to pursue a path that builds on demonstrated success as a result of partnerships in support of First Nation, Métis and Inuit students across the province.

I'd like to begin by addressing recommendations numbers 2 and 3, and then move on to the remaining three.

The ministry recognizes the need for accurate and reliable sources of data about aboriginal students attending provincially funded elementary and secondary schools. In 2006, less than 10 school boards and school authorities had approved aboriginal student self-identification policies in place. As of April 2013, we now have all 72 boards and four school authorities with self-identification policies.

In October 2009, the ministry implemented the collection of aboriginal student self-identification data, through OnSIS, from boards with policies in place. Data collected through OnSIS enabled the creation of Ontario's first educational baseline data set for aboriginal students.

Preliminary October 2012 data shows that 70 school boards had reported self-identification data to the ministry and 28,079 students have been self-identified. This is an increase from 8,684 self-identified students in 2009 and represents approximately 44% of the estimated aboriginal student population, up from just 14% in 2009.

This signifies a great deal of progress in a short period of time. To get here, the ministry has supported relationship-building at the local level and encouraged the building of trust among aboriginal students and families by providing the information they need when choosing to voluntarily self-identify.

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With regard to recommendation number 2, the ministry will continue to support voluntary, confidential aboriginal student self-identification efforts across the province. This work will focus on:

- policy development and implementation considerations related to the collection of aboriginal student self-identification data;

- planning and implementing community engagement around self-identification;

- increasing opportunities for professional development for boards and school staff; and

—sharing best practices on using the data to support targeted strategies.

As well, the ministry will move forward on a communication strategy to support all boards in strengthening their voluntary, confidential aboriginal student self-identification activities.

The ministry provides project-based funding for district school board projects outside of the Grants for Student Needs to support the implementation of the framework. Project funding can be allocated towards the ongoing development and implementation of aboriginal self-identification policies, such as community engagement initiatives around self-ID, and related professional learning opportunities for school board staff.

For 2013-14, the ministry is continuing to provide funding outside of the Grants for Student Needs towards a number of priority areas, including funding to support district school boards to increase aboriginal student self-identification data use, analysis and sharing. This year, we are allocating \$4.9 million to support board projects. To date, the ministry has funded over 1,000 board projects over several years. We know that through these targeted investments, a number of successful initiatives are in place across the province to support aboriginal learners.

For example, an aboriginal transition coordinator position was created in York Region District School Board to support students transitioning from the Chippewas of Georgina Island First Nation. As a result, the dropout rate for grade 10 students was reversed from 75% of the students dropping out by second semester to 100% retention in the second semester within the first year of the program. By the fourth year, 86% of those First Nation grade 10 students had completed 16 out of 16 credits, which is an indicator we use in Student Success/Learning to 18 to identify students who are on track to graduate on time.

The identification and sharing of these promising practices are critical as the ministry moves forward in framework implementation. Past opportunities such as the ministry's Circle of Light conferences and other board professional development initiatives have proven to be valuable in raising awareness and increasing knowledge around First Nation, Métis and Inuit cultures, histories and perspectives.

As suggested by the Auditor General in recommendation 3, the ministry released Ontario's first baseline data on First Nation, Métis and Inuit student achievement through the second progress report this past summer.

With aboriginal student self-identification data, the ministry and school boards can now continue to target strategies and develop new initiatives that will help close the academic achievement gap between aboriginal students and all other students. For example, Algoma District School Board has created academic achievement profiles for self-identified aboriginal students using EQAO data for students in grades 3, 6 and 9, and, for students in grade 10, using the Ontario secondary school literacy test. This data allows the board to identify and

assist First Nation, Métis and Inuit students who may need additional support.

The ministry agrees with recommendation number 1 of the Auditor General's report that implementation plans are necessary to support initiatives to close the achievement gap. That's why, this fall, the ministry plans to release a framework implementation plan for 2013-14 and beyond.

The framework implementation plan supports the delivery of the next implementation phase of our Aboriginal Education Strategy. It focuses on:

- increasing awareness of aboriginal perspectives, histories, languages and cultures;
- furthering the analysis, use and sharing of self-identification data;
- increasing the number of students and families that choose to self-identify;
- ensuring greater alignment and integration of ministry priorities and initiatives; and
- setting aspirational student achievement targets for self-identified aboriginal students in order to close that achievement gap.

To achieve this, a ministry-wide First Nation, Métis and Inuit student achievement steering committee and working group have been established to support the development of the framework implementation plan, inclusive of First Nation, Métis and Inuit perspectives.

The steering committee and working group, key assistant deputy ministers, directors and advisers use available self-identification data and identify and deploy student achievement initiatives targeted towards aboriginal students with the goal of closing the achievement gap.

The ministry is committed to working with our aboriginal partners and education stakeholders to support First Nation, Métis and Inuit students as we move forward in the implementation of the framework.

To engage our partners directly in this work, the Minister's Advisory Council on First Nation, Métis And Inuit Education was reconvened in April 2013. At this meeting, the minister shared the baseline data and struck a working group of representative members from the committee to provide input into the framework implementation plan. The working group is key to informing that plan, as all of our work must go forward in partnership with our First Nations, Métis and Inuit people.

I'm also pleased to advise that, as suggested in recommendation 4 of the auditor's report, the ministry has made progress in the review of existing funding mechanisms and reporting procedures. Since 2007, the ministry has provided funding to district school boards through the First Nations, Métis and Inuit Education Supplement. The supplement is projected to be \$42.8 million in 2013-14. This includes \$8.2 million to support the elementary and secondary native language programs; \$15.2 million to support native studies courses for secondary students; and \$19.4 million to support a per pupil allocation based on 2006 census data.

This past March, the ministry established an internal working group to examine the feasibility of remodelling

the First Nations, Métis and Inuit Education Supplement based on available aboriginal student self-ID data. Given the complexity of this work, the working group will continue to meet to develop options for moving forward.

The ministry has also enhanced existing templates used by boards to apply for funding and report on their projects. The new templates support an objective and needs-based approach to funding, provide increased accountability, and will allow the ministry to obtain evidence-based data from boards on the success of their projects.

The ministry agrees with the suggestions of the Auditor General in recommendation 5 to improve educational outcomes for First Nation students living on reserves. The ministry continues to engage in three separate Education Partnerships Program tables with Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada and the following First Nation organizations: the Nishnawbe Aski Nation, Grand Council Treaty 3, and the Association of Iroquois and Allied Indians/Indigenous Education Coalition.

On April 9, 2013, the government of Canada, government of Ontario and Nishnawbe Aski Nation signed a historic memorandum of understanding on First Nation education. Through this agreement, Canada, Ontario and the Nishnawbe Aski Nation are working together to improve educational outcomes for Nishnawbe Aski Nation students in both First Nation-operated schools and provincially funded schools. Key work plan activities include the delivery of regional forums to promote student engagement, professional development opportunities for First Nation education directors and the development of a guide to improve communication between parents and students.

In addition, the ministry, in collaboration with the Chiefs of Ontario, launched an e-learning pilot project in September 2012. The project provides selected First Nation communities with access to the Ontario Educational Resource Bank, an online repository with over 31,000 digital learning resources linked to the Ontario curriculum.

The Ministry of Education has also, in collaboration with the Chiefs of Ontario office, Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada, and the Ontario Public School Boards' Association, developed a tuition agreement guide. The resource guide was created to assist district school boards and First Nation communities in discussions regarding tuition agreements and was released in September 2013. Regional information sessions will be held in the fall of 2013 and the spring of 2014 to provide an opportunity for First Nations communities and district school boards to review the final resource guide and discuss best practices in developing successful agreements.

We've achieved a great deal of success. Great strides have been made in the collection and use of aboriginal student achievement baseline data; relationships have been strengthened across the sector; knowledge of First Nation, Métis and Inuit histories, cultures and perspec-

tives have increased; and targeted supports are in place to support aboriginal learners. But I know—we all know—there is much more work to do.

The Ministry of Education remains committed to ensuring that every First Nation, Métis and Inuit student has every opportunity for success and will continue to work in collaboration with district school boards, First Nation, Métis and Inuit partners, and other education stakeholders to build on those successes to date.

Student achievement initiatives specifically have been targeted to support First Nation, Métis and Inuit students in two priority areas: first of all, to increase the understanding of all students with regard to First Nation, Métis and Inuit cultures and histories, because this is our culture and history as well, as citizens of Ontario, and those are important steps to creating the environment for our aboriginal students of acceptance and celebration of their histories; and secondly, to close the achievement gap for First Nation, Métis and Inuit students.

To close this achievement gap, the student achievement division, working in partnership with the Aboriginal Education Office and local school boards, is currently supporting a number of initiatives and activities with two main foci: first of all, to embed an aboriginal education focus into all of the various successful strategies that our division and school boards already use to improve teaching and learning. We have a huge track record of success—

The Acting Chair (Mr. John O'Toole): About a minute and a half left.

Ms. Mary Jean Gallagher: Pardon?

The Acting Chair (Mr. John O'Toole): About a minute and a half left.

Ms. Mary Jean Gallagher: All right. That's good. Thank you—and secondly, to implement specific targeted programs and research designed to address the achievement gap for those students.

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My colleagues from the three school boards selected by the Auditor General are here and will now take a moment to make some remarks to share their work.

Mr. Rusty Hick: Good afternoon. My name is Rusty Hick.

In the Kawartha Pine Ridge District School Board, we're proud to serve almost 33,000 students in 90 schools spread across 7,000 square kilometres, covering the city and county of Peterborough, Northumberland county as well as the municipality of Clarington, in Durham region.

Within that population of students, we currently have 740 students, or 2.24%, who have self-identified as being of First Nation, Métis or Inuit heritage. We also serve three First Nation communities. We serve Alderville First Nation, which is on the east side of Rice Lake; Curve Lake First Nation, on Buckhorn in Peterborough county; and Hiawatha First Nation, which is on the north side of Rice Lake in Peterborough county. We currently have 200 tuition-paying students from those three communities.

Further to our context, the largest of these three is Curve Lake First Nation, which has its own school for kindergarten to grade 3 students. In grade 4, the students transition into our system at Ridpath Memorial Junior Public School in Lakefield.

As a board, we have long recognized the importance of our First Nation partners and indeed all of our students of aboriginal heritage. Since the inception of the Kawartha Pine Ridge District School Board in 1997, we have had one of our board trustees selected on a rotating basis by the three First Nations, and we have a board advisory committee for aboriginal issues.

In our education centre in Peterborough, in the main foyer, we have, as a focal point, original art from our First Nation partners, visibly emphasizing our commitment to honouring aboriginal peoples.

The advisory committee is chaired by our First Nations trustee and has representatives from each of the three First Nations—

The Acting Chair (Mr. John O'Toole): I just might want to interrupt, and I apologize as well. The understanding of the 20 minutes of the introductory remarks has been exceeded—not to cut you off. I think the suggestion from members of the committee is perhaps that, during your response to questions, you could outline your board's background and connection with the issue before us so that there is time for committee members' questions. I appreciate your input. In your responses, you can fill in the blanks.

With that, perhaps it would be appropriate now—the normal round of questioning will be 20 minutes allocated to the opposition side. The Chair recognizes Mr. Miller.

Mr. Norm Miller: Thank you, Mr. Acting Chair.

Thank you for your presentation. Perhaps we could get—the comments you were going to make, maybe we can get those in print form so that we don't miss out on them.

Mr. Rusty Hick: Certainly.

Mr. Norm Miller: Unfortunately, we don't have a huge amount of time this afternoon.

I guess I'm going to start off with the policy plans and performance measures, because I guess it's my impression, having read the auditor's report, that there are some significant goals that have been set, including closing the gap in aboriginal education levels, achievement levels and graduation rates by 2016. It doesn't look like we're going to achieve that goal that was initially stated a few years ago. It seems to me that part of the reason is that there were kind of general goals set but nothing too specific. But then, a few years back, you put out three goals and then 10 very specific performance measures. I'm wondering how you're progressing with those very specific three goals and the 10 performance measures.

The three goals were high levels of student achievement, reduced gaps in student achievement, and high levels of public confidence in public education. The performance measures: I'm sure you're probably familiar with them. That seems to me to be the right approach to actually be able to know that you're making progress. So if you could talk about that, it would be appreciated.

Ms. Mary Jean Gallagher: Thank you, and my apologies for the confusion about the introductory time.

First of all, the three goals: The first goals that you mentioned are, in fact, the three goals that have been in place for the entire Ministry of Education since 2003-04. On the whole, with all of our students across Ontario, we have been significantly successful in the goals and the measurements that have been associated with those, so much so that our EQAO test results have moved from 54% to 71% of the students in Ontario meeting provincial expectation in that decade, and from 68% to 83% of our students graduating in that same period of time. We are, in fact, recognized worldwide for the success of our student achievement initiatives and reform.

Of course, the problem in aboriginal education is that in order to set specific targets to measure achievement along all of those 10 indicators, we first have to be able to reliably identify who the aboriginal students are in our schools. Quite honestly, the history of aboriginal education in our province and all across Canada, we all know, is not one that is supportive of having our aboriginal people identify themselves and their children in our schools. To make progress in this area, to be able to make those specific measurements of gains in student achievement, we have to first get a large enough cadre of our students in our schools to self-identify.

In my view, the history of attempts to try to improve educational outcomes for aboriginal students is littered with examples in which, from a government perspective or a community perspective, with possibly all the right intentions in the world, things are done to our aboriginal students and communities rather than done with them.

Our work, up to this point in our aboriginal education strategy, has been very diligently and energetically focused on trying to build a strong enough relationship not only between the Ministry of Education and aboriginal nations but, even more importantly, between school boards and their local First Nation, Métis and Inuit communities so that the necessary trust and understanding of how we could work together can be built.

We can identify who the students are in our schools, and only then can we actually start to measure our progress in having things move along better.

Mr. Norm Miller: On the self-identification piece of this, then: In the ministry's initial response, the ministry committed to discussing the feasibility of development of a policy guideline for voluntary staff self-identification. What's the status of that commitment?

Ms. Mary Jean Gallagher: The status on that commitment is that it is moving forward on a very uneven front as school boards are ready. Given the relationships within school boards and staffing and teachers' unions and staff representational groups, we need, again, to build an understanding of the culture and the understanding of the need and the advantage of doing this.

Perhaps some of my colleague directors could talk to you about that.

Mr. Norm Miller: On the self-identification question, some school boards have been very successful, I under-

stand. In fact, one board, I believe, had 100% identified. Others are not doing near as well. I think the complaint from some of the school boards was that they could use more assistance from the ministry on that. I'll let you address that in a minute—

Ms. Mary Jean Gallagher: Perhaps our board representatives can speak to that, as well.

Mr. Norm Miller: Sure.

Ms. Catherine Siemieniuk: I just wanted to assure the committee that the self-identification of students is an ongoing process. At Lakehead District School Board, 20.3% of our students self-identify. We're a board of approximately 9,700 students. We're a small board. We serve the city of Thunder Bay and the surrounding areas, and, in 2009, we added the community of Armstrong and the settlement of Collins. Last year, we were also approached by Gull Bay First Nation to offer provincial education to their students. So it's an ongoing process. Part of that process is annually reaching out to new registrations, JK parents in particular—but also, through our student verification system, to have parents update their self-identification process. So it is an ongoing campaign.

In addition to that, in May 2013, trustees approved a policy to have staff self-identify. That was based on feedback that we got from our communities as well as from our aboriginal education advisory committee, which this afternoon I will refer to as EAC, respectfully. That will be fully implemented this year, and it's really for us to know. We can't guess how many aboriginal staff members we have. We know that part of the success in aboriginal education is ensuring that students have role models.

Mr. Norm Miller: Did you say 20% of your students—

Ms. Catherine Siemieniuk: Yes, 20.3% of our students self-identify.

Mr. Norm Miller: So does that mean 80% of the aboriginal population did not—

Ms. Catherine Siemieniuk: I'm sorry, I misrepresented that. So 20.3% of our student population self-identifies as aboriginal.

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Mr. Norm Miller: So do you have any idea whether that's the entire aboriginal population, or what percentage of the—

Ms. Catherine Siemieniuk: StatsCan data says that it should be around 15%, so we believe that we've exceeded what the StatsCan data is.

Mr. Norm Miller: So you're one of the boards that has been successful, then.

Ms. Catherine Siemieniuk: We've been very successful. I might add that the Northern Ontario Education Leaders group—NOEL, we fondly call ourselves—we're really the leaders in starting that self-identification process, with a great deal of support from the ministry.

Mr. Norm Miller: If you've been successful, you obviously have some best practices. Is the ministry sharing that information with other boards?

Ms. Mary Jean Gallagher: Absolutely. Most of our student achievement work, actually, has to do with finding out where there are successful initiatives, in whatever it is we think should happen, and finding ways to mobilize that knowledge across the province.

Mr. Norm Miller: Thank you. Please continue.

Ms. Lucia Reece: I'm Lucia Reece, from Algoma District School Board, and I would just echo. We have a student population of approximately 10,283 students. We are geographically the size of Ireland, just to give you a context. Within that, we have data telling us that 13% of our student population self-identify as First Nations, Métis or Inuit. The statistics for the city of Sault Ste. Marie indicate that in our community of 75,000 it's 10% of our general population that is aboriginal.

We have 510 students from 10 different First Nations communities in the North Shore Tribal Council who pay tuition fees, and we have had our self-identification policy in place since 2007, as well. We would like to reiterate that it took time and trust in order for us to put that in place, but we do believe we have a near-100% participation rate with our aboriginal partners. Our staff are also encouraged to self-identify, and that has also been met with positive results.

As of this September, I can share that that trust continues to build, to the point where we signed a memorandum of understanding with one of our First Nations partners to share our student data on a daily basis, so that we can monitor our students' progress and academic achievement and work collaboratively to put resources where they're needed most to support the student achievement of our First Nations students.

Mr. Rusty Hick: In the quote, the Kawartha Pine Ridge District School Board has indicated that we have approximately 2.24% of our students who have identified as First Nations, Métis or Inuit. StatsCan would suggest we would be in the neighbourhood of 2%, so we think we're somewhere close to being fully identified. However, the ongoing efforts are there.

When the first policy was adopted, we put together a number of efforts, including a television commercial which we're quite proud of; we locally aired it, on CHEX. We had newsletters go home and we had three events that we called "gatherings." We brought together elders of the First Nations in celebration of First Nations, Métis and Inuit heritage. We had speakers. We had a pretty good turnout for those.

We've also trained our front-line staff—all of our secretaries in our schools—with respect to approaches to how to encourage people to self-identify. Our numbers for self-identification over time have gone up, from 480 students in 2010-11 up to, currently, 740 students. That's in a context of declining enrolment, where we've gone down several thousand students over the same period of time, so the number of self-identified students have gone up.

So we believe that we have been successful, but I would echo my colleague's comment that it is an ongoing effort, and at times it is a challenge. I will point out that

even members of our First Nations who are tuition-paying students don't always self-identify, for some of the reasons outlined earlier: the historical mistrust, in some cases, of organizations and systems that are beyond the First Nation itself.

Ms. Mary Jean Gallagher: If I may just briefly add to that, overall, over the last three years of intense work on this, we've moved from 14% of the estimated population attending provincial schools in 2009 to approximately 44%. That is, actually, quite a strong accomplishment, particularly in light of the fact that we know that aboriginal children and youth are the fastest-growing population in our province. The baseline of the group that we're trying to have self-identify keeps increasing, just as we keep trying to increase the number who self-identify.

Mr. Norm Miller: Thank you. I noticed in your report—I think it's the second one, A Solid Foundation—that you used to have on-reserve and off-reserve students separated, but now you've grouped them together. I'm just wondering about why you've done that. I would assume there's more challenge for on-reserve students. Would this not obscure the information you're going to get from your work?

Ms. Mary Jean Gallagher: The report itself, I think, has some places where it does bring those populations together. We still maintain desegregated data sets, however, for those students. There are differences and different challenges to addressing the needs of those groups. The challenges in particular for those groups that are on the federal lands, of course, are that, ultimately, the education of those students is the responsibility of the federal government. That's how we end up in these tripartite negotiation discussions in terms of how we might be able to deal with that differently.

Mr. Norm Miller: The transition from on-reserve to the public system is a real challenge, I'm sure, for many aboriginal students. Do you have specific programs that are in place to try to meet those challenges? In the report I think it said that many of the aboriginal students were two or three grades behind, and I'm sure there are other challenges as well.

Ms. Mary Jean Gallagher: Yes.

Mr. Norm Miller: Do you have some specific programs to try to assist with that?

Ms. Mary Jean Gallagher: The challenge for students moving off-reserve to on-reserve—of course, in many cases students move back and forth several times over their school career between schools on-reserve and off-reserve. You're absolutely right: The transitioning of those students to another school in another system is very difficult. It's exacerbated by the fact that many of these students attend their on-reserve school for most or all of their elementary school education and then actually not only have to change school systems but have to move away from home and live on their own or with another family or whatever in a larger community in order to attend secondary school. That's a difficult transition, as I'm sure you would understand, for any 13-year-old and

their parents who would be sending them off to that environment.

We have a number of programs. First of all, I would say that one of the programs is in fact that which we described as building an understanding, among all of our students and staff, of the history, perspective and culture of our aboriginal students. There are a number of surveys and studies that have been done that identify that these kids move to another community and, quite frankly, they face various levels of racism in the community, in terms of the environment in which they are. The ministry has, in fact, funded a number of these projects I spoke about earlier, and the boards have taken us up on that funding and put in place a number of things.

I'm going to talk about one in particular that I'm familiar with from my student achievement division and then ask the directors to speak to that. One of the programs we have in the student achievement division is a students-as-researchers project. It's part of our Speak Up analysis in our Student Success Learning to 18 portfolio. We identified kids from school boards all across the province who we brought together for a day, and the full Ontario education research conference. These are students from all different levels of ability and interest who come and are trained on how to do research, and then they attend the educational research conference with school board researchers and university people.

One example is a young gentleman named Curtis from Ontario North East school board. He was one of these grade 11 students, or grade 10, I think at the time he came, who we trained in research and we supported and the school board supported his doing a research project in his school. Curtis was an aboriginal student who lived on the reserve and had made that transition to high school. Quite frankly, he was finding it not to be a very successful experience. Curtis decided that the research project that he was going to do with a group of students from his school was to sort out what the challenges and barriers were to students like him coming from the reserve to the school, to identify those challenges and then try to identify some things that the school and the school community could do to help. He produced an absolutely amazing research report.

This is a kid whose marks and success in school prior to this were not all that great. He produced this amazing report where he and his fellow students identified things like isolation, moving away from home, the culture shift, the racism in the community, the sense of not belonging to the school etc. He took that back and presented that to his school administration.

I just bumped into Curtis, actually, as part of our ministry visioning exercise as I was travelling around the province, and the school now is assisting Curtis. The elders in his community are working with the school, and Curtis and several of his fellow students have started a transition support group for students coming from his reserve to the high school.

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They also, for the first time ever, sponsored a one-week residency program at the end of August at Nipis-

sing University, where the kids who are in grades 7, 8 and 9 would come together, get to know each other and be ready to support each other in the transition.

Those are the kinds of local initiatives that start by, again, working with members of the community. I'm sure the board of directors will have other things to tell—

The Acting Chair (Mr. John O'Toole): You have about one minute left on this round.

Ms. Mary Jean Gallagher: Okay. Go, Cathy, quickly.

Ms. Catherine Siemieniuk: I have a number of things I'd like to say, but I will start with saying that it's respectfully about relationships with First Nations communities. As the Lakehead District School Board, we have not only had meetings with education councillors, but we visited communities to be a presence in those communities to ensure that that transition—that you meet the parents face to face and understand the reality.

We have 252 tuition-fee-paying students in our system, and that's from 17 different First Nations communities, some of them organized by education councils. In addition to that, we have our own YouTube channel, where we have a video. We have, through project funding from the ministry, ensured that we have a project called Tutors in a Cultural Environment, which provides a safe space for students.

Speaking of sharing, we found that out because of a sharing opportunity that we had through the ministry. We followed up, with Queen Elizabeth, actually, in Sioux Lookout, found out what program they had going on, and we've replicated it through project funding, first in one school and then in all of our secondary schools—and you're not going to let me finish.

The Acting Chair (Mr. John O'Toole): Very good. I'm sure in the next turn we'll have time. The Chair recognizes, from the NDP, Ms. Campbell.

Ms. Sarah Campbell: Do you need a few more seconds to wrap up your thought?

Ms. Catherine Siemieniuk: I'd like to talk a little bit further about the tutors at Tutors in a Cultural Environment. As I said, we started that with project funding. We visited Queen Elizabeth in Sioux Lookout. We found out how that program was working and how it was supporting transitioning students from First Nation communities. We were able to replicate that in all of our secondary schools. It really is to provide that caring space for students that are coming out from remote First Nations.

This year, we're including technology so that students are able to Skype with their parents. That tutor is a caring adult. They help the child. They track the child as far as success in school and success outside of school, and in addition to that, really provide that connection back to the community. I think it's that opportunity for us to learn from other boards through opportunities to be had, not only from the ministry, but NOEL itself, I said, again, has opportunities to share those and then to personalize it for our system.

Ms. Sarah Campbell: Thank you. I have a question for Mary Jean. Has the ministry developed a full imple-

mentation plan for the Ontario First Nation, Métis, and Inuit Education Policy Framework? And what are some of the challenges that the ministry has had in setting up this framework?

Ms. Mary Jean Gallagher: First of all, the plan is still in development. From a student achievement point of view, I never believe any of our implementation plans are finished, because we go out there the first year and we implement and then we work with our partners to figure out what we need to do to refine and nudge things along.

One of the biggest complexities, I think, in being able to put that together and roll it out across the province is the need to do that in partnership with our First Nations, Métis and Inuit communities. One of the things that makes Ontario different from most other provinces in Canada is the huge number of different First Nations communities that we have to deal with.

In BC, there's sort of a gathering of the five or six communities, or nations, into one education agreement with the provincial government, which means you've got a partner that you can talk to and you know who that's going to be. The challenge here is we have 133 First Nations communities, or nations, alone that we have to work with in order to move forward. So part of the difficulty—I'd say the biggest challenge—we have to that implementation plan is how you speak on an equal and partnered basis with 133 different nations in a way that allows you to move forward.

It's critically important. The way we overcome that, I think, is through that on-the-ground relationship-building with school boards, because everything I know, as a long-term educator who has led student achievement in this province for the last five or six years is that you change outcomes for kids by changing the experiences children have in their own communities, in their own schools, in the classrooms they attend. To do that, we have to work really respectfully with 72 school boards, four school authorities, 5,000 schools and their staffs, and 133 First Nations, trying to fit that dance together before we go forward and say, "Okay, here's the plan."

We've done a lot of work in support of that implementation plan. The pieces of it, I think, are coming together very well. Some of the early pieces of it that we can implement out there and get started on, because it's an urgent issue, we've been working on, but to actually be able to say, "Okay, here's the plan" and announce it publicly, we've got to coax all of that discussion to take place. Quite frankly, our history all across Canada, in terms of my reading in aboriginal education, is that we eternally don't take the time to build those relationships and partnerships, and we end up in a place where we've failed once again, and we can't afford to do that anymore.

Ms. Sarah Campbell: The ministry has said that 40 out of the 72 school boards in Ontario had included an aboriginal education component in their improvement plans, but that the ministry did not have a formal process in place to review the plans. Is a formal process to review in place now?

Ms. Mary Jean Gallagher: Absolutely. As a matter of fact, the ministry, through the student achievement division, has had in place an ongoing process for reviewing board improvement plans for students in general. We have student achievement officers who meet with school boards twice throughout the year, and we actually are in ongoing communication with them about their ongoing targets and goals for student achievement.

The piece that I think has been missing until we had that baseline data was the ability to have a really deep conversation with boards with regard to aboriginal ed and what they were trying to do there, because we didn't have the baseline data.

In fact, this year, starting in the meetings of my staff and boards called BIPSA, board improvement plan for student achievement meetings, there are two specific questions around which my staff have been instructed to engage in a discussion with school boards. The first is: How are you working with your community to increase knowledge and understanding of all staff and students about your local-area First Nation, Inuit and Métis communities' histories, cultures and perspectives? The second question my staff are asking every school board is: What steps, current and future, are in place to close gaps where they exist for First Nation, Métis and Inuit children and youth?

That discussion will be more robust in those school boards that our self-identification data tell us have larger numbers and/or proportions of First Nations, Métis and Inuit students. So there is absolutely a process in place now for tracking that.

M^{me} France Gélinas: Just in follow-up to this question, we were told by the Auditor General that a lot of the programming that has been actually rolled out in the different schools and school boards has not been specifically evaluated, as in: Are they helping to achieve the goal of closing the gap, of keeping kids in school etc.? Are you telling us that new endeavours have happened, where you actually look at, of the different programs that have been funded by your ministry, do we now know if they help in the achievement of our goals?

Ms. Mary Jean Gallagher: Our ministry has a long and successful track record in tracking our student achievement initiatives to see if they're successful or not. Every item of work that we've done in the last eight or 10 years in student achievement has been about saying, "Here's an initiative or a program. It's operating in these boards. How do the results for these students compare?"

The challenge in working with aboriginal students is that without that baseline data—if you only have 10% of your students identified, you really don't have a large enough group of kids to be able to make judgments about—that are a statistically significantly large enough group of kids—to be able to make legitimate evaluations of your programs. The first step in getting to that point where we could actually evaluate these initiatives as they were going forward was having a large enough group of aboriginal students who were identified and therefore who we could then track to say, "What's this group of

kids' trajectory? Is it better than it was before we started putting our programs in place?"

We don't have those evaluations in place for every program. We have evaluations in place for many, many of them. I would say to you that one of our big successes in Ontario education reform has been building a culture in school boards of really deep attention to evaluation, evidence and data.

I don't know whether my colleagues here would like to add anything to what I've said.

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Mr. Rusty Hick: It's Rusty Hick. I would echo that, in that our First Nations, Métis and Inuit self-identified population has gone up, as has their student achievement as measured on EQAO results. We have seen an improvement in student achievement objectively measured. We still, as Mary Jean identified, have a gap that we're constantly working to overcome.

We also look at some measures that are not student achievement measures, but the number of times teachers take out the resources that are there to support First Nations, Métis and Inuit students. We've augmented our libraries and our central resources, and the number of times that teachers are accessing those resources has gone up over that same time where we've seen a rise in student achievement. So those are measurables.

We've also provided in-service professional development for teachers in every one of our schools on our First Nations at one of the three communities over time, where we've had the support of local elders and speakers from the community who have raised that awareness and helped that overall sense of belonging, respect and trust that our First Nation partners—and I say "First Nation" because they are the predominant group within our jurisdiction; we also have Métis representation on our committees and so on. But that increase in support, trust and respect has benefited those students, and we can measure that.

Ms. Sarah Campbell: There is a lot of mention in one of the tables that's included in the Auditor General's report—on page 133; I don't know if you have it handy, but the table is titled "Ontario First Nation, Métis and Inuit Education Policy Framework Goals and Performance Measures." There's a lot of mention of the word "significant" in terms of performance measures. In fact, Mary Jean, you also mentioned that the programs have been "significantly" successful in your remarks. My question is, can you define what "significant" is?

Ms. Mary Jean Gallagher: As a specific numeric number, no, but what I would say about that is that our experience in raising the bar and narrowing the gap for other student achievement groups tells us that often, our progress starts more slowly. Even in the overall raising of the bar across the province, our gains in the first few years were a couple per cent. It gets more difficult as you start to get up into the higher levels. But schools increasingly come on board. The focus becomes intensified, and deeper work starts to happen as we go along.

The goal, I think, is equity. These students are capable of learning as well as any other student in Ontario, and

we need to get them there. To me, "significant" is perhaps not a one-year measure. We know in our work that schools can go up and down in their performance in any given year. What we like to see is a good, steady northeast movement of the curve so that we know, over time, they're making gains.

We do still take seriously the goal of trying to hit those targets by 2016. We may not hit them, but we had better be moving in the right direction quite rapidly, would be what I would say.

Ms. Sarah Campbell: Further to that, on page 134 of the auditor's report, she mentions that "to assess the aboriginal education planning process at the school board level, we reviewed the improvement plans for the past three years at the three boards we visited." Basically, it was determined that "one of the boards made no reference to aboriginal education." Another one listed some "aboriginal cultural activities and events," and the third board "set specific targets that focused on aboriginal student achievement, one of which was to increase by 10% the number of aboriginal students who were successful on the Ontario secondary school literacy test."

My question to the ministry is, do you think that a 10% increase is appropriate?

Ms. Mary Jean Gallagher: It would be a good start.

Ms. Sarah Campbell: Is it an appropriate target?

Ms. Mary Jean Gallagher: Actually, it probably is an appropriate target. I think it has to be one, though, that a board sets in partnership with its own First Nations community. That kind of conversation needs to take place at that level.

I would tell you as well that in the Auditor General's report, as I reread this section in the last few weeks as we were preparing for this, it was really clear to me the kind of distance we've covered in this period of time. We're now at a point where my staff going out and talking to boards about their improvement plans will expect to see an aboriginal goal in an improvement plan for any of the boards that have a larger percentage or larger number of aboriginal students. We've identified that that's probably in the neighbourhood of about 27 of our district school boards who we think really should be definitely, without exception, coming forward with an identified goal for their aboriginal students and moving from there.

It's not really easy for boards to set that goal until they actually have baseline data and they look and they say, "Here's where our kids in our board are, all of the kids. Here's where our First Nation, Métis and Inuit students are." If our goal in the long run is to close that gap in X number of years, then we need to set a target that says we're going to get X per cent a year moving along.

I don't know whether my colleagues here would like to say anything more to that.

Mr. Rusty Hick: It's Rusty Hick. I'll make one comment. It's very contextual. The diversity between the First Nations is large, and then the experience of the urban aboriginal population is very different from some of the other, perhaps, members of a First Nation who live on a First Nation. So when we look at an overall statistic

of a rise of 10%, which is an admirable goal over a period of time, we may be talking about a school, for example, that has one student who is self-identified and another school that may have 30 or 40. So it's very different in the context, and their approach would be different.

Again, I echo my colleagues who spoke to the importance of the relationship. I will point out that the education managers, when you're dealing with a First Nation in our context, are incredibly important and capable individuals who work for the First Nation, who work with us and track every tuition-paying student. But again, that's not talking about those who may be in an urban setting who self-identify. It's a very different approach, depending on your local context.

Ms. Sarah Campbell: Absolutely. I think the concern is, too, that the minister and the government are taking the position that they want to close the gap by 2016, so just an increase of, say, 10% may not get us there in the next three years.

In terms of assessing the success of the improvement plans, what is the ministry doing to ensure that aboriginal components that are already included in the improvement plans are successful? How is the ministry going to be measuring those?

Ms. Mary Jean Gallagher: Well, actually, I'm glad you asked that, because I was trying to get back in to talk a little bit about that.

We do an ongoing assessment of all of our student achievement initiatives. For instance, the special transition programming that was being asked about earlier includes those parts of our student achievement programs that we already have in place, and we focus some of them and try to recruit, as appropriate, self-ID'ed aboriginal students into them.

So one of our programs, for instance—part of our Student Success/Learning to 18—is the Specialist High Skills Major program. It is probably the crown jewel of our student success initiatives, and it is a program that allows students in the senior years of their secondary school to take a bundle of courses and workplace co-op credits that lead them to any one of the four pathways post-secondary. But it really allows a student to explore and become skilled very specifically in an area of interest for a future career or future study for them.

For instance, our analysis of 2011-12 data on self-ID'ed students, now that we have enough that we can start to pull that together, tell us that, on average, aboriginal students in their fourth year of secondary school who were participating in the Specialist High Skills Major program earned approximately, on average, point seven more credits towards their diploma than self-ID'ed students who were not in the program. That provides evidence for us to be able to say, "Look, these kids are doing better than the kids who are not in the program. Therefore, school boards, make sure that you actually have Specialist High Skills Majors programs in place that would be of interest to these students."

So we have a number of measures of individual programs, individual approaches. We track credit accumula-

tion data. All of that robust reliance on data and evidence to make decisions becomes embedded in our work in student achievement.

Ms. Sarah Campbell: It sounds as though one of the main challenges that the ministry seems to be having right now is around self-identification. There has been some mention by Catherine of some of the self-identification campaigns that have been undertaken in the Lakehead District School Board that have been successful, like getting staff to self-identify, and also, it sounds like, approaching JK parents.

What other campaigns have been undertaken in any of the school boards across the province that have been successful, and what is the ministry doing to share that information and to help, probably accelerate, the collection of that data?

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Ms. Catherine Siemieniuk: If I might, I didn't want to leave you with the impression that that might be all that we had done. Certainly, the community consultation around why students should self-identify was probably the most critical thing that we did. At the Lakehead District School Board, through some project funding, we did hire an aboriginal partnerships officer, and her job really was to go out and outreach and help our aboriginal communities understand why this would be a good process. We promised that we would not use this data to individually target students but really use it in the aggregate to ensure that we were using our human and physical resources to support student achievement for our aboriginal people. That was one of the things.

I think my colleagues to the left and right have lots of ideas, so I'll just sit back.

Ms. Lucia Reece: Similarly, we have our welcome-to-kindergarten program, where we work with parents coming in and talk about the importance of self-identification. I can't stress enough the trust level with people understanding why we collect that data and how we use that data. In conversations with our First Nations partners, we talk about the successes that we have. We show them, we work with the data together and talk about next steps.

We have an aboriginal education committee that works throughout our board, has representation from First Nation education officers, from Métis Nation, North Shore Tribal Council, the Indian friendship centre. We have our Algoma University partners and Sault College partners there as well. Collectively, we discuss and talk about strategies to encourage self-identification. It's all in reassuring people how we're going to use that data. When they can see results and we can share results and success stories—Mary Jean spoke of some; we all have those success stories in our boards as well—and when they see that we are using that data for the purpose of student achievement—and even in a board where we felt very good about initiating our self-identification policy in 2007, we've seen our numbers grow. Originally we had 904 and now we're at 1,400. So even in a board where we felt we had a good showing in the start, that confi-

dence continues to build and we see more and more people willing to self-identify.

Interjection.

The Chair (Mr. Norm Miller): Thank you. Sorry. We'll move to the government now. Who would like to ask questions? Mr. Balkissoon.

Mr. Bas Balkissoon: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I just want to clarify something that I want to understand before I get into the real meat of my questions. The Inuit and Métis students in the system—are there any schools on-reserve that are strictly for these students or are they all just in the regular board?

Ms. Mary Jean Gallagher: I was just confirming with my colleague here that the reserves we talk about are reserves for First Nations students. The Métis and Inuit students—their history does not include that of living on reserves, on federally owned land.

Mr. Bas Balkissoon: Okay, so that clarifies something. These students would have always been in the public school system.

Ms. Mary Jean Gallagher: The Métis and Inuit? Primarily, yes. Yes.

Mr. Bas Balkissoon: When we look at the data that were collected now, do we see a difference in student performance between those students and the ones who might have been on a reserve before?

Ms. Mary Jean Gallagher: We see a definite difference in the Métis data that are there. The Inuit data—to be honest, it's such a small population of students that I think it's very difficult to make those kinds of same statements. They're a much smaller population. They are doing better. Certainly our biggest challenge in terms of performance is our First Nations students, with all of the history that comes with that.

Mr. Bas Balkissoon: You stated in the beginning that we have to go through a period of time of building trust with our First Nation leaders and elders. With 72 boards doing that work with 133 groups, as you said before, how quickly do the boards share information where that trust-building has struck a good note somewhere, that you pass it to the next board so that can occur in the next set of negotiations or relationship-building as quickly as possible?

Ms. Lucia Reece: I can speak locally. Certainly we have shared across districts, and I think, more importantly, we do meet—certainly in my situation, we meet with our coterminous board when we data-share and we talk about strategies, so that we're there together. We have our conversations at the table so that we're there together.

Mr. Bas Balkissoon: How often do you meet?

Ms. Lucia Reece: It varies. This year, so far, we've met three times.

Ms. Mary Jean Gallagher: One of the things I'd say, as well, is that when we're talking about trying to share information, as much as it'll happen informally, it's not really going to happen as quickly as you want it to if you don't provide an infrastructure and a support system for it.

This goes back to an answer to a question that was asked over here as well: "What are the ministry's specific strategies for increasing self-ID, for supporting boards in doing these kinds of things?" Part of what the boards have been doing with the resources that the ministry has been providing for them, for instance, is putting together First Nations, Métis and Inuit advisory councils. There were 30 school boards in 2009. The aboriginal office was established in 2006; the first reports in 2007—so there began to be a conversation, but it started to accelerate and intensify. By 2009, there were 30 boards with First Nations, Métis and Inuit advisory councils; there were 50 in 2012; and I would suspect that if we looked, there would now be more. As well, in 2012, 64 of our 72 school boards had aboriginal education leads. That infrastructure is in place. It focuses on increasing self-ID within the boards and giving them the resources—and somebody with dedicated time—to build those relationships and lead the board's activities in doing that. In addition, that group then becomes the foundation on which we can build shared student achievement strategies etc.

As well, my division, the student achievement division, hosts regular meetings with school boards—board personnel at every level: directors, school improvement teams, board improvement teams, student success leaders, school effectiveness leads. We bring them together on a regional and, occasionally, provincial basis, with great regularity, to talk about student achievement strategies. There isn't any one of those meetings that takes place now that we are not inviting boards to reflect and also discuss student achievement improvement for aboriginal students in their community.

So there are any number of opportunities—many a month—in which staff across school boards are talking about how to get there.

Mr. Bas Balkissoon: What can we do, as a ministry, for the boards that are not yet there? And how soon can we expect them to get there?

Ms. Mary Jean Gallagher: Actually, a wise leader who mentored me several years ago told me that it was the role of the leader to comfort the distressed and to distress the comfortable. So I would say to you that part of what the ministry needs to do—and we are doing it now—is being much more systematic in our approach with school boards, and it was that that I was referring to when I talked about my student achievement staff talking to school boards right across the province as part of their formal board improvement plans.

In addition, there are regional education officers who are part of the Aboriginal Education Office, who work on a local basis with school boards.

As we've made this transition from the early stages of it being mostly about the cultural learnings among all students and staff and building that self-ID database, now that we have that data and we can actually measure what works and what doesn't work as we go forward, there is an intense interest in moving forward in those directions.

Mr. Bas Balkissoon: Okay. My colleague on the other side started out with the issue of on-reserve stu-

dents transferring to the public system. In some cases, they're one or two grades behind. What are we doing with the First Nations leaders in terms of helping them to improve their own system, so that when the students transition over to the public system, we would be getting the kind of quality students we're looking for?

Ms. Mary Jean Gallagher: A number of things. First of all, we are in those negotiations with various groups of the First Nations communities and the federal government, in tripartite discussions, and we've had some significant success, which I will invite Alayne to speak to. So part of it is that formal piece. I'll speak first to sort of an informal piece that's going on.

In those places where local boards have a good relationship built, or are building that relationship with their local First Nations communities, we're, in fact, putting the welcome mat out. When my staff in the student achievement division come in and do a workshop or a training session in a local area, we invite the local on-reserve First Nations schools to come and join us. Unlike an event where I'm able—because it's a provincial responsibility to pay for travel and all of that sort of thing—I can't do that for these nations because they have their money from the federal government to do that, and it complicates it and makes it more challenging.

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We send the welcome mat out, and I would say as well that we have observed in the last year or so an increased take-up of that invitation by a number of our First Nations schools, who will send some of their staff or their leaders to our workshops, and we give them the resources we give everyone at that sort of thing. We work with them to help them understand some of the building blocks of improved outcomes.

Alayne, perhaps you would like to speak about some of those broader, more formal government issues around engaging those schools as well.

Ms. Alayne Bigwin: I believe we mentioned earlier the MOU with Nishnawbe Aski Nation, and that is a tripartite process: Canada, the Ontario Ministry of Education and the First Nations. The Nishnawbe Aski Nation representatives are at the tables and having discussions around those types of initiatives that will support students moving from the First Nation federal education system into the provincial system.

The types of things that they're looking at are the kinds of services and support services for students moving from one system to the other, enhancing curriculum and also increasing the participation of parents. So it's really working together on those shared goals. That's an example of one of the tables at which we are at with one specific group of First Nations in Ontario.

We are also in a process with the Association of Iroquois and Allied Indians and their partner, the Indigenous Education Coalition, in southwestern Ontario—again, in a tripartite process with the Ministry of Education and Canada—exploring those opportunities to work together toward those shared goals of increasing student achievement and ensuring those smooth transitions from one system to another.

We are also working in collaboration with the Chiefs of Ontario on an e-learning project. This is where we have been working to make available the resources that are available digitally for students. A select group of First Nations began the pilot project, and now we'll work from there to make the access available to even more First Nations across the province.

We've also held a number of conferences. They've been called Circle of Light conferences. We've had three of those now. We began in 2007. At the one we held in 2011, there were over 1,000 educators, from both the First Nations federal education system and the provincial education system, coming together and sharing effective and best practices to support students.

These are some of the examples of the things that we're doing, working in direct collaboration with First Nations and the federal government.

Mr. Bas Balkissoon: In this negotiation process with our federal friends, have they sort of indicated any type of support, that they will provide additional resources to facilitate this transition improvement that we're looking at?

Ms. Alayne Bigwin: That's part of the discussions, of course. I think that the federal government is supporting the process, so the participation of the First Nations into those discussion tables.

Part of the work that we do in developing a joint action plan is to identify the resources that the federal government will contribute and the resources that we will contribute into supporting those programs and services.

Mr. Bas Balkissoon: But is the negotiation going on that they're positive in supporting this, or they're just going to be another bystander to the process?

Ms. Alayne Bigwin: No, I think both levels of government are interested and that each are partners in the process.

Mr. Bas Balkissoon: Okay.

Ms. Mary Jean Gallagher: I think it's fair to say, however, that we all know there is a significant gap between the per-student funding provided to on-reserve schools and the per-student funding that the Ontario government provides to our provincially funded schools. That makes the challenge greater. That is without doubt.

Mr. Bas Balkissoon: Okay. One other question is, in our system, the public system, you have certain teacher qualifications and standards. I believe I understand that the First Nations schools are not consistent. What are we doing to help them in their recruitment process of teachers or upgrading their teachers so that it does help the student, so when that transition process comes in, it improves the system overall for both the students and the education system?

Ms. Mary Jean Gallagher: As I've said, any of our ministry staff development programs that we've put on certainly have the welcome mat out. We've been working through our local school boards to communicate that as robustly as we can. It has certainly been communicated in the work that our aboriginal education officers do in that area.

Alayne, are you aware of any other areas of work with the schools on-reserve in that area?

Ms. Alayne Bigwin: Again, in a number of those tripartite discussions, the interest of many of the First Nation participants is to look at the whole range of components in terms of the education system. So I think, as we progress with those discussions, there will be things that centre around how we can continue to work together supporting educators from both systems.

Mr. Bas Balkissoon: Okay. I've got one last question and then my colleague has a couple. The preliminary report, *Continuing the Journey*—you released it for feedback. Are we including the parents in First Nations communities to be engaged in that feedback process?

Ms. Mary Jean Gallagher: Yes, through the communications and discussion through the school boards with their local communities and through the work with the minister's advisory council and the communication with the First Nations communities themselves.

Mr. Bas Balkissoon: Okay.

The Chair (Mr. Norm Miller): Ms. Jaczek?

Ms. Helena Jaczek: Thank you very much for outlining the ministry's activities and the local boards. I guess we all know the history of educational efforts with First Nations in Canada and the loss of trust, perhaps, that history has resulted in. But fundamentally, when this program was started in 2006, and the Aboriginal Education Office was established, it was with the shared goals of the aboriginal community. You've outlined that there are 133 First Nations, but were there not fewer people at that table when those shared goals—which presumably was increased student achievement. They were discussed within a group. Is there not some sort of leadership within the 133 First Nations to assist you in moving forward?

Ms. Mary Jean Gallagher: Actually, as I've discovered working with my colleague in this field of attempting to reach those First Nation communities, I would say to you that they do not self-organize in the ways that we would think other governing councils and so on do to the same extent. There are groupings of the nations that come together and say, "Yes, for these purposes, we are this one council." It's why those tripartite discussions are so important. The one agreement that we have in place, the memorandum of understanding that we have with the one group, involves how many of the 133 First Nations?

Ms. Alayne Bigwin: With Nishnawbe Aski Nation, it's 45,000. It's 49 First Nation communities.

Ms. Mary Jean Gallagher: So they're together in one group and we work in a tripartite arrangement there and have achieved an historic memorandum of agreement that we're very happy with. But then, we have other agreements we have to develop with other of the nations, and we're pursuing those, but then there are also individual nations that elect to go their own way. So it's a mixed grouping, as it were.

Ms. Helena Jaczek: The fundamental question: Are we sure that the 133 nations really see a value in gradu-

ting from high school—I mean, the fundamental goal of all your efforts is to increase that percentage, is it not?

Ms. Mary Jean Gallagher: I haven't spent my entire career working within the Ontario public service. I've spent most of my career working in schools and school boards. For the last five years, I've led our ministry's student achievement agenda. With 40 years of working in education, I can't tell you with any certainty that all parents who are non-aboriginal actually see the value of a high school diploma. That's one of the challenges people who are attempting to increase educational outcomes face. There are whole communities, non-aboriginal communities, in our province, where a driver's licence is seen as a bigger and more important rite of passage than a graduation diploma. It's very difficult in those circumstances, in an environment in which that's a fundamental belief, to help kids and parents understand the importance of staying in school and persisting against challenge and working hard to proceed.

I will tell you that we are quite certain that we are reaching more of those families and more of the aboriginal families with those messages. But we're not only reaching them with the messages; I think we're also working diligently to do a better job of listening to them. All parents everywhere want the best for their children. There are just different cultural beliefs around what we see as the best.

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One of the really interesting pieces that I've learned recently in our ministry's vision consultation all across the province, where we've been going and asking people, "Now that we've come this wonderful distance in improving outcomes for our students, what is it that we aspire to next for our kids in this province?"—an aboriginal leader in southwestern Ontario at one of the tables said, "Well, here's what I think education needs to think about going forward," and he looked us in the eye around the table and he said, "In our culture, we believe that every child has a gift. What are our schools doing to uncover and develop our children's gifts?"

It needs to be a sharing if we're actually going to be able to come together as adults in our communities and do what's right for our kids—all of our kids, including aboriginal.

Ms. Helena Jaczek: I guess reading the Auditor General's report, "What's taking you so long?" is kind of the underlying theme. This is where you've raised a really important issue. There are all sorts of cultural issues with First Nations, Métis and Inuit that have made it a real challenge. What I've heard is that you're certainly sharing the best practices as much as you can to ensure that school boards across the province are knowledgeable as to how to increase self-identification, but again, I presume that each of the First Nations takes a slightly different approach, because presumably, if you're in a band and your elder is telling you it's good to self-identify, that would be a very positive aspect as well.

Presumably, your experience tells you that that's happening in some places and not happening in others etc. That's a fair assumption, that it's a two-way street.

Ms. Mary Jean Gallagher: Absolutely.

Ms. Helena Jaczek: Okay. Thank you.

The Chair (Mr. Norm Miller): We're out of time, so we'll move to the opposition. Mr. O'Toole.

Mr. John O'Toole: Yes, thank you very much. It's very interesting. I remember Director Hick from the Peterborough board. It's good to see you and good to hear the information from the other directors of education who deal directly with this, perhaps, with a bit more intensity, as you described your enrolment—20-some per cent of First Nations.

I think the question raised by Ms. Jaczek is a very good question. The broader scope here is the self-identification issue. I think you said that it was voluntary and confidential, that you would not use it in any way to generalize on outcomes and resources. There are a couple of things even in the reports that we were given to read, of which we have many—I didn't get them all read, but there's a very important statement on aboriginal education in our background paper from the Auditor General. It says here on page 5:

"According to the framework, aboriginal education must be integrated into the school board planning process. School boards in Ontario are guided by the board improvement plan for student achievement." That's the template, which I know you take, as the assistant deputy, as very important. But the thing is, do they all buy into that? I think they need to spend some time, first with us as elected people, kind of listening to that—you know, hunting, gathering; they live in community; they don't own property. They have a lot, in their own, general sense, that I think are valued concepts that we could all learn from, because we're all trying to figure out who's got the most money.

But I mean that in a genuine sense. We're making assumptions that I believe are false to those who live in community, where they don't own property on reserves. They own it in community, not individually. I think that's important to realize. That's fundamentally different from ours, and I think if you were to compare comparative groups, whether it's on an income basis or whatever, some schools within the public system—the complaint is now that they can raise more money for extra-curricular activities because they're from a wealthier area, whereas in poorer areas, you could probably generalize there that the outcome is a higher failure rate.

I think we have to look at these things in a more removed manner. Responding to what Ms. Jaczek says, do they buy into the expectation here that everybody is going to pass the EQAO test, and they're going to be raving about how great it is? They're just going to be subordinated and assimilated into the general statistics about all students graduating in Ontario. It's quite a different thing.

Also—it's not a question; it's more of a statement than anything. There are 133 bands. It's pretty hard to get a consensus. I see it, even in my own riding; there's difficulty on some issues, and on other issues they have broader agreements.

Another thing, too, is that the federal government—I just want a response on this, really, perhaps from your assistant or the person sitting with you; she didn't identify what her role was directly. Reading in the report, the federal government—chapter 3 in the report said, "In February 2012, members of the House of Commons unanimously supported the education for First Nation children motion to provide the necessary" funding and support.

You have this tripartite group now. Would you say that they are embracing the equity issue? Because they've got the broader First Nation discussion going on, on lots of fronts—poverty, health and all the rest of it. Are they endorsing that plan for on-nation schools—and everybody—to get the same per-student funding that we have? All these category grants and—do they endorse it or not? Because it has been suggested in our own meetings amongst ourselves that the federal government isn't at the table. Would you say they are or they're not at the table as equal partners?

Ms. Mary Jean Gallagher: Well, they're certainly equal partners in the conversation and the discussion that takes place. There certainly has not been a commitment that the federal government is suddenly going to provide funding that's equal to the Ontario funding model for all of those schools. That statement has not been—

Mr. John O'Toole: Did they look at other provinces and, say, take an average of the provinces and territories? Maybe Ontario's level is higher. Whether that's good or bad is another discussion, but do you understand? Are they relative to other provinces? Let's look at New Brunswick. There are probably more First Nations there, really, quite honestly.

Ms. Mary Jean Gallagher: I don't think we're in a position to be able to comment on relative funding across the country of First Nation education. We could certainly send someone to gather some of that information together—

Mr. John O'Toole: Yes, that would be good to know.

Ms. Mary Jean Gallagher: —if members were looking for it.

Mr. John O'Toole: Yes, because they should get their fair share. I don't think anyone in Ontario would argue with that.

I was looking at Ontario—is this all of the money you've spent on-reserve? It's my understanding, from the brief notes I took, that there were 27,700 in off-reserve, in the public system, and 5,690 in on-reserve schools, in 118 different schools. That's a very inefficient delivery model—118 schools? They may have five or six students. They may have one in grade 1, one in grade 7—do you know what I'm saying? It's a pretty—

Ms. Mary Jean Gallagher: Well, there's no doubt that there are a number of small schools in the on-reserve category. There are a number of small schools in remote communities that are a part of our provincially funded education system, as well.

Mr. John O'Toole: That's a good start. That's really the point I'm trying to get to. When you have an in-

efficient model for delivery—because Ontario's current government has said that they want everyone to have, like, 500 in an elementary and about 1,100 in a secondary school, or at least large numbers so that they can provide all of the resources. Do they compare with the communities? Especially in northern Ontario, because it was mentioned earlier this morning about the fairness of funding for First Nations in the north.

Ms. Mary Jean Gallagher: There is no doubt that funding for First Nation schools on-reserve is less than funding for our provincially funded schools. That's absolutely an accurate statement.

Mr. John O'Toole: Who would pay for the off-reserve students who are in the north, or in remoter areas, who have to have transportation and boarding? Who pays for all that part of it?

Ms. Mary Jean Gallagher: If they are on-reserve students attending provincially funded schools?

Mr. John O'Toole: Yes.

Ms. Mary Jean Gallagher: It's paid for through a tuition agreement between the local school board and the local First Nation. The local First Nation, in effect, purchases education, because they—

Mr. John O'Toole: Where do they get the money from?

Ms. Mary Jean Gallagher: They get the money from the federal government.

Mr. John O'Toole: Under what envelope? Is it the education envelope?

Ms. Mary Jean Gallagher: It's under the First Nations funding.

Mr. John O'Toole: Okay, because those are things that, for the committee here, we don't really have a very good grasp of.

Now, Ontario, in the last five years, I believe, has spent \$170 million. Is that right? That's what the report tells us. Since 2006—

Ms. Mary Jean Gallagher: Through the Aboriginal Education Office, yes.

Mr. John O'Toole: And the audit report is telling me we're partially there in some areas. Is it good value for money, what we're doing, or do we have to look at how we're doing it?

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Ms. Mary Jean Gallagher: Ultimately, I would suspect the auditor would want to comment on that, but from my point of view, I would suggest that it is in fact good value for money. I would tell you that the work that has gone on since the Aboriginal Education Office came into being in 2006 has come a long, long way to building those relationships we talked about, and the importance of that to our success cannot be understated. That investment of \$170 million has gone a long, long way to supporting school boards in their local work. As we said, there are 64 of them now that have a full-time staff person who's focused on moving the aboriginal outcomes and self-ID and all of those things forward. It has gone a long way, as well, in building the kinds of intensity all across the ministry.

Mr. John O'Toole: So you think it's good value, is what I'm hearing.

Ms. Mary Jean Gallagher: It's absolutely good value.

Mr. John O'Toole: My colleague has a couple of questions, I think.

The Chair (Mr. Norm Miller): Mr. Ouellette.

Mr. Jerry J. Ouellette: To follow up on my colleague Ms. Jaczek, her comments regarding—I think she was somewhat reluctant to mention it—the impact of residential schools: Quite frankly, it will be a generational thing that will take years to realize the impact of that. ADM, do you have a full understanding of the impact of what happened with the residential schools? If you talk to Grand Chief Stan Beardy, he certainly would be sometimes willing to express the impact, in his perspective, of how it has impacted the community. Do you have an understanding of the total impact as a societal aspect?

Ms. Mary Jean Gallagher: To be honest, I believe that period of history and the things that happened in those schools are so abhorrent that I'm not sure any of us fully understand it. I do understand that one of the things that has happened as part of this, and the ministry's priority-setting in terms of aboriginal education, is that we've worked hard to do some cultural sensitivity and development and understanding development among our own staff. I did not know, for instance, until within the last year that a significant proportion, almost 50%, of the children who went to residential schools died there. They never came home.

Mr. Jerry J. Ouellette: Yes. There's a huge impact that's far more wide-reaching than what's taken place. The removal of peer figures from communities—

Ms. Mary Jean Gallagher: Absolutely.

Mr. Jerry J. Ouellette: —to be able to pass on generational knowledge has been lost.

Ms. Mary Jean Gallagher: The interruption of parenting skills.

Mr. Jerry J. Ouellette: It's going to continue on for a number of years.

But when we talk about the Thunder Bay school board, you mentioned the 252 students from 17 communities. Basically, what would be the most remote communities that you would be in partnerships with?

Ms. Catherine Siemieniuk: I don't want to embarrass myself geographically, but certainly from past Pickle Lake into Muskrat Dam. We have some students from there.

Mr. Jerry J. Ouellette: So you have some students from Muskrat Dam?

Ms. Catherine Siemieniuk: Yes.

Mr. Jerry J. Ouellette: So it's a fly-in access only or winter-road-access communities that you're dealing with.

Ms. Catherine Siemieniuk: Absolutely, yes.

Mr. Jerry J. Ouellette: Which is very key, because quite frankly, I believe that there's more or less an urban First Nation community, which is the Kawartha community, or even if you're talking about Garden River or even from Thunder Bay, whereas the remote commun-

ties are completely separate. I was in one this summer where 56% of the adults over the age of 25 don't have a high school education. I was in that community several years ago where the chief, Chief George, had to phone all the parents because they were cancelling school. The reason they were cancelling school that afternoon was because the school bus's fan belt broke and the parents saw no value in sending the kids to school. The only reason they went to school was to ride on the bus.

The point I'm trying to make here is that we in southern Ontario try and base a standard of how education should be perceived, or the value of it, on a southern Ontario standard, as opposed to a remote community of First Nations. I think that, quite frankly, the more time that all our colleagues here spend in some of these reserves, as I'm sure France or Sarah have spent in a number of these communities, they get a greater understanding.

So some of the questions, then, would be, when you're entering into negotiations with these communities, these 17 communities, that's for students coming to you. What about you going to those students and providing the elementary school guidance? Because I don't necessarily believe that there's a teacher certification requirement when the federal government provides teaching on-reserve. The difficulty may be the standard in each one of those locations may not be up to, in your case, the Thunder Bay standard. Have you looked at some of those options or possibilities?

Ms. Catherine Siemieniuk: Absolutely. And if I might, just to complicate things a little bit more, of those communities, some are organized into education councils as well, or tribal councils, and that's who we have our agreement with, so they're different communities but they're organized in a different way. Those conversations really are with what we call their education councils. I noted that my colleague used the term "education managers." That's who we would have that conversation with. That's who we take our guidance from.

That is why we have created our own videos to help the students transition. That's why we have flown, using Wasaya airlines, into some of our remote communities: because it's based on that relationship-building with those individuals that we have that relationship of trust with. It's one of those situations that our grandparents taught us: Listen first; listen more than you talk. It has been a good experience for us.

As far as outreach into elementary schools, that certainly is something that we could do more work on. Because of our relationship with our closest First Nation communities—not Fort William First Nation, which is our over-the-bridge neighbour, but Whitesand First Nation, which is an independent community, and Gull Bay, which is about 75 kilometres south of Whitesand; Gull Bay now sends their students to our provincial school—we've had more opportunity to interact as far as teacher training goes, and in addition to that, more opportunity to connect with the community in those two First Nations communities.

Mr. Jerry J. Ouellette: In the summer, I spent some time on-reserve at one community, and I have a number of nurses willing to volunteer in a number of fly-in locations. One of the things that I found quite surprising was that they were not allowed on-site unless they had federal approval. Do you have to have federal approval to allow individuals to go onto a federally approved school on-reserve?

Ms. Catherine Siemieniuk: We would go through chief and council to do that—through the education councillor, but through chief and council. Our relationship with Gull Bay and with Whitesand in particular is such that when we're visiting our school, which is in Armstrong proper, for us to go there, we always make a trip to the band council, to ensure that we connect with the chief.

The Chair (Mr. Norm Miller): You have two minutes.

Mr. Jerry J. Ouellette: Okay. You mentioned the NAN agreement and more involvement with the parents. When effectively a lot of the NAN community—I've dealt with Chief Yesno quite a bit, particularly on the education file. How do you get more parents involved? What do you do? Is that going to be the answer? Because when 56% of those over 25 years old don't have a high school education, it's very difficult for them to see the value. How do you get—

Ms. Catherine Siemieniuk: I think we need to think of it differently. I had mentioned briefly that in one of our projects, the tutors in a cultural environment, we're trying to use technology so that students who are off their community, who are attending school in Thunder Bay, would be able to reach out to their parents as part of a service that we would provide. We see it as using Skype, and through that, that would make that connection with parents.

I think we can't always expect that parents in remote communities would attend the school. It's 2013; we need to find a way to reach out to them in a different way. That would be one of the ways for the on-reserve students.

The Chair (Mr. Norm Miller): Very well. We will move on to the NDP: Ms. Gélinas.

M^{me} France Gélinas: Just to make sure that I'm talking to the right person before I start with my question—and I apologize; I have a cold—I'll start with you, Ms. Reece. In Algoma district, how many small schools—really small schools; 30 kids or less—have you got?

Ms. Lucia Reece: Thirty kids or less? One, I believe.

M^{me} France Gélinas: You only have one?

Ms. Lucia Reece: Yes.

M^{me} France Gélinas: Have there been school closures within your school board?

Ms. Lucia Reece: Absolutely. That has been a process in our board for the last five years, where we've been working through our capital plan. Probably since 2005, at last count, I believe we have amalgamated 12 schools, both secondary and elementary.

M^{me} France Gélinas: Of the 12 schools that have been amalgamated, what was the size of them?

Ms. Lucia Reece: After amalgamation or before?

M^{me} France Gélinas: No, before.

Ms. Lucia Reece: It varied; certainly, they were schools of less than 100. Our smallest school would have probably sat at one point with about 30 students, and another one, perhaps just under that—again, in more rural areas of our board, where we had to look at how we would best accommodate those students in terms of transportation and the closest school. Those are probably the smallest.

M^{me} France Gélinas: Do you have a policy as to what is the furthest that a kid can be bused, not only in kilometres but in time?

Ms. Lucia Reece: We have a transportation consortium, and our goal is to try and have no student on a bus for more than an hour.

M^{me} France Gélinas: How many are actually outside of this goal that you give for yourself?

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Ms. Lucia Reece: Very few.

M^{me} France Gélinas: Less than a dozen, or less than 100?

Ms. Lucia Reece: We probably have one community towards the east of our board where we might have two or three buses that would be—again, I can't tell you how many specifically on those buses. But they are very rural areas; they might have to travel a little more than an hour to get to a school.

M^{me} France Gélinas: Were any of those areas affected by the school closures that we were talking about?

Ms. Lucia Reece: We have an area east of the board where we did have some students, yes—and have seven to 12 schools. So we do have some students in those areas who would be a little bit more than an hour getting to school.

M^{me} France Gélinas: Okay. For Lakehead district, the same kind of idea: How many very small schools have you got? She used 100. I have many in my riding that are less than 30. How do you define a very small school, and how many have you got?

Ms. Catherine Siemieniuk: The smallest school that we have—less than 30—is a school of five students. It's in the settlement of Collins. It's called Bernier-Stokes public school. That community is only available by rail or float plane. That school was amalgamated with Lakehead District School Board in 2009. That would be the smallest school. We have no other schools under 30 students.

M^{me} France Gélinas: How about under 100 students?

Ms. Catherine Siemieniuk: Under 100 students? I believe we have one, possibly two.

M^{me} France Gélinas: Has your school board seen any school closures?

Ms. Catherine Siemieniuk: We closed a number of schools previous to 2005. We have not closed a school since 2005.

M^{me} France Gélinas: Of the schools that you closed previous to 2005, were any of them small schools?

Ms. Catherine Siemieniuk: Yes, some of them were small schools. I wouldn't be able to tell you the exact number. Those school closure decisions were made primarily on program offerings and ensuring that we had the best facilities to offer program for our students.

M^{me} France Gélinas: Do you have a policy as to how long a kid can be on a bus?

Ms. Catherine Siemieniuk: I believe it's an hour that we try to keep—again, we are organized through a consortium with our two coterminous boards. I think we meet that, within the time frame. Remember that Lakehead District School Board and the rural areas are not a huge geography, as was stated by my colleague from Algoma.

M^{me} France Gélinas: I have no idea if that applies to where you're from.

Mr. Rusty Hick: Peterborough county and Northumberland county do have some small schools, and we have closed schools over the past 10 years. Fortunately, we have been able to keep students within the one-hour guideline. Most are well, well under that. The exceptions to that may be students who are involved in an optional program such as French immersion or integrated arts, where it's a central location and parents have chosen to attend on that basis.

Our smallest school is 54 students, and it is in the process of being consolidated into another school. I think I touched the questions that you asked.

M^{me} France Gélinas: Yes, you did—

Mr. Rusty Hick: We have about two under 100.

M^{me} France Gélinas: —without even having to repeat.

So I guess I'm at the ministry people now. We've been presented with the stats: 12,700 kids; 118 reserve schools. Most aboriginal people go to small schools. You guys have very few of them.

Whenever we look at amalgamations, we look at making them bigger so that they have access to the programs and what you've been talking about. I'd like to turn that on its head a bit and see how much time, effort and energy is put into finding out how we build good small schools. Rather than listing out everything that the kids miss out when they're in a small school because they don't have access to programs, where is the leadership within the ministry to say, "How do we make small schools good schools that give you a good education?" So, to you.

Ms. Mary Jean Gallagher: First of all, I would point out that 12,700 kids and 118 schools in the on-reserve area are, in fact, not schools that we have direct intervention or interaction with around the aboriginal file.

The ministry is definitely committed to ensuring that any and every school that is part of our provincial education system is well supported and well resourced. For that reason, the grants for student needs include a number of additional funding supports that are provided to smaller schools. There is an expectation, though, that before a board opts to have a very small school, with all of the challenges that are associated with that, if they're

within a very close neighbourhood proximity of another school that's also small, the declining enrolment brings one to the obvious conclusion that boards need to look at their overall accommodation and capital plan to make appropriate arrangements. But our Grants for Student Needs funding formula—and if you're looking for more information, I can certainly have ministry people from our finance branch delineate those parameters to you—provides for additional funds to go to any school that is a certain distance from its neighbourhood schools and is falling behind a certain enrolment number so that they can have a principal, so that they can have a secretary, so that they can have additional library resources appropriate to the school etc.

It's one of the strengths, I think, of the Ontario education system, because some of my work brings me into conversation with people who visit from all over the world, who come to Ontario to see what we're doing in our schools that is so successful. While they're here, I take advantage of the opportunity to ask them about what goes on, and many, many places around the world do not have a district school board. They have a government agency that runs schools throughout the area, and all of the decisions sort of emanate from the centre. One of the things that I think is really important to Ontario is, in fact, that existence of district school boards. It not only provides local decision-making around education, but it allows the central agency to fund a district school board on a per pupil basis, and to make really good decisions about where they want to distribute that funding.

I used to be a director of a school board, like these folks to my left, and I thought that it was a really important component of my ability to deliver equity to small schools or to students who had greater needs for a whole host of reasons, because I got this money and could distribute it among my 75 schools—

M^{me} France Gélinas: You're going further and further away from my question—

Ms. Mary Jean Gallagher: Yes.

M^{me} France Gélinas: My question is really, is there any research to make education in small schools great education? What are the key success factors? What are the best practices for small schools to deliver key education? Are there research papers that you guys have done? Round tables that you've put together? Brain trusts that have been brought together to say, "Here's how we will build successful small schools"?

Ms. Mary Jean Gallagher: Rusty?

Mr. Rusty Hick: If I may, the Upper Canada District School Board for many years ran an annual conference on small schools, and the intent was exactly that: recognizing the reality of remote and rural schools, sharing ideas and practices and certainly the role that technology can play, especially as you move into the high school years.

Currently, we have a joint course between Campbellford District High School and Norwood District High School. Norwood has just dipped under 300 students, which for us is a very small secondary school. In order to

give students the opportunity of taking grade 12 calculus, students in both schools sit in a classroom and, through the use of video-conferencing technology, share one teacher. So things like that are being shared across the province.

In addition, we took several of our trustees and senior administration to the Bluewater District School Board and looked at the kindergarten-through-grade-12 model as a way of utilizing space. It doesn't necessarily address all the programming needs, but certainly when a community wants to keep its school, it's one way and one possible solution that a number of boards across the province have looked at, in sharing that kind of approach.

Ms. Mary Jean Gallagher: And I would say as well that one of the areas of considerable work on the part of the ministry has been our whole e-learning strategy. A major part of that e-learning thrust has been how to deliver education to more remote and smaller schools.

As a director of education, one of my schools was a school on Pelee Island. We had 17 students in that kindergarten-to-grade-8 school. The school is still functioning well, I think, though they were down to about 14 kids the last time I talked to anyone from the board. For us, part of the strategy in being able to keep, say, grade 9 students on the island instead of having them travel and live for the week on the mainland was taking advantage of ministry support to put in place e-learning programs that would be appropriate for our grade 8 and grade 9 students.

So the ministry is certainly looking at a number of those components that provide options to school boards, but ultimately, that decision about local programming and whatnot is the board's.

Ms. Sarah Campbell: I thank you for that. I'm sorry; I'm going to cut you off. I've got a couple of more questions coming back to aboriginal education. I wanted to ask some questions with respect to reporting and some of the benchmarks. Specifically—maybe we'll start with the benchmarks, actually.

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Does the ministry believe that graduation rates are a fair benchmark to assess the progress of closing the gap in achievement between aboriginal students and non-aboriginal students? If not, what would the ministry believe are probably better benchmarks to have?

Ms. Mary Jean Gallagher: The ministry believes that the benchmarks we use to measure success for our students in fact need to be fair for all students. Graduation, I think, is indeed an appropriate benchmark in terms of measuring the progress of aboriginal students.

I would not want us to be in the business of setting different expectations and different measurements for different groups, because what I know about improving teaching and learning is that a lot of how a student does in school is a reflection of the expectations for achievement placed upon them by their parents and their teachers, and we want high expectations—as high a set of expectations for these kids as for every other.

The problem with the graduation rate right now for aboriginal students is that we're going to be another four years before we're able to identify what the aboriginal graduation rate is, because when you look at how we calculate the provincial graduation rate, what we do is we say, "Who do we know is in school in grade 9 right now?" Then, five years from now, of that cohort that started in a given year, how many of them have an Ontario graduation diploma? It's a very rigorous way of measuring graduation outcomes. The problem, of course, is that if you don't have your baseline aboriginal data to tell you who you have in grade 9 until just this past year, you aren't going to be able to track that cohort as a distinct cohort for a number of years. We had that problem when we first started the Student Success/Learning to 18 initiative, and we set graduation outcome as the measurement.

We actually have about 14 other measures that we measure or identify as indicators of progress within a secondary school. Some of those are grade 9 credit accumulation: "How many kids have eight credits by the end of grade 9? How many have 16 by the end of grade 10?" that sort of thing. Others are sort of mark distributions and a host of those other things.

So I would say, yes, graduation is a reasonable and fair benchmark, but we can't wait five years to figure out whether what we're doing is working or not, so we have to climb inside the data that we have for the cohort and say, "How does the marks distribution compare? How does their credit accumulation in Specialist High Skills Majors and dual-credit programs etc. compare to the norm etc.?"

Ms. Sarah Campbell: Sure. Just a couple of questions with respect to reporting. The ministry has committed to reporting publicly every three years on the implementation of the framework, and the first report in 2009 was very general. It didn't mention the 10 performance measures. What is being done to make the next report better? And do you think that reports should be made sooner than every three years, recognizing some of the challenges that the ministry has had to date with the implementation of the framework?

Ms. Mary Jean Gallagher: First of all, I think the first was very general. I think as we now have that baseline data, we're going to be able to be much more specific in our reporting on progress.

I am not of the belief that reporting and generating all of those reports more often than the three years, as a big report, would in fact spur more urgency to the—the root of your question is, will that give it a greater sense of urgency and will people pay more attention to it? I will tell you that there is no lack of urgency within the ministry and all across the ministry about the work that needs to take place to raise the achievement levels for students. The fact that aboriginal ed is not my own portfolio—student achievement is—and yet I have the knowledge tells, I think, the members of this committee that the entire ministry is engaged deeply in this work.

Where those reports become more useful is in accordance with the auditor's recommendation and where

we've been going, which is working at a much more detailed level with local school boards, to talk to them about their board improvement plans and what specific targets they're going to be working and looking to move forward with. The ministry works with them around those targets. The ministry provides additional funding. The boards commit their own per student funding to that pursuit.

I think what our three-year report does is provide that higher-level view of a system of improvement that actually is about the ongoing work we need to measure on a more regular than three-year basis on the ground.

The Chair (Mr. Norm Miller): Thank you. We'll move to the government and Mr. Balkissoon.

Mr. Bas Balkissoon: Mary Jean, in terms of the ministry, what do we do with students who leave the reserve and come to a public school, in terms of meeting their housing needs, their social needs, their counselling needs etc. so that we're sure that we're helping them to succeed? Can you describe what the ministry does today and how it works?

Ms. Mary Jean Gallagher: A lot of that is done at a local level, so I will ask these folks to my left to speak to it as well. But what the ministry has done is provide the funding required so that boards, for instance, can develop those transition plans in a more robust way.

As an example, the York Region District School Board hired an aboriginal transition coordinator. We talked earlier about the coordinators that boards have been able to hire with the funding that we've provided. That aboriginal transition coordinator enhances the supports to those aboriginal students, resulting in a reversal of the dropout rate. That's what we really want to see. As I said earlier, they moved, through the work of that individual, in partnership with the First Nation community, the elders there and the local schools, so that instead of 75% of the students dropping out in their first year of school, we now actually still have 100% of them, this year, attending school into the second semester.

They would have more specific examples here.

Mr. Rusty Hick: I'll just point out that Curve Lake First Nation, our biggest First Nation, has a kindergarten-to-grade-3 school of its own. The students come to us in grade 4, but they still live on Curve Lake First Nation, so they're just bused. So I don't have that issue of boarding and so on.

Mr. Bas Balkissoon: Does anybody have it where they actually live off-reserve?

Ms. Lucia Reece: Yes. We have had students come from the Far North, so it's a team effort. We use our aboriginal lead teacher, along with our school counsellors, and sometimes our First Nations support us with an aboriginal worker as well. We have all kinds of activities that we plan with the students. There are social gatherings, outings, opportunities for them to go out into the community with someone to learn the community; school-based school counsellors who touch base with them and make sure their needs are being met. We actually had a group come to speak to our board of trustees

about their transition to our school board, talking to us about what they appreciated and giving us feedback about things we might want to think about in the future.

So it's a team effort to try to make the transition as smooth as possible.

Mr. Bas Balkissoon: We also have programs for them before and after school? Or is this strictly during the school day?

Ms. Lucia Reece: No, this is after school as well. So activities during school—but then many of the outings and activities are in the evenings, as well, to help them socialize and get to know other students.

Mr. Bas Balkissoon: This would be funded by the agreement with the First Nation leaders? How is it funded?

Ms. Lucia Reece: Some of this would be our staff; some of it might be staff that we work with through the bands, as well. But primarily it would be our school staff and our aboriginal lead teacher who would take the lead on that.

Mr. Bas Balkissoon: My last question is back to Mary Jean. I liked your story about Curtis. It begs this question, because we do it right here in the urban centre—we try to find mentors for certain communities. How can we put into your program that a person like Curtis would be an ambassador to education for First Nation people, and that we facilitate them going back home to their reserve, meeting with the younger students, meeting with the staff at the schools and trying to pass on their experience so that those who come next would see the value of education?

Ms. Mary Jean Gallagher: That's one of the things I absolutely love about the story of Curtis. Curtis was a young man who cared about his colleagues, but prior to the students-as-researchers program in his board, he didn't really have an avenue for how you could organize that into something that would bring more people to the table. The result of his work has now become an annual program in his board, which brings students who are approaching that transition in grades 7 and 8 to this one-week experience with kids who are in grades 9 and 10, in a local high school, where they talk about their aboriginal identity and their history and their culture and what they can expect in the transition. So these kids know, when they come to the school, that there are going to be friends and mentors there for them, and the school, because of Curtis's work, has a heightened understanding of the challenges these kids are going through.

The real success in improving student achievement, aboriginal and otherwise, is about bringing together parents and the community and the school in a way that says, "Who are these children who are at risk, and what are the challenges they face, and how do we work at establishing locally based supports that are responsive to the needs of those students?"

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It seems to me that for decades education has tried to improve. We've got something very precious going on in Ontario right now: 10 solid years of improved outcomes

for our kids. We're not there with every kid, and we're nowhere near where we need to be with aboriginal students, but we've learned a lot about the fact that it requires local leadership, it requires local involvement and it requires the alignment of an entire system, from parents and community working with the local schools, the local school within the board, and the board within a ministry in a government that supports it with resources that make all of that work.

That's what we're trying to nudge into place, with urgency and intensity, in the aboriginal education field. It's very challenging, given the history and given the number of nations we work with, but we are making progress. Just from the point of view of somebody who spent 40 years in education, this is going to move; it has to. We have to get it right. Getting it right means that partnership on the ground. There have been too many attempts where it's been a top-down, directive kind of thing around aboriginal education, and none of them anywhere in Canada—or, for that matter, anywhere around the world that I've been able to research—have been successful with that approach.

This ground-up approach, I think, is the way we need to go, and I think our early signs and the leadership of the ministry's Aboriginal Education Office are moving us in the right direction in those areas. Lu?

Ms. Lucia Reece: I would like to add that I think there is a momentum that's building. I would urge you not only to think about the transition of the students we bring in off-reserve. We've had a large number of aboriginal students who were disengaged from high school, who had dropped out of high school.

One of our re-engagement initiatives, in co-operation with our First Nations partners, was to start an urban aboriginal alternative high school in Sault Ste. Marie. It's in its 10th year. It has a current enrolment of 113 students and, to date—we've partnered with the Indian Friendship Centre—we've graduated 58 students from that school. In 10 years, we have granted a total of 815 credits to students.

One of those success stories—it's not a Curtis, but her name is Christine Bob, who spoke so passionately about her experience of being re-engaged through that school. She came to the Circle of Light conference here in Toronto in 2011 and spoke to a room of 1,000 educators about the importance of understanding her needs and embedding her culture in her learning, and the difference it made for her to be able to graduate.

I think if we can build that momentum on a local level, we have our leaders. We have our graduates coming through, and we need to capitalize on them and let them have their voice heard, so that they can encourage our aboriginal partners and those, perhaps, in the Far North to see the value and see what can be done to ensure their success.

Mr. Bas Balkissoon: But my point was, are we looking at a program to actually hire some of these people to go out and do that work to engage the community, similar to the way we hire youth workers within the city

to go into a community and help that community that is distressed?

Ms. Mary Jean Gallagher: There are a number of our programs in terms of tutoring programs; boards can use those dollars to hire local students etc. I know, for instance, that in Toronto they've made a point of hiring members from local cultural groups and national groups to work with students from that group as we go forward, so there are those opportunities within it.

One of the other things the ministry has done just this year: In August, we sponsored our first aboriginal youth leadership camp. The ministry always sponsors an Ontario education leadership camp over the summer for students with leadership potential from all boards; this was a dedicated aboriginal youth leadership camp with student representatives from all across Ontario who came together. We had aboriginal elders there. The entire camp was focused around the aboriginal culture, but the message of the camp was about building the leadership capacity of these students to help their colleague students focus on better outcomes in school.

Mr. Bas Balkissoon: Okay. Thank you very much. My colleague has some questions.

Mr. Phil McNeely: How much time?

The Chair (Mr. Norm Miller): You have six minutes.

Mr. Phil McNeely: I come from a business background, and I did teach school one year in a rural schoolhouse with 35 kids. So I got a good start, but I was 18 years old then. That's a few years ago.

Just looking at the issue that you have here, it was interesting: You said there were less resources for the schools on the reserves than in our public system?

Ms. Mary Jean Gallagher: Yes.

Mr. Phil McNeely: I mean, that's a travesty, just that. I don't have very many First Nations in Ottawa–Orléans. We have a large Inuit community in Ottawa–Vanier, and they do wonderful things in Ottawa–Vanier with their kids.

I'd just like you to describe the changes that you've seen since 2006. The objectives that you feel are there: Are you meeting those objectives? Are we moving quickly enough? There's a great waste of youth every year if they don't get the proper background and the proper education. Is the education that you're delivering giving them what they need to move on then to technical school or to work? Is that coordinated?

I think technology is important, especially with your distances. Contact North: I've had some experience talking to those people and seeing what they do. We have a little office in Orléans with them.

I'd just like your impression, the three who are out there teaching the kids: Are you doing enough? Is it going to the right place? Are we going to get where we want to get?

Ms. Catherine Siemieniuk: I'd like to start. Thank you very much for that question. I wanted to say that I think we've made dramatic changes in the way that we offer programs, but I think we need to think bigger than

this being just about the targeted aboriginal students. This is about all students. This is about a changing respect in society.

Part of the training that we are providing for teaching staff and all support staff is to really understand the aboriginal community and to embed indigenous knowledge into our curriculum offerings so that we can help combat racism, to be honest with you. It's an understanding that we are all responsible for, and I think education plays a critical role in that. Through the supports that we have received from the ministry, we've really made some significant gains there.

We've got a lot of work to do at the Lakehead public schools. We're very happy with what has happened, but we have a long way to go. I think we are making changes for our aboriginal students—I could quantify that with data—but bigger than that, I think we're making societal changes.

Mr. Rusty Hick: It's Rusty Hick. It's a very broad question, but what I would say is that education is about continuous effort and continuous improvement, and our job is never done. For all students, I would echo that.

What I would also say is that we have seen continuous improvement, not only in our general student population but in our students who have self-identified as First Nation, Métis and Inuit. There's no question that the evidence supports ongoing improvement; we've seen that.

The other thing, I think, that we all imply and understand is that we have national policies, we have provincial policies, and we have board-wide policies, but what education boils down to is one student at a time, and every student matters every day. We always instil that. Our staff believe that. So making a difference in one child's life every single day is how we move forward. I just wanted to bring it down to that level. It's about the Curtises, it's about the Melodys, and it's about the whomever that happens to on a daily basis—and our teachers and our support staff, who help those students improve, whether it's their literary skills, their math skills, their character, whatever it is. Every day, they're working hard to do that.

Ms. Lucia Reece: I think they've said it well. Maybe I'll just focus on the leadership part to that as well, because I think it wouldn't matter today whether we were talking about special education students, English-language learners, crown wards or suspended and expelled students.

Are we doing enough? Perhaps until the rate is 100%, we might say we're not doing enough. Yet, yes, we have data to show us that we are absolutely making a difference and that the strategies we use to engage and support one group of learners are not at the detriment or expense of any other group.

I'll speak as someone who has moved very recently from a superintendent role of program to the directorship. The guidance and support and focus from the ministry around using data and making sure that we live and breathe student achievement has been second to none. And it has helped us, I think, at a senior level across the board to look at: Are we really aligning our practices and

our resources to make a difference for every single student? Again, we do have data to support that for this particular group of students we are making a difference. Our goal is to make a difference for every student in the province of Ontario.

Mr. Phil McNeely: Thank you. I don't have any other questions.

The Chair (Mr. Norm Miller): Okay, thank you. We're out of time in terms of being able to ask questions,

so thank you very much for taking the time to come before the committee today.

We will now go into closed session to have a discussion, and we'll need the room cleared fairly quickly, so if you're saying goodbyes, please do it in the hallway. It would be appreciated. Thank you very much for coming.

Ms. Mary Jean Gallagher: Thank you so much. We appreciate your time.

The committee continued in closed session at 1441.

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