Legislative Assembly of Ontario



Assemblée législative de l'Ontario

Official Report of Debates (Hansard)

P-13

Standing Committee on Public Accounts

Special Report, Auditor General:

Performance Audit: Special Education Needs

1st Session
44th Parliament

Monday 16 November 2026

Chair: Tom Rakocevic
Clerk: Thushitha Kobikrishna

Journal des débats (Hansard)

P-13

Comité permanent des comptes publics

Rapport spécial, vérificatrice générale :

Audit de performance : Besoins en éducation de l'enfance en difficulté

1re session
44e législature

Lundi 16 novembre 2026

Président : Tom Rakocevic
Greffière : Thushitha Kobikrishna

Hansard on the Internet

Hansard and other documents of the Legislative Assembly can be on your personal computer within hours after each sitting. The address is:

Le Journal des débats sur Internet

L'adresse pour faire paraître sur votre ordinateur personnel le Journal et d'autres documents de l'Assemblée législative en quelques heures seulement après la séance est :

https://www.ola.org/

Index inquiries

Reference to a cumulative index of previous issues may be obtained by calling the Hansard Reporting Service indexing staff at 416-325-7400.

Renseignements sur l'index

Adressez vos questions portant sur des numéros précédents du Journal des débats au personnel de l'index, qui vous fourniront des références aux pages dans l'index cumulatif, en composant le 416-325-7400.

Hansard Publications and Language Services
Room 500, West Wing, Legislative Building
111 Wellesley Street West, Queen's Park
Toronto ON M7A 1A2
Telephone 416-325-7400
Published by the Legislative Assembly of Ontario

Journal des débats et services linguistiques
Salle 500, aile ouest, Édifice du Parlement
111, rue Wellesley ouest, Queen's Park
Toronto ON M7A 1A2
Téléphone, 416-325-7400
Publié par l'Assemblée législative de l'Ontario

ISSN 1180-4327

CONTENTS

Monday 16 November 2026

Committee business.....P-159
2026 Special Report, Auditor General.....P-160
Ministry of Education; Toronto Catholic District School Board; Peel District School Board; Upper Canada District School Board.....P-160
Ms. Denise Allyson Cole
Ms. Charmaine Perera
Mr. Ron Ferguson
Ms. Hilary Forgie-Resnick
Dr. Brendan Browne
Mr. Andrew Davis
Mr. Harjit Aujla
Subcommittee report.....P-182

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF ONTARIO

ASSEMBLÉE LÉGISLATIVE DE L'ONTARIO

STANDING COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC ACCOUNTS

COMITÉ PERMANENT DES COMPTES PUBLICS

Monday 16 November 2026

Lundi 16 novembre 2026

The committee met at 1345 in committee room 1, following a closed session.

COMMITTEE BUSINESS

The Chair (Mr. Tom Rakocevic): I would like to call this meeting of the Standing Committee on Public Accounts to order. We are here to begin consideration of the 2025 Performance Audit: Skills Development Fund Training Stream.

Before we begin, any questions from committee members? MPP Pasma.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: I'd like to move a motion before we begin.

I move that the Standing Committee on Public Accounts hold additional public hearings on the Auditor General's report entitled 2026 Performance Audit: Special Education Needs before it commences report writing; and

That the following organizations be invited to appear before the committee: the Ontario Autism Coalition, Community Living Ontario, the Association des enseignantes et des enseignants franco-ontariens, the Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario, the Ontario English Catholic Teachers' Association, the Ontario School Board Council of Unions, and the Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation; and

That the subcommittee on committee business be authorized to set dates for the additional public hearings.

The Chair (Mr. Tom Rakocevic): Further discussion? MPP Pasma.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: Special education is incredibly important to get right, Chair, because this is about our most vulnerable children.

I think we want the best for all of our children in the province, but we are really talking about the most vulnerable children when we are talking about those with disabilities and special needs. The system determines their access to an education—not just academic supports and the opportunity to learn, but also whether or not they're able to be at school at all or whether they're going to be safe at school. I think one thing we can all agree on is that a child who goes to school in the morning should come home safely at the end of the day. Special education sets them up, for better or for worse, for the rest of their lives, so it has a lifelong impact, and it impacts their parents' ability to work—so even the financial stability of the family.

For all these reasons, I think it's incredibly important that we get special education right.

The Auditor General has offered a very thorough look at special education and some of the challenges here. The Auditor General, in addition to speaking with the ministry and the school boards, also spoke with parents, with organizations like the Ontario Autism Coalition and Community Living, and with teachers and education workers. I think that it would be good for the committee to do the same—that we hear from as many voices as possible who are in the system and experiencing the system and the challenges—before we write our report. That's why I would like the committee to invite these witnesses to appear and to share with us their perspectives on special education and to be able to respond to our questions.

The Chair (Mr. Tom Rakocevic): Further debate? MPP Fairclough.

Ms. Lee Fairclough: First of all, I just want to say thank you very much for moving this motion. I do think that this is a really critical issue. I've certainly heard about it not just in my own constituency, but I've heard it about it across this province. I do think that it makes sense to invite additional stakeholders to inform our report-writing process. I appreciate everybody who has joined us today. We're really looking forward to digging into the details of the report and what is happening within the three school boards that were part of this report. But I can anticipate that we would also then get some additional insights from beyond just those three school boards, if we were to pass such a motion. I am just expressing my support, and I understand the rationale for it.

The Chair (Mr. Tom Rakocevic): Further debate? MPP Fraser.

Mr. John Fraser: We'll of course be supporting this motion, and I thank the member very much for bringing it forward.

I've been around special education in the community for about 27 years. The voices of people who help our kids and our kids' parents are really important. Education is critical for every child, but when a child has an exceptional need that's not met, the longer it takes to get that need met, the more impact it has on their development. I think it would be informative for the committee to hear from all of these people, just to underscore and underline the importance of getting it right.

The Chair (Mr. Tom Rakocevic): Further debate? MPP Dixon.

Ms. Jess Dixon: The government will not be supporting this motion. We've had the benefit of the Auditor General's very comprehensive report and her extensive consultations and questions, and we'll be having the opportunity to, of course, speak to ministry officials and boards and really get to grips with what is in this report.

1350

The Chair (Mr. Tom Rakocevic): Further debate? MPP Pasma.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: I would really urge the government members to reconsider and support this motion. It's incredibly important that we hear from people directly—nothing about us without us. We should hear about the families whose lives are being directly impacted—the parents who are called to pick up their child and are being told that their child can't come to school at all, the parents who are waiting once on an assessment wait-list or who are trying to figure out if they can pay out of pocket—and the teachers and the education workers who are coming home burnt out at the end of the day because they feel like they weren't able to meet all of their children's needs.

I appreciate that the Auditor General has done excellent work, but I think there is important insight that the people who are in the system every single day experiencing it, living it, having their lives upended by it could provide to the committee. I would really encourage the government members that if we want to provide the best possible road map to improving special education in the province, then we should make sure that we are including as many voices as possible in doing that so that we get it right, because this really matters.

The Chair (Mr. Tom Rakocevic): Further debate? MPP Fraser.

Mr. John Fraser: I agree with my colleague, obviously. With things like exclusions, they have impact on people's daily lives—the children, their parents, their teachers, their EAs—and I think it's important that we look at this from that perspective. Yes, we want to get the numbers right. Yes, we want to get the systems right. But why do we want to do that? I don't know if everyone here clearly understands—I'd like to think that everybody clearly understands that, but you have to hear the people who are actually impacted by the decisions that we make and the direction that we give. That's why it's important. We don't have to take a week to do it, or five days; all it takes is a day of hearings. That's what you need, and I think it will inform this report and make it a better report. I really encourage my colleagues—it's not going to hurt; it's only going to help.

The Chair (Mr. Tom Rakocevic): Further debate? Further debate? Seeing none, are members ready to vote?

Ms. Chandra Pasma: Recorded vote, Chair.

The Chair (Mr. Tom Rakocevic): Understood.

Ayes

Pasma.

Nays

Dixon, Grewal, Kanapathi, Pang, Rosenberg, David Smith.

The Chair (Mr. Tom Rakocevic): It does not carry.

2026 SPECIAL REPORT, AUDITOR GENERAL
MINISTRY OF EDUCATION
TORONTO CATHOLIC DISTRICT SCHOOL BOARD
PEEL DISTRICT SCHOOL BOARD
UPPER CANADA DISTRICT SCHOOL BOARD

Consideration of the Performance Audit: Special Education Needs.

The Chair (Mr. Tom Rakocevic): For the 2026 Performance Audit: Special Education Needs, we are joined today by officials from the Ministry of Education, the Toronto Catholic District School Board, Peel District School Board, and Upper Canada District School Board.

You will have 20 minutes, collectively, for an opening presentation to the committee. We will then move into the question-and-answer portion of the meeting, where we will rotate back and forth between the government, official opposition and third party caucuses in 20-minute intervals.

Before you begin, the Clerk will administer the oath of witness or affirmation.

The Clerk of the Committee (Ms. Thushitha Kobikrishna): Denise Allyson Cole, do you solemnly affirm that the evidence you shall give to this committee touching the subject of the present inquiry shall be the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth?

Ms. Denise Allyson Cole: I affirm.

The Clerk of the Committee (Ms. Thushitha Kobikrishna): Hilary Forgie-Resnick, do you solemnly affirm that the evidence you shall give to this committee touching the subject of the present inquiry shall be the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth?

Ms. Hilary Forgie-Resnick: I affirm.

The Clerk of the Committee (Ms. Thushitha Kobikrishna): Charmaine Perera, do you solemnly affirm that the evidence you shall give to this committee touching the subject of the present inquiry shall be the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth?

Ms. Charmaine Perera: I do.

The Clerk of the Committee (Ms. Thushitha Kobikrishna): Brendan Browne—I do have the Bible in front of you if you want to use that—do you solemnly swear that the evidence you shall give to this committee touching the subject of the present inquiry shall be the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, so help you God?

Dr. Brendan Browne: I do.

The Clerk of the Committee (Ms. Thushitha Kobikrishna): Harjit Aujla, do you solemnly affirm that the evidence you shall give to this committee touching the

subject of the present inquiry shall be the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth?

Mr. Harjit Aujla: I do.

The Clerk of the Committee (Ms. Thushitha Kobikrishna): Ron Ferguson, do you solemnly swear that the evidence you shall give to this committee touching the subject of the present inquiry shall be the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, so help you God?

Mr. Ron Ferguson: I do.

The Clerk of the Committee (Ms. Thushitha Kobikrishna): Thank you.

The Chair (Mr. Tom Rakocevic): Also, before you begin: In the event that you ask someone who is behind you that you have invited to answer more specific questions, they will also be asked to either affirm or swear an oath. And I ask that the moment you speak, at least the first time, introduce yourselves for Hansard so that they know who the speaker is. Thank you very much.

Please begin. You have 20 minutes collectively.

Ms. Denise Allyson Cole: Good afternoon, everyone. My name is Denise Allyson Cole, and I'm the Deputy Minister of Education.

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before the committee this afternoon. With me is Hilary Forgie-Resnick, interim assistant deputy minister of the student achievement division; Charmaine Perera, director of the special education/success for all branch within the student achievement division; and not at the table, but who I might call upon to assist with questions, is Andrew Davis, assistant deputy minister of the education labour and finance division.

At the request of the committee, we are also joined by representatives from the three school boards that were engaged in the Auditor General's 2026 Performance Audit: Special Education Needs: Dr. Brendan Browne, chief executive officer of the Toronto Catholic District School Board, and members of his executive team; Harjit Aujla, chief education officer of the Peel District School Board, and members of his executive team; and Ron Ferguson, chief executive officer of the Upper Canada District School Board, and members of his executive team.

We very much welcome the opportunity to provide an update on the Auditor General's report on special education, including the progress made since its release and the work that remains ahead.

Special education matters profoundly because it is about ensuring every student receives the supports they need to learn, belong, participate fully and achieve their potential.

Before I begin, I would like to acknowledge the dedication of the educators, educational assistants, principals, school board staff and ministry officials who support students with special education needs every day. Their commitment is vital to student success.

While there is much to be proud of in Ontario's special education system, we recognize that the experiences of students and families are not always as consistent as they should be. The Auditor General's report provides an important opportunity to strengthen consistency, accountability, transparency and outcomes across the system. Those priorities align closely with the ministry's ongoing work, and we remain committed to building a more responsive and effective system that keeps students at the centre of every decision.

Today, nearly one in five students in Ontario's publicly funded education system receives special education programs and services, representing more than 350,000 students across the province. Behind those numbers are individual students with unique strengths, needs and aspirations.

Special education is not a single program or standardized service. Every student requires a different combination of supports, and those needs can evolve over time. Meeting those needs often requires collaboration among educators, parents, families, school boards, community partners, other ministries and service providers. While the system is complex, students and families rightly expect that complexity to be managed effectively.

That is why the Ministry of Education continues to work closely with the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services, the Ministry of Health and other government partners to help ensure children and youth receive coordinated, connected and responsive supports.

Every student deserves the opportunity to succeed, and every parent and family should be able to navigate the system with confidence and access to support their child's needs.

1400

The ministry remains committed to a strong and inclusive publicly funded education system that supports students with diverse learning needs. In the 2026-27 fiscal year, the ministry is expected to invest more than $3.8 billion through the Special Education Fund to support special education programs and services across Ontario. This funding is dedicated to the additional supports required by students with special education needs, while these students also benefit from broader investments made through core education funding.

I have seen first-hand the dedication, expertise and innovation that educators, school boards and their partners bring to this work. At the same time, the Auditor General's report along with what we continue to hear from students, parents, families and educators make clear that there is more work to do. That is why we remain focused on strengthening accountability; improving consistency across the system; and ensuring every student has access to the supports they need to learn, belong, participate fully and achieve their potential.

The Auditor General's report provides an important assessment of Ontario's public education system and highlights areas where improvement is needed. Over the course of more than a year, ministry staff worked closely with the Office of the Auditor General to support its review, providing extensive information, documentation and subject matter expertise. The review involved numerous discussions and the examination of hundreds of supporting documents. It was a rigorous and valuable process that has provided important insights to help strengthen supports for

students with special education needs, their parents, families and the educators who serve them.

I would like to thank the Auditor General and her team for their work and for the recommendations put forward in the report. We welcome the report and the opportunity it provides to strengthen the system. Work is already under way across a number of areas, and today I would like to focus on the progress we have made to date as well as the actions we are taking to address the recommendations and further improve outcomes for students and families.

The Auditor General's report highlighted the challenges many parents and families face when navigating Ontario's special education system. Families and parents should be able to easily understand the supports available to their child, how to access those supports, and what rights and processes exist within the system. We agree that parents and families need clear, accessible information and meaningful opportunities to share their experiences.

Our goal is to create a more user-friendly one-stop-shop approach to special education information and resources. To support this work, the ministry will update its special education Web content and work with school boards to align parent guides, improve accessibility and provide clear information about local programs and services.

Providing information, however, is only part of the solution. Parent and family perspectives are essential to understanding how the system is working in practice and where improvements are needed.

Student and family support offices, first introduced in supervised boards and expanded across the province in September 2026, at the start of the school year, are helping the ministry to better understand the concerns families are bringing forward. Information collected through these offices is being used to identify trends, improve service delivery and inform future decision-making. We will continue to listen to families and use their feedback to strengthen supports, improve communication, and enhance the overall experience of navigating special education in Ontario.

The ministry has also taken action in response to the Auditor General's recommendations related to consistency, transparency and provincial guidance for school boards. One area highlighted in the report was the identification, placement and review committee, or IPRC, process.

We agree that parents and families should have a clear understanding of how decisions are made and how placements are determined. To support greater transparency and consistency, the ministry recently reinforced legislative requirements requiring IPRC decision-making and documentation for all school boards.

The Auditor General also identified opportunities to strengthen the development and implementation of individual education plans, or IEPs. In response, the ministry required all school boards to provide mandatory professional learning on special education and IEPs, and has begun reviewing a sample of IEPs from across the province to inform future guidance and expectations.

The report also recommended that the ministry work with school boards to better understand student placement decisions and their impact on outcomes. The ministry has completed a province-wide analysis of special education placement trends and will work with boards to further examine placement patterns and use those findings to inform future planning, service delivery and provincial guidance.

Taken together, these actions reflect our commitment to improving transparency for parents and families, strengthening consistency across Ontario—

The Chair (Mr. Tom Rakocevic): There's 10 minutes remaining.

Ms. Denise Allyson Cole: Yes—and ensuring that decisions affecting students are informed by evidence and focused on outcomes.

Our goal is not simply to respond to the Auditor General's recommendations but to use them as an opportunity to strengthen the special education system so that students and families receive the timely, effective and responsive supports they deserve.

Another key focus of the Auditor General's report was the educators and education sector professionals who support students with special education needs. We agree that students should have access to qualified professionals with the knowledge, skills and training needed to support their success. As student needs become increasingly diverse and complex, it is essential that staff have access to ongoing professional learning and support. To advance this work, the ministry is reviewing staffing roles, training requirements and workforce capacity across the province to identify opportunities to strengthen special education programs and services and promote greater consistency in how supports are delivered.

The ministry is also establishing clearer expectations for ongoing professional learning; collecting workforce data to better understand capacity pressures; and examining staffing practices across school boards, including leading practices from other jurisdictions. This work will help ensure that school boards have the workforce, capacity, expertise and guidance required to deliver high-quality supports for students with special education needs across Ontario.

Another important area of focus in the Auditor General's report was the use of exclusions and suspensions. Student safety must always remain a priority. At the same time, students and parents should be able to expect that decisions affecting access to learning are made fairly, consistently and in accordance with provincial requirements.

Exclusions are provided for in legislation as part of a principal's duty to maintain a safe and inclusive learning environment. They are intended to be used when a person presents a risk to the physical safety or mental well-being of students or others. They are not intended to be used as a disciplinary measure but rather as a temporary response to address immediate safety concerns. The ministry recognizes the importance of ensuring that school boards have clear expectations and consistent guidance in this area. We

continue to explore opportunities to provide additional guidance to school boards regarding the appropriate use of exclusions, with the goal of promoting greater consistency, transparency and understanding.

The Auditor General also highlighted the importance of better understanding disciplinary practices affecting students receiving special education programs and services. To support this work, the ministry is undertaking additional analysis of suspension data across the education system. This analysis is focused on better understanding suspension patterns among students receiving special education, programs and services; identifying trends over time; and determining whether certain groups of students experience suspensions at disproportionately higher rates. These findings will help inform future policy guidance and supports to ensure disciplinary practices are fair, evidence-informed and responsive to the needs of students. Our objective is twofold: to maintain safe learning environments for all students and educators while ensuring that students with special education needs receive appropriate supports and can participate fully in school life. Better data, clearer guidance and stronger oversight will help us achieve that balance and support more consistent practices.

1410

Oversight is not about process for its own sake. It is about understanding whether expectations are being met and, ultimately, whether students are receiving the supports they need to succeed.

The Auditor General's report included several recommendations aimed at strengthening accountability at both the school board and ministry levels. One recommendation focused on the ministry's oversight of school boards' special education plans. In response, the ministry implemented an enhanced review process in June of this year to support greater consistency, stronger documentation and more effective monitoring of board compliance with provincial requirements.

The report also highlighted the need for greater transparency and consistency in how special education funding is reported. The ministry has completed a province-wide review of special education expenditures and will undertake further analysis with a representative sample of school boards to strengthen financial reporting and accountability.

In addition, the ministry is working directly with school boards to review student achievement plans, monitor programs and assess results. These plans help boards identify local priorities, target supports and establish concrete actions to improve student outcomes.

Taken together, these initiatives will strengthen the ministry's ability to monitor performance, assess results and support continuous improvement across Ontario's special education system.

Ultimately, accountability is about more than compliance. It is about ensuring that decisions are informed by evidence, resources are used effectively, and students receive the supports they need to achieve their full potential.

At the centre of everything I have spoken about today are students, their families, parents, educators and EAs. Parents and caregivers need confidence that their children will receive the supports they need to succeed. Educators need the tools, training and clarity to provide those supports. And the public needs confidence that the education system is accountable for the resources it receives and the results it delivers.

The Auditor General's report has provided valuable recommendations that are helping to strengthen our work. We are taking meaningful steps to improve accountability, consistency, transparency and outcome for students with special education needs.

Supporting more than 350,000 students requiring special education programs and services across a province as large and diverse as Ontario will always involve complexity, but complexity does not lessen the ministry's responsibility. Our focus remains clear: a special education system that is responsive, evidence-informed, accountable and centred on the needs of students, parents and families. That is the standard we must continue to hold ourselves to.

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before the committee today. We would be pleased to answer any questions.

The Chair (Mr. Tom Rakocevic): There are two minutes remaining, but that concludes your presentation?

Ms. Denise Allyson Cole: Yes, it does.

The Chair (Mr. Tom Rakocevic): Thank you very much.

This week, we will be proceeding in the following rotation: beginning with 20 minutes to the third party members, 20 minutes to the official opposition members, and 20 minutes to the government members.

I'm also notifying everyone that we are expecting a vote between 3 p.m. and 3:30 p.m., at which point we will be recessing for roughly 15 minutes to allow members to leave the committee room and go on and vote. So the witnesses, please be around—if you need to take a break, of course, that's welcome, but we will be beginning once again in around 15 minutes.

We'll now begin with the third party.

Mr. John Fraser: Thank you very much, Ms. Cole, for your presentation, and to everybody who is here today. There are a lot of people in the room right now.

I just want to cut to the chase here about a couple of recommendations, three in particular. The first one is recommendation number 3—the absence of standard criteria and guidelines for identifying and supporting students. The Auditor General made some findings in that regard, that that was lacking, and made a recommendation. I'll read a couple of them here:

"—establish student support guidance for school boards to provide greater consistency in identifying the types of supports a student may require based on their needs, for both students that are identified by an IPRC and those identified through school-based teams;

"—revise its categories and definitions of exceptionalities to apply to a broader range of conditions and disorders; and

"—take the lead to collaborate with school boards to establish a mechanism for the boards to regularly review IPRC decisions to identify inconsistencies, and highlight areas for improvement for the school boards to implement."

All of this sounds pretty reasonable, given what we know about children and their development and their learning and their exceptionalities. As I mentioned earlier, I have been involved in special education in some way or form for about 27 years, and I can say that that's the case. We are discovering more learning exceptionalities.

So I'm just trying to understand why you disagree with the recommendation and there's no work planned.

Ms. Denise Allyson Cole: Thanks very much for the question, MPP Fraser.

The Education Act does identify five categories of exceptionality for exceptional students: behavioural, communicational, intellectual, physical, and multiple. These broad categories are designed to address the wide range of conditions that may affect a student's ability to learn and are meant to be inclusive of all special education learning needs, including medical conditions, whether diagnosed or not, that can lead to particular types of learning.

The reason that we are not in agreement with the recommendation, however, is that while the five categories are a useful tool for the identification of students with special education needs, a student may present learning needs in many ways in the school setting and may be identified as exceptional within one or more categories. The determining factor for the provision of special education programs or services is not any specific diagnosed or undiagnosed medical condition but rather the need of the individual student based on an individual assessment of strengths and needs.

Charmaine, I'm going to ask you to elaborate.

Ms. Charmaine Perera: Thank you, Deputy.

Charmaine Perera, director of special education/success for all branch.

The deputy is correct: The determining factor for the provision of special education programs and services isn't any specific diagnosed or undiagnosed medical condition and is rather based on the students' actual needs in the classroom, so their strengths and needs—their challenges as well as their strengths.

For example, a student with autism may have a diagnosis, but that doesn't actually tell the educator or the IPRC very much about their learning needs. One student may be identified as having autism under the communicational exceptionality category, whereas another student could be identified with giftedness or developmental disability under an intellectual category, and yet another student might be identified with a behaviour exceptionality. All three of these students would have very different learning needs and very different accommodations, modifications or alternative curriculum to go along with that. They would need very, very specific needs considered, their unique learning needs considered, to determine which placement makes the most sense for them.

So it is for those reasons that the ministry does not support this set of criteria or a one-size-fits-all application.

Mr. John Fraser: How long has the criteria that exists right now been in legislation? Does anybody know? How long as it been there?

Ms. Charmaine Perera: Could I ask you just to clarify what you mean by the set criteria that—

Mr. John Fraser: In other words, they asked you to revise the categories and definitions of exceptionalities to a broader range of conditions and disorders. Obviously, it is defined legislatively. How long has it been defined legislatively as it is right now?

Ms. Charmaine Perera: The actual exceptionalities are defined. I don't know for how long they have been defined. It has been some time. But that is not a set criteria for the needs that are required for the student's learning.

Mr. John Fraser: So it has been some time. I guess the question that I would have—and I would say I don't expect an answer; I'm trying to encourage something—is, if it has been that way for a long time and things change and we learn more and we know more, would it not make a bit of sense to take a look at that and say, "Maybe there's something here that belongs here that's not here right now"? I'm suggesting that maybe you should take a look at it because it has been that way for a long time—or at least what you'd be able to describe as for some time, I should say. You don't need to answer that question and say yes, you're going to do it; I would just say that I strongly recommend it.

1420

I want to move on to recommendation number 6, which dealt with long wait times for specialist assessments and delayed IPRC decisions. The Auditor General made a number of recommendations for the ministry to instruct school boards. I'm not going to read through them all. You know what they all are. Again, you disagreed with the recommendations and you didn't provide a response outlining work completed. You didn't respond to it is, essentially, what I understand. Why? Could you respond to that, please?

Ms. Denise Allyson Cole: I'll begin.

In Ontario, students with special education needs do not need a professional assessment or a formal diagnosis to get the learning supports that they need. Support planning should not be delayed because a professional assessment is being considered or has not been completed. That's at the heart of why we do not support the Auditor General's recommendation.

I'm going to turn to you now.

Ms. Charmaine Perera: I'm happy to elaborate a little on that.

Student supports should be based on a student's individual learning strengths and needs. Of course, a professional assessment can be a useful tool that can help inform what accommodations and/or modifications a student might need. But educators and IPRC members can and do use other assessments to determine what the student might need in terms of learning supports.

For example, educator observations are used—student tests, quizzes and comprehension checks that educators do regularly. Educators use their professional experience and judgment to provide students with special education needs with programs and services that they require to learn and to demonstrate that learning as well.

Where needed, educators can also work with school teams and/or a school board psychologist to determine what supports can be provided immediately, without a professional assessment, and can be adjusted as needed as time goes on, which is the same thing that would occur if a professional assessment happened. It would still be adjusted afterward as well, as needed.

Mr. John Fraser: So, essentially a tool that is not our only tool, but a really good tool, we should measure how long it takes—I'm not saying stop anything we are going to do for the child, but we're not asking ourselves, "How long is this taking? Is there some way we can make this process better? Are people taking too long to write decisions? The performance level of the people doing those things, is it good?" Maybe it's great; I don't know. But this is a tool that is used by educators and parents. I think it's fair to say that it's an important tool. It's probably not our only tool, but it's a pretty strong tool. So again, I would recommend—although you haven't done it—that you respond to the Auditor General and maybe follow through on measuring those things, so that you can manage—

The Chair (Mr. Tom Rakocevic): Just over 10 minutes remaining.

Mr. John Fraser: Go ahead.

Ms. Denise Allyson Cole: Just to set the record straight, we have responded to all of the Auditor General's recommendations—that one we have a nuanced disagreement on in terms of what it is that she is recommending. The ministry does, in the spirit of continuous improvement, always look at what is being used in school boards, what is the ministry's guidance and so forth, with the intent of continuous improvement.

Mr. John Fraser: I'm sorry if I have mischaracterized it; it was just how I read it.

Again, another strong recommendation is a response that says, "Yes, we need to measure this. We should measure it. It's an important tool, and we're going to do this in some meaningful way."

I'm not giving you a deadline or anything like that. I just think it's—to me, if you want to manage it, you'd better measure it. I don't think we're measuring these things, and I think they're critical to find out how many people we have waiting too long—and maybe performance levels.

Does somebody want to—here we go.

Mr. Ron Ferguson: Ron Ferguson, CEO of the Upper Canada District School Board.

Thank you for the question.

You'll notice from the Auditor General's report that the Upper Canada District School Board did not have any students waiting any longer than a year, so we were able to have it so there were no wait times that went beyond a year.

As the deputy minister said, even for those who are waiting a few months, we don't wait on providing the support the students need. We were able, as a school board, to put resources and our attention about four or five years ago toward this issue. We set a target for ourselves to reduce wait times, where no student was waiting beyond a year, and we were able to accomplish that, so we were happy about that.

But to your point, certainly, the Auditor General's report identified areas where we could do a better job of documentation and following where it is. We're working on that next, so we welcome the Auditor General's advice around that.

Mr. John Fraser: That's really great. If we could just deliver that in the other 71 school boards, that would be a good thing—just that measuring. Again, it's just a recommendation. I appreciate the fact that you're doing it. That's a great thing. I'm just saying it's something that I think we need, more than just at the Upper Canada District School Board.

I have to say, at my constituency office, I hear about exclusions regularly. It's a great concern on a whole wide range of fronts. A lot of families of children with exceptional needs call my office, and they're upset that their child is being excluded because the person who needs to help them is not there, or there's another reason that may be based behaviourally, in the ability of the school or the classroom to work with that child, to be able to provide a safe environment for that child. But again, this is another measurement thing. We're not measuring the reasons why this is happening, and it makes it hard for us to manage if we're not measuring it. Is the problem absenteeism of the person who is helping that child? Is it the ability of that person to be able to provide what that child needs for their exceptionality? We don't know how often this is happening.

You can see the thread that I'm going on. It's just that we need to do this. It is a great concern to parents. It's not every parent in the system—it's a small number of students that I would argue is growing. It has a great impact on their learning, a great impact on their families, a great impact on their families' livelihoods. No need to answer; I'm just climbing up on a soapbox and saying we need to do that, post-haste.

Ms. Denise Allyson Cole: We would love the opportunity to respond, if we—

Mr. John Fraser: You can. I'm not saying you can't.

Ms. Denise Allyson Cole: Yes. The ministry does track the exclusions and so forth. We could do better.

In the spirit of continuous improvement always, we are working on looking to see if there are opportunities to strengthen the PPM around exclusions and so forth to give further guidance on principals. We will be, as a ministry, giving the minister our advice and recommendations around that.

Hilary or Brendan, I don't know if you wanted to elaborate.

Ms. Hilary Forgie-Resnick: I'm happy to. Thank you, Deputy.

Hilary Forgie-Resnick, acting assistant deputy minister for the student achievement division at the Ministry of Education.

Thank you for your question.

To build upon what the deputy has said, there are areas where we recognize there could be a degree of improvement in this space. The ministry does collect formal exclusion data. When a formal exclusion has to be made, it's required to be reported to the ministry.

I can let you know that for the 2024-25 year, the number of exclusions was approximately 1,840, with 838 individual student exclusions. That's because students can face multiple exclusions. So that's what we have in terms of formal data recording. The data for last school year is not available yet.

1430

I think that what you're referring to, though, is soft exclusions or informal exclusions. This may include parents being called repeatedly to pick a child up or being asked to have a child stay home for a day. That's an area where we don't have as much insight, and it can occur for a multitude of reasons, as you've flagged. There is no public reporting of informal exclusion data at this point in time. The ministry has been doing some work in the background to develop further guidance in this space in order to provide consistency across school boards and a degree of guidance in terms of what constitutes formal versus informal and what are the root causes behind the informal exclusions. We hope to continue that policy work going into the next school year—and when I say "next school year," I mean the next calendar year, because we are still in the middle of this school year. That's currently where the ministry is at in terms of engagement.

Mr. John Fraser: How much time?

The Chair (Mr. Tom Rakocevic): You have just over three minutes.

Dr. Brendan Browne: Brendan Browne, CEO of Toronto Catholic.

From a school board perspective, we recognize that we want students in class. We know that students are best-served when they're in school with their peers, with their supports that are in place, and we try to do everything we can to make sure that that remains consistent for our students.

In terms of the formal reporting on exclusions, our numbers would be very low, and I know that that's not what you're referring to if you're suggesting—the colloquial term is "soft exclusions." Something that we've been working on as a school board very consistently over the last few years is consistent professional development with our principals about what we need to have in place and the conversations that need to take place.

So, while 265(1)(m) in the Education Act allows the principal to exclude a child for safety reasons, we have, in part of our strengthening of our process, made sure that that doesn't happen without consultation with superintendents moving forward, and making sure that we have our processes in place.

I can see that you're trying to cut me off, and I'm happy to—

Ms. Lee Fairclough: I'm going to jump in if you don't mind, because I do want to just finish on recommendation 11. There were some very specific things that came through in those recommendations, and there wasn't much response at all. So my question is, do you think that there is enough happening today as it relates to exclusions? One of the recommendations here was "establish a mechanism for parents to report exclusions, without reprisal, to ensure that the informal exclusion data provided is accurate." And 39% of teachers who were surveyed said that they observed undocumented exclusion. Do you think that there's some validity in that, and if so, then why were there no actions, actually, on this one?

The Chair (Mr. Tom Rakocevic): There is one minute and a half remaining.

Ms. Hilary Forgie-Resnick: I hear what you're saying, and I understand that there were specific recommendations made. The ministry's goal would be to have this included in comprehensive new guidance that we would like to continue to explore and work on. Admittedly, those guidelines are not in place right now as it relates to informal exclusions. We do have robust policies in place, as I'm sure you're aware, related to formal exclusions. So I think that there's some work on the part of the ministry where we'd like to continue to explore and engage in this space to determine how to best tackle these. By the nature of an informal exclusion, it is not something that adheres to a strict policy, so I think that there's some additional work that we're willing to do in this space.

Ms. Lee Fairclough: I'm happy to hear it, because I would say this is something I too hear from parents in my MPP office. I also will say that since the changes in governance with the school boards, it has been harder for them to actually raise them and make sure that they're being heard, so I'm pleased to hear that there might be some additional commitment on it.

Ms. Denise Allyson Cole: It's part of the limitations, and I'll follow up with the Auditor General a bit later. In terms of the definition under "completed undertaken, outstanding undertaken," it doesn't always capture the work that's actually under way—

The Chair (Mr. Tom Rakocevic): Thank you. We're at time.

Just to notify witnesses, the button that's on your speaker doesn't actually work. It is controlled—or, rather, it may work, so there's no need to frantically press it. Our broadcast services will very capably activate your mikes, just like they do for all the members in the room.

Also, if you have noticed, at the halfway point—10 minutes—I will interrupt to let you know you're at your halfway time, and as well at two minutes remaining. I try as best as possible to do it in a break in a sentence, but sometimes it's not possible. It's just in the interest of framing your questions and answers within the timeline that is allotted.

Let's move on now to the official opposition, beginning with MPP Pasma.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: Thank you very much to everyone for being here today—I think this is the most crowded witness table I've ever seen—not to mention all the folks at the back of the room. It is, of course, a very big topic as well, so I have a lot of questions. I apologize if I interrupt you. It's not something that I love doing, but there's a lot of material that I want to get through, so if I can ask that you please try to keep your answers brief, then I will try to keep any interruptions to a minimum.

I'm going to start with some questions for the Ministry of Education, starting with funding. The information that you provided to the Auditor General on funding showed school boards spending $3.9 billion on special education in 2023-24, which resulted in a deficit that year of $397.9 million. That is how much more school boards spent than what they got. But if you look at the audited financial statements in EFIS, the education finance information system, those financial statements show that the school boards spent $4.6 billion that year on special education, meaning that the deficit, or the overspend, was actually $1.1 billion. This is an analysis that came from school boards; it's not me reading EFIS. This is coming from people who work with school board financial statements all the time.

I would like to know, why would the information that your ministry shared with the Auditor General be so different from what school boards themselves are collecting through your own ministry's data portal?

Mr. Andrew Davis: My name is Andrew Davis. I'm the assistant deputy minister of education labour and finance. I believe I have to do my affirmation first.

The Clerk of the Committee (Ms. Thushitha Kobikrishna): Andrew Davis, do you solemnly affirm that the evidence you shall give to the committee touching the subject of the present inquiry shall be the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth?

Mr. Andrew Davis: I affirm.

The Chair (Mr. Tom Rakocevic): Please note that the time is paused when this happens, so no one loses time.

Resume.

Mr. Andrew Davis: Thank you for the question.

What's important is to understand a little bit in regard to the structure of the funding and be able to compare the expense to the funding itself.

In core education funding, special education funding is just one of six pillars. It is $3.8 billion through the Special Education Fund, representing about 12.5%. But funding from the other pillars within the formula can all be used for special education. In fact, funding in those other pillars is intended to do that. The special education funding is a floor, or a minimum. In fact, that funding is protected and enveloped so that that funding can only be used for that purpose. Therefore, it is actually by design that boards use other funds from other pillars within the funding formula to support the special education needs.

Maybe the easiest way is by example—

Ms. Chandra Pasma: Sorry. I don't really need an example, but I just want to be clear.

The school boards aren't arguing with you about how much money was allocated toward special education. They are saying that what the ministry is saying went toward special education is actually $600 million less than what the boards themselves are saying went to special education. That's an enormous discrepancy. So is the ministry not recognizing that that money went to special education when the boards are saying it did—or how do you account for a $600-million discrepancy?

Mr. Andrew Davis: That's exactly the point that I am getting to, which is, the $3.8 billion is a minimum. It sets a floor. It is actually expected that the funds generated in other pillars will be used for the purposes. So, really, when you're comparing the funding of $3.8 billion, you're comparing an apple and an orange to the expense side on special education. That's because those other grants are intended to supplement the actual special education needs.

1440

Again, I think the easiest way to explain this is by example, so—

Ms. Chandra Pasma: Sorry. Like I said, I have a lot of questions, so I do want to be able to get through them.

I feel like we are talking about apples and oranges, because I'm not arguing with you about how much money is being allocated; I am saying that the boards are saying they are spending this much money on special education. You're agreeing that they are spending more than what they are getting, but somehow your number for what they're overspending is $600 million less than what they're saying. So maybe you can submit to the committee in writing how you're coming to your analysis, and then we would be able to make that comparison.

Setting that aside for a moment, about whose numbers for 2023 or 2024 are right, the Auditor General's report shows that there was a shortfall in education that year. The school boards are saying that data from last year shows that the total shortfall in special education was $854 million last year. This year—we're still early in the school year, so it is preliminary, but the data looks like we're on track to be even higher than that yet again.

There have been many reports over the past number of years—from the K-12 Education Standards Development Committee in 2022, People for Education, the Ontario Autism Coalition, Community Living, the Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario—that speak very powerfully to how special education in Ontario is failing our kids right now. It's not keeping them safe. It's not meeting their learning needs.

Given that, why would the ministry allow that gap between what is being allocated for special education funding and what the boards are spending to grow instead of trying to shrink that gap?

Mr. Andrew Davis: Thank you for the question.

The phrase that you're using, which is "the gap"— is again the amount that school boards are choosing because it is generated in core education in other pillars and is intended to be used and augmented for that.

Special education funding, the $3.8 billion, is not intended to cover special education on its own. There is flexibility designed within the funding formula and designed and intended to do so to augment and supplement that. The Learning Resources Fund, in the core education funding—that's generated for your paraprofessionals. These paraprofessionals, often with specialized expertise, are hired by the school boards and deliver services solely for the purposes of delivering programming and educational services to special education students. When they report that expense side, they report that as part of their special education expenditures, but that funding is not in the Special Education Fund. That funding is in the Learning Resources Fund, and that is why there is a difference.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: We know the Financial Accountability Officer said overall spending is only increasing 0.6%, when just to maintain baseline level of service, it should be 2.6%, right? The Financial Accountability Officer said that.

The Auditor General, in this report, flagged that spending on special education is actually outpacing overall spending, that enrolment in special education is outpacing overall enrolment. So I don't think to simply say, "Well, there are other sources of funding, so it doesn't matter at all what's in the special education envelope"—I don't think that's a good enough answer, because every year, then, that special education need which is increasing is drawing more and more funding out of the funding that is meant for every issue that school boards need to deal with.

If education funding for special education is not keeping pace with the need, then we are creating challenges for school boards in other areas.

So why would we not want to invest sufficient funding, specifically for special education, knowing that the needs are growing, so that we can keep our kids safe, so that they can actually learn something when they're at school for the day?

Ms. Denise Allyson Cole: I probably feel like we're going to go around the mulberry bush on this one.

The $3.8 billion is a sweatered amount that cannot be used for anything else other than special education. The way in which the funding formula works for school boards—which is enrolment-based—is used for other things. So if a special education student is in the classroom, part of core education funding supports that student in the classroom; not from the special education fund—the sweatered amount—it's a part of our core education funding.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: But that part of the core education funding is going to support a student who has additional needs, which means that that funding is being used for special education, which means that there is less funding than available in other pots for other things.

I agree with you; I think we're going around the mulberry bush here. I don't think we're going to come to a common agreement on where we should be at in terms of funding.

My next question is related to funding again, but via staffing.

This audit found that one third of students in both the TCDSB and the PDSB who needed a psychological or speech-language assessment were waiting more than a year. And that's actually in line with an audit that was done in 2017 by the Auditor General, which identified that the number of students waiting more than a year in the boards that were surveyed that year in the audit was also one third to a quarter.

According to People for Education, the number of schools with no access to a psychologist has doubled since 2011. So there are now twice as many schools in Ontario that don't have a psychologist as there were 15 years ago.

And a recent CUPE OSBCU report just showed that 38% of school boards that have psychologists have cut permanent staff since 2018, and in 64% of them, the ratio of psychological professionals to students has gotten worse since 2018. Similarly, 30% of boards with speech and language professionals have cut permanent positions, and 45% have worse staff-to-student ratios than in 2018.

In this year's core education funding, we see the per pupil allocation for staffing has gone down from $928 to $927 per student. So there's less funding for staffing, even as we are seeing boards cutting specialists, psychological professionals, occupational therapists, speech-language professionals.

Knowing that wait times are an issue in boards and that they have been for the past eight years, why hasn't it been a priority for the ministry to stop the cuts and to ensure that we have more psychologists and speech-language professionals in our schools?

The Chair (Mr. Tom Rakocevic): Eight minutes remaining.

Mr. Andrew Davis: I'm happy to take this one.

Some important information in order to be able to share with the committee in regard to staffing and enrolment trends—since 2017-18, the benchmark that we compared to, total staffing has actually gone up by 10,600. If you compare overall staffing to overall enrolment, staffing has gone up by 4.75%—so almost 5%. Meanwhile, enrolment has actually gone up only by about 3.4%. So the actual staffing ratios, overall, are actually improving. It's—

Ms. Chandra Pasma: Sorry—those are staffing of psychologists and speech-language therapists?

Mr. Andrew Davis: Sure. Actually, if you compare the paraprofessionals line—that's the category for which you're referring to—the numbers are even more stark. Total overall staffing for paraprofessionals since 2017-18 has actually gone up by 16%, or almost 1,400 additional staff.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: "Paraprofessionals" is a very broad category. So maybe you could provide in writing to the committee the number of psychologists and speech-language therapists by school board, and we can compare that against the CUPE data and come to some clarity about what's happening with regard to staffing for professionals and why wait times aren't coming down in these school boards.

The audit report states on page 43 that in the PDSB, they have a formula to determine where EAs should be

targeted but that schools are still understaffed by a total of 51 EAs, because the board has limited the total number of EAs so that they can stay within their staffing allocation. So they are doing the work that the Auditor General says we should be doing of having a clear and consistent process to decide where EAs are needed, but then they don't have the funding to provide that level of EAs.

1450

You accepted the Auditor General's recommendation that you should provide clear guidance on how special education staff should be allocated. So would you agree, then, that there have to be sufficient resources for school boards to be able to hire the number of staff identified through that process?

Mr. Andrew Davis: Thank you for the question.

In regard to the total number of EAs who have been hired for school boards—and the vast majority of all of the EAs are actually used for special education purposes. Since 2017-18, the number of EAs has actually grown by 19%—

Ms. Chandra Pasma: I'm sorry; I'm going to interrupt, because that's not actually answering the question that I asked, which was, if you're going to follow the Auditor General's recommendation and have a formula or a methodology for allocating, then wouldn't you agree that there have to be resources for school boards to hire the staff who have been identified by that methodology?

Mr. Andrew Davis: Thank you for the question.

In regard to the resources, this comes back to our earlier conversation that we just had, which is, the funding for special education is not the only source of funding for school boards in order to be drawn upon for their needs and—

Ms. Chandra Pasma: So, to be clear, your argument is that if they need more staff than what they're getting, they should pull that out of another budget line, rather than the ministry providing them with funding to staff schools at a level that the ministry has identified they should staff at.

Mr. Andrew Davis: I think the piece that we're trying to communicate on this is that the staffing that you're referring to is often generated in a different pillar. There are six total pillars. As I spoke to earlier, the pillar on learning resources is where all the paraprofessionals are generated, and so—

Ms. Chandra Pasma: Yes, but there are deficits across the board for school boards. They have deficits in student transportation, in maintenance and repairs, in classroom staffing to be able to bring down classrooms to the size that's recommended by the Ministry of Education or in some cases legislated by the government. So, why, when we have deficits across the board within our education funding, would the answer be, "Well, we're going to require you to have more people, but we're not going to pay for them, because you could just take the money from something else"? We'll just perpetually rob Peter to pay Paul. Meanwhile, it's our kids who are in the classrooms who don't actually have the support and the resources that they need, and it's our teachers and education workers who are being asked to fill in the gaps every single day, being asked to do a job that they can't because we haven't provided the conditions. So, why, if we're going to set a standard, wouldn't we just fund education to meet that standard?

Mr. Andrew Davis: Thank you for the question.

I think it's important, if we're taking a look at school boards more generally—which is your question. In fact, school boards in this sector are actually doing quite well. They have over $1.1 billion sitting in their cumulative surplus or their reserves, which is roughly about 3.5% of the—

Ms. Chandra Pasma: I'm sorry. The number of school boards with a deficit is over 40%, and it has grown every single year for the past seven years. I don't think that we can argue that school boards are in great financial shape, and they have absolutely cut to the bone. So I think we're going to have to completely disagree on whether or not sufficient funding is being provided to meet the needs.

Ms. Denise Allyson Cole: I think it's important to note—

The Chair (Mr. Tom Rakocevic): One minute, 45 seconds remaining.

Ms. Denise Allyson Cole: —[*inaudible*] boards with deficits that have money in surpluses and reserves.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: I'm going to move on to another topic, because I only have a minute and 30 seconds left.

You mentioned earlier the wait times for assessments—that it didn't matter because a student could get support without that diagnosis. There are certain categories where I'm wondering if you actually believe that a student would get the special education support without a diagnosis.

Would a student be placed in an autism class without having a formal diagnosis of autism?

Mr. Harjit Aujla: Thank you very much for that question.

Harjit Aujla, chief education officer with the Peel District School Board.

In terms of the assessment wait times, in the Peel District School Board, what we have done since the—

Ms. Chandra Pasma: I'm really sorry again. I'm not asking for a general "what have you done"; it's "Would a child without an autism diagnosis be placed in an autism class?"

Mr. Harjit Aujla: We would ensure a child in one of our classrooms that has an autism—that falls within categories that require support, would indeed receive the necessary instructional supports to be able to access the curriculum.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: But in a mainstream classroom, they could not get a classroom placement?

Mr. Harjit Aujla: We have many congregated classrooms within our district that provide specific programming needs for students based upon their individual student portraits. That is where very explicit alternative programming does take place for students.

In our mainstream classrooms, we do have a number of different supports—tier 1, tier 2—that can be provided to students to be able to continue to access the curriculum, even with—

The Chair (Mr. Tom Rakocevic): Sorry, we're at time.

We're moving on to the government members. MPP Rosenberg, please begin.

MPP Bill Rosenberg: Through you, Chair: Thank you to everyone for being here today. My question is for the deputy minister.

Earlier today, we got the Auditor General report, and one of the recommendations in there was to make special education easier for families to navigate. The Auditor General recommended improving access to information for parents of children with special education needs. What steps are the ministry taking to make this information clearer, more accessible and easier for families to navigate?

Ms. Denise Allyson Cole: The ministry agrees that parents should have timely, transparent and accessible information to help them understand the education system and make informed decisions about their children's education. To strengthen access to information, as I mentioned in my remarks, the ministry is updating its dedicated special education content on the ontario.ca website portal, its broader parent guide to the education system, and also related online resources. The goal is to reduce duplication, improve accessibility and navigation, and make it easier for parents to find and use special education information.

Our plan is that by March of next year, the ministry will complete the updates to its dedicated special education content on ontario.ca, making the information more accessible, user-friendly and mobile-friendly. I note the "mobile" part because that is very important.

The ministry will also direct school boards to update their local parent guides, so they align with revised provincial content and include board-specific information about local program services and key contacts. This will help create a more consistent experience for families and parents across Ontario, while ensuring they can still access information relevant to their local school boards.

In addition, families can access support through the student and family support offices, as I mentioned earlier, including support related to special education.

We will continue to work with parents and school boards to ensure information is clear, accessible and responsive to parents' needs.

MPP Bill Rosenberg: Could you elaborate a little bit more on how the ministry plans on improving provincial guidelines, parents' guidelines, so the information that they need is out there for them, to advocate for what their children need?

Ms. Denise Allyson Cole: I can ask my colleague to respond to that.

Ms. Charmaine Perera: Thank you.

As the deputy said, we agreed with the recommendation that there is improvement to be done. Currently, each school board is required to prepare a parent guide to special education through O. Reg. 181/98.

But like the auditor, we too have heard from parents through correspondence that they do sometimes find it difficult to find information that they are looking for and, once they find it, to understand it. To piggyback on what the deputy was saying, we are updating that for all those pieces, like the mobile-friendly, but also to reduce that duplication, to remove jargon, to improve the accessibility and maximize search engine optimization, so that it is easier to get to that language. That will all make it easier for parents to find the information. And then, coupled with the student and family support offices that the deputy spoke about, that then gives a parent a place—of course, they'll start with the teacher, then move to the principal, the supervisory officer, but if they still need to speak to somebody or they need to know to whom they should speak, then they can call those offices and get a contact name or more information and be able to navigate the system that way.

1500

The Chair (Mr. Tom Rakocevic): MPP Pang.

Mr. Billy Pang: Mr. Chair, through you to the deputy minister: Your team just mentioned the student and family support offices.

The Auditor General identified opportunities to improve how school boards collect feedback from parents. Can you explain how the government's new student and family support offices are helping address these recommendations?

Ms. Denise Allyson Cole: Thanks very much for the question, MPP Pang.

As you know, the government did establish the student and family support offices—or, as we fondly call them, the SFSOs; we wouldn't be great public servants if there wasn't an acronym—in every district school board to strengthen accountability, transparency and responsiveness within the education system.

As of the start of September—the beginning of the new school year—all district school boards are required to have an SFSO in place to provide families with a clear and consistent process to raise concerns, seek information and receive support related to their child's education.

As I mentioned in my remarks, we did start with the boards that were under supervision, to be able to learn from those experiences before rolling it out across all school boards. We're finding that the offices do provide an additional way for families to get answers, navigate complex issues and access the information they need to support their child's educational journey. And the model is supported by consistent provincial service standards aligned with Policy/Program Memorandum 170, the school board communication with parents PPM. That helps to ensure a more consistent experience for families across the province.

Our experience with the first five SFSOs demonstrated that the offices can improve communication and provide valuable information about the issues families are experiencing. Between January and June of this year, the offices received more than 1,900 inquiries, with approximately 11% related to special education. And by creating a dedicated point of contact for families and collecting information on the themes and trends that are emerging from the inquiries, the offices are helping school boards

and the ministry better understand parent concerns and identify opportunities to strengthen the services and supports. That is consistent with the recommendations we received from the Auditor General.

I don't know if you want to chat about any of your experiences with them?

Mr. Ron Ferguson: Thanks for the question.

We always had mechanisms for parents to reach out to school board officials, but we noticed it wasn't always consistent—where parents reached out. We did not do a very good job in the past of tracking them globally; we did individually; within superintendents' departments, it was.

With the new student and family support office, we now have a better picture of the overall issues that are coming in.

The other thing that we've noticed is that it's a one-stop shop for parents now. I think MPPs will be able to attest that sometimes parents reached out to you, sometimes they reached out to MPs—

Ms. Lee Fairclough: They still do.

Mr. Ron Ferguson: I have had people send me emails, and they have had the Prime Minister of Canada in the c.c. line. When parents are trying to find supports, they reach out to whoever they think can help them. And now this is helping us be able to communicate to them.

To one of the MPPs' points there: Yes, the message hasn't gotten to all parents yet, but we're hopeful, as this rolls out. It's fairly early days, but we're starting to see more people knowing, "This is where we call," and then we can get them to the support. The Prime Minister or an MPP or even a trustee are not the ones who can help get your grade 11 student into that chemistry class; if you call the student and family support office, we can get you the guidance counsellor who can get you that support much faster. We do a better job of tracking that now, and so far we've been very happy with this department.

Mr. Billy Pang: Thank you for giving me that very detailed answer.

Since September, the ministry has been collecting monthly reports on parents' inquiries and response times. How would this information help school boards in responding to families and improving the services provided? Do you have some data on that?

Ms. Hilary Forgie-Resnick: I can very quickly speak to that.

Regarding children with special education needs, we've just started tracking in September, so I will note that it is only November. Approximately 6% of the inquiries that have come into the student family support offices have been related to children with special education needs. And what we've been able to identify so far, based on the number of requests that are coming in, is how we may want to further categorize them going forward, so we can understand the nature of the requests that are coming in, the types of supports that are needed, broadly, for students with special education needs and beyond students with special education needs. As we get further into gaining data from members of the public and we're able to do that analysis, it will help to further inform policy direction.

The Chair (Mr. Tom Rakocevic): There's 10 minutes remaining. MPP Singh Grewal.

Mr. Hardeep Singh Grewal: Thank you, Deputy Minister and the Peel, Catholic and Upper Canada school boards for being here today.

I'd like to focus my questions around student supports. Ensuring students receive supports based on their individual needs is very important, and the ministry emphasizes the importance of avoiding a one-size-fits-all approach to special education.

I just wanted to see if you could explain why maintaining flexibility in determining student supports is important, and how the current processes recognize the unique learning needs of each individual student.

Ms. Denise Allyson Cole: Thanks very much for the question.

I think it was in the first response to MPP Fraser's question—we do believe that special education decisions should be based on the individual strengths and needs of each student rather than on a predetermined set of criteria. As somebody who is great-aunt to a child with profound special education needs—her needs are very unique.

While Ontario's five categories of exceptionalities help identify students with special education needs, students may present learning needs in many different ways, and that's what we want to respond to—the unique needs of that individual student. A student with the same exceptionality, whether it's autism, various diagnoses or undiagnosed learning needs, can have very different support requirements. For this reason, the determining factor for the provision of special education programs and services is not a specific diagnosis—whether diagnosed or undiagnosed medical condition—but the individual student's assessed strengths and needs. The ministry's view is that student support should be tailored to the learner, recognizing that each student has unique, varying and diverse needs that require individualized support. Maintaining flexibility helps to ensure that students receive the supports they require rather than being limited by rigid eligibility criteria—so it's building in that flexibility and elasticity that individual responses need.

The ministry has indicated that it does not support the introduction of set criteria for determining supports because doing so could limit the ability of schools and school boards to respond appropriately to individual circumstances.

I invite any of my colleagues from the boards to speak to that.

Mr. Harjit Aujla: Thank you for that question. I think that is a really important question.

We have almost 140,000 students in our district, who come to us from a variety of different backgrounds, languages, ethnicities, capabilities—all the range. And I think it's really important that we ensure that each of our individual classrooms is able to provide effective supports.

In the PDSB, we really focus on tier 1 and tier 2 interventions that are able to effectively support a range of learners. But we know that there will be students where tier 1 and tier 2 are not effective and appropriate enough,

and for that we do have additional supports and measures that can come into the classroom and also be engaged within the structure itself. We have literacy intervention programs, math intervention programs that are designed explicitly to provide remedial support to build up those necessary skills that we know will enable students to find success.

When we talk very explicitly about special education, I think one of the vehicles that we use within the PDSB to really monitor the effectiveness of support that we provide to special education students is the individual education plan. There's a lot that goes into building that plan and monitoring it—

The Chair (Mr. Tom Rakocevic): Sorry, I have to now take us to a 15-minute recess. The bells are ringing, and we have to go vote.

You have five minutes and 39 seconds remaining on the clock.

Mr. Hardeep Singh Grewal: I'll follow up when we get back.

The committee recessed from 1511 to 1532.

The Chair (Mr. Tom Rakocevic): We are now resuming committee. We'll go back to MPP Grewal. You have five minutes and 39 seconds.

Mr. Hardeep Singh Grewal: Mr. Aujla, would you like to finish what you were saying, if you still remember your train of thought?

Mr. Harjit Aujla: Sure. I'll try my very best to jump back in. Thank you for that question.

I think we had just ended off speaking about the importance of IEPs. They really help to ground and maintain the integrity of programming for students with special education needs.

In addition to that, what we also rely upon is a collaborative, multidisciplinary approach where we engage the support of classroom teachers, speech-language pathologists, psychologists, school administrators as well as our central special education staff and other departmental staff.

Third, we also examine a range of student outcomes. We look at the ways in which our students are faring through report card data—how they're achieving against their individual education plans. We look at well-being data as well as graduation rates. There's a number of different factors that we take into consideration to ensure effective and ongoing programming and also the success of each individual student based upon learning portraits.

Finally, I would say that we take a quantitative and a qualitative measure to ensure the success of children within our region. Quantitatively, we monitor achievement credit accumulation—if you look at the secondary level, looking at students who are maintaining or acquiring 16 credits by the age of 16, which is a really important marker that we notice around the ability to graduate from high school in a timely way. In addition to that, we look at student success indicators and, qualitatively, we also gather information from our educators, our support personnel. Ultimately, probably the most important indicator is also the connections that we build with our families to round out that support.

Dr. Brendan Browne: Just further, to go back to the original question about the consistency, we recognize that consistency, in a lot of ways, is important across the province, especially as students transition in different parts of the province. But the idea that students have individual needs, individual education plans, and the ability to be flexible to be able to meet individual student needs, is hugely important when we do our work.

We also have to consider that when it comes to accommodations, we think about the Education Act, and we also think about the Ontario Human Rights Code. There's an expectation within the code that accommodations must be individualized. We take a look at this work in supporting one another, that one complements the other. That's why the flexibility and the importance of having an individualized support for individual needs is not only supported by the code and also in the students' best interest.

Mr. Hardeep Singh Grewal: I'm definitely pleased to hear about the flexible approach. As constituents talk to us, parents talk to us—one of the biggest concerns that parents bring to our table, as legislators, is how we are supporting students when it comes to their child's flexible needs. Not everybody needs the same approach. Everybody needs their unique way of teaching, and everyone has a different way of learning. I'm glad to hear these measures are being put in place to ensure that flexibility exists in the classroom.

I would like to just do a follow-up to what I asked earlier on how the existing identification, placement and review committee process helps ensure students receive supports based on their individual strengths and needs. After that, I will be sharing my time with one of my colleagues, if there's any left.

The Chair (Mr. Tom Rakocevic): Two minutes remaining.

Ms. Charmaine Perera: I'm happy to speak to that.

IPRC decisions really need to be very clear and transparent for parents, so that they are documented in a way that parents can see, educators can see and can build on in order to inform the IEPs and provide that unique and individual support and assessment—so whether that's, again, modifications or accommodations of whatever sort, as well as the appropriate placement for the student.

We, as a ministry, in October, also reminded all school boards of their existing obligations to document identification, placement and review committee identification and placement decisions. That's a requirement under O. Reg. 181/98. Clear documentation really demonstrates compliance as well to that regulation and forms a part of that larger record for the IEP.

Mr. Hardeep Singh Grewal: Chair, I believe we're probably up on time?

The Chair (Mr. Tom Rakocevic): There's 45 seconds.

Mr. Hardeep Singh Grewal: Well, in my last 45 to 30 seconds, Deputy Minister and your team, and Peel, Catholic and Upper Canada, thank you very much for your participation today.

The Chair (Mr. Tom Rakocevic): That concludes the first round of questions.

We are now moving to the second round of questions, beginning with the third party. MPP Fairclough, you have 20 minutes.

Ms. Lee Fairclough: I didn't get to say in my earlier session, thank you all for being here. I really appreciate you making the time for it.

Interjection.

Ms. Lee Fairclough: Yes, exactly. I'm saying it now.

I do have about nine questions for the next 20 minutes, if that can help to gauge the responses appropriately.

My first question is kind of at a higher level. The number of students with special education needs has grown by 7% since 2014-15 to now more than—that has seen the total increase in enrolment that has been at 4%. We've seen a larger growth in the need for special education. But based on the financial accountability estimates, the real provincial operating funding to school boards will decline next year and will decline again and again in the years after. From their estimates, we're at $15,074 per student in 2026-27, we're at $14,850 per student in 2027-28 and $14,775 per student in 2028-29.

I'm reading in this report—and we've had some discussion about this today—about the length of time for assessments by psychologists and speech-language assessments. Particularly at the TCDSB and the PDSB, 34% of students waited over a year for those assessments. Those students are waiting for the most appropriate supports almost a whole year.

So my question is twofold: How are you going to reduce the wait time with the reduced funding from the province to be able to do the assessments and meet those needs? Secondly, how are you going to ensure timely access to support an assessment regardless of the ability to pay? I do think there were some comments through the report around the reliance on private pay for assessments.

Dr. Brendan Browne: This is something that we've been working on for a while now. I've been a special education teacher. I was a superintendent of special education, a principal. My mom was a superintendent of special education. This has been work that we've been involved with for a long time. The idea of wait-lists and making sure that we're getting as timely an intervention as possible is something that we're always thoughtful about.

1540

In Toronto Catholic, when the Auditor General came in to do the work that they were doing, we—about five to six years ago, we were kind of embarking on a way in which we needed to change the way that we are looking at assessments, the way that we are looking at how our data is talking to each other, breaking down the silos in our structures. So about five years ago, we committed to doing this work.

And last year, in September 2025, we implemented a new platform that has paid off tremendously when it comes to your specific question around psych assessments. It's a platform called RISE. It's done by a company here in Ontario—a former student with special needs in Ontario. A lot of work has been around how we're getting our IEPs and our SEA claims and our behaviour plans—all together, we can see the big picture. And some of that comes with our psychological assessments. So what the implementation of this new platform for us—and again, we're about a year and four months into it at this point; so last year was the big rollout, and we're still rolling forward—has really allowed for is our department to take a holistic look across the system, because we really didn't have that system-wide lens available; we had different wait-lists in different areas of the city.

What happens now is that our senior manager from the psych department would take a look at all of the wait-lists across the city, triaging, looking at where our greatest needs are, sometimes even moving some of our team into different areas to be addressing wait-lists, because we want to make sure that we're reducing the amount of time students are on it. We are at the point now where we still have some historical ones to get through, but we should be completed by the end of this June in terms of the ones that are on the historical list. We know this takes time. But we would recognize—

Ms. Lee Fairclough: That's great. It sounds to me like the wait-lists will hopefully be reduced and/or you'll be very efficient in making sure those who might have higher needs get access to assessments more quickly.

Dr. Brendan Browne: Certainly, the Auditor General report was suggesting no longer than a year, and we do think that's a very reasonable target for us.

Ms. Lee Fairclough: But are you worried about having the finances to be able to meet the needs once you've done the assessment?

Dr. Brendan Browne: In terms of the wait-lists themselves and being able to get the team out to see them, we've seen great benefits in what we've done already with streamlining the ways in which we're taking a look at them. We're using our existing processes and doing the work better in order to be able to make those reductions to be able to get those wait-lists down.

Ms. Lee Fairclough: So you think that families will have to rely less on paying privately to do the assessments with the new model?

Dr. Brendan Browne: We recognize the financial impact for families if they have to pay on their own. We do think that there will be—and we're committed to less of a wait time. We're already seeing the results after a year and four months, so we are optimistic about our way forward as a result of some of these commitments we've made.

Ms. Lee Fairclough: I'm going to keep moving on. My next set of questions is really around—it's a combination. The section under recommendation 8 about unfilling EA absences caught my attention, so the next set of questions is really around some of the differences in the ratios that we're seeing to support kids across the different boards.

I'm going to focus first on the students per special education teacher; that ranged from anywhere from eight to 76 at the TCDSB, 10 to 78 at the UCDSB, and 13 to 70 at the PDSB, even between schools that had similar needs.

One PDSB school had 105 special education students and got the same number of special education teachers as a school with 33, and the PDSB allocated these teachers solely on mainstream enrolment.

So my questions, first of all, to the school boards: What do you think is an acceptable student-to-teacher ratio for special education? Why does the ratio differ so significantly from school to school? And why are special education teachers not allocated more evenly across the schools, based on that need?

Dr. Brendan Browne: I'll start.

At the elementary level, it's fairly clear, transparent and consistent. It's in our collective agreement. For every 135 students, there's one special education teacher. So it's actually not even reliant on being in special education specifically. That number, I believe, is—

Ms. Lee Fairclough: Why is that so different, then?

Dr. Brendan Browne: It's part of what's in our local collective agreement.

Something that I actually had a chance to speak with before the report was published—we had great conversations back and forth with the Auditor General's office—was that students dictate our needs. The students kind of tell us the needs that they have when that comes to educational assistant support or the supports that are required. So you might have some students with the same identification at one school with different supports because of what the needs are compared to students in another school. It might be the same identification, but how they would present what their actual, specific needs are would be different. So we try to take a specific, student-by-student approach when it comes to understanding how to allocate resources.

Ms. Lee Fairclough: So how do you know, as a leader, whether you've got the right number?

Dr. Brendan Browne: The right number in—

Ms. Lee Fairclough: The right ratio, then.

I worked in health care for so many years. You always look to certain kinds of standards to guide—"Okay, are we on the right track for the quality of care here?"

If the answer is, "We just meet the need," how do we have any sense of what an approximate appropriate ratio would be?

Dr. Brendan Browne: I gave you the elementary numbers as they're in our CA.

We also have our congregated classes, in which we have a teacher with a certain number of students in the class, also with an educational assistant. That's transparent across different schools as well.

Ms. Lee Fairclough: Well, maybe I'll move there, because I also think that we see a lot of variation on the ratio of student to EA. I understand that some of the needs might change, but if I looked at each of the three TCDSB schools, there were 14 high-needs students, and the ratios were 1.6, 4.7 and seven students per EA. That's quite a bit of variability. And then we hear the stories about when an EA is absent—they're often unfilled, right? The stats were, I think, 49% to 72% of the time they went unfilled. Then the third input that I think that we heard is that when an EA isn't there for a specific student, sometimes that student is asked not to come to school that day.

What's your sense of the ratio difference, and how do we really get at this issue of not filling in the EAs? There didn't seem to be many actions planned for that.

Dr. Brendan Browne: For the first part, I would go back to something I've said before, in that if you've met one student with autism, you've met one student with autism. Students have different needs, and their needs will dictate how our staffing supports will go into place.

When it comes to our educational assistants, we have a specific hiring strategy. We've been increasing the number of EAs we've been hiring for our supply list—our "casual list," we would call it—and that has been going up steadily.

We've seen a good increase in our fill rates from year over year. That has gone up by about 5% from last year to this year—at about 58% to 60% last year, but so far, in September, October and the beginning of November, our fill rate is around 89%. We're trying to have more people on our list.

We're also getting out to a lot of recruiting fairs, getting out to the colleges to make sure that we're talking to those schools that have programs—Durham College, Conestoga, Northern, Niagara—that we're really present and we're really there at these to try to encourage people to come to work with us and to try to bolster our supply list.

The Chair (Mr. Tom Rakocevic): Nine minutes remaining.

Ms. Lee Fairclough: Thank you.

It certainly is an important area for us to get ahead of.

The last question in this category is really for the ministry. Again, measured against the PDSB's own staffing methodology, schools were short a net 51 EAs in 2024-25, and 109 of 217 elementary schools—50%—were understaffed. Then the shortfall came from adjustments to remain within its EA budget.

So does the ministry track how many boards staff EAs below their own assessed need for budget reasons? The ministry said it will provide staffing guidance subject to any applicable collective agreement provisions. But when will that guidance be issued, and what does that caveat mean in practice?

Ms. Denise Allyson Cole: In terms of the caveat around—

Ms. Lee Fairclough: Yes.

Ms. Denise Allyson Cole: I think because we're in the midst of collective—

Ms. Lee Fairclough: I understand that, but I really worry—some of what I worry about in all these conversations is, we're losing the focus on the kids and making sure that we've got the right mix of educators in the classroom. So that's kind of at the root of my question.

Ms. Denise Allyson Cole: One of the things we did start to do this year was collecting the annual staff fulfillment rate data to strengthen that oversight capacity and better understand the impact that it is having on student learning—agreeing, at the end of the day, it is around the students and the kids. We don't want anybody falling through

the cracks. One of the things the minister has been challenging the ministry at is being able to better answer the question, how do we know? How do we know that school boards are doing what's in the PPM? How do we know that they're fulfilling their obligations? So it's really strengthening and stepping into that space of the stewardship role that the ministry should be playing.

1550

It's probably not a smart thing for a deputy to say, but I will: The ministry has a lot of data, but I often say that we're data rich and insight poor. So how do we use the data that we have to be able to give us the insights that we need to be able to just plan better? To understand the impacts that are—having to be able to identify trends. I often say that part of our role as public servants is to be able to bring the future into focus so that we're able to do that longer-term planning as well.

Ms. Lee Fairclough: I'm happy to hear that. I'm a person who loves data too.

And it does say here that you have a plan to begin collecting staff fulfillment rates.

Ms. Denise Allyson Cole: We've started.

Ms. Lee Fairclough: Okay, that's good to hear. I think that's really important.

I will say we're talking about specific boards in this, but when I was travelling in the north this summer, I heard a lot of stories, even of a grade 8 class, for a full year, not having a qualified educator. And I think about special education layered on top of that—it's worrying. So I think it's good to hear that we're focusing in on some of the data.

Will the staffing fulfillment rate data being collected distinguish between qualified versus unqualified replacements and track when special education needs students are asked to stay home or change learning environments due to an unfulfilled absence?

Ms. Hilary Forgie-Resnick: We're looking at all different data points as we start to refine where this is going to take us. I just wanted to flag that understanding that the Auditor General found that absenteeism and unfilled absences, particularly amongst educational assistants, limit access to consistent supports and can have an impact on classroom attendance for students with special education needs as well.

In addition to the workforce data collection, which we will dig into and—I think, as some of my answers previously have been—we're going to further refine as we go along, I think one of the things, to the deputy's point, that I would piggyback on is, it's not a static state of what we may have done previously, which is, "We're just going to collect this data, and now we have it"—

Ms. Lee Fairclough: Right; let's use it.

Ms. Hilary Forgie-Resnick: Correct—it is, what is the data that we're collecting, what is it giving us, what can we do with the data and then, moving from there, how can we use this going forward, whether it's to inform policy or program. So I think that's kind of a more thoughtful piece in terms of data collection that we're looking into in general.

I also just wanted to highlight that there is another piece in terms of strengthening attendance management practices that we currently have under the attendance support program policy that we had in place, which is intended also to be used by school boards, and they were all required to publicly post them by June 2026. It's a PPM that was put in place—

Ms. Lee Fairclough: Okay, yes.

Ms. Hilary Forgie-Resnick: Should I go on a bit?

Ms. Lee Fairclough: Yes, I am the mom of a teenager, so I know all about this—the absence policy.

Ms. Hilary Forgie-Resnick: Exactly. Not the assessment one—but to that end, it's meant to provide individualized supports.

Ms. Lee Fairclough: Thanks very much.

I'm just going to jump in here. One last thing on the EA absenteeism: What is the plan to actually address the high rate of EA absenteeism—so that's including workplace injury, stress, increasingly complex student needs. We talked about ratios and having enough to be part of the solution, but what about getting at the root of some of the high absenteeism rate?

Dr. Brendan Browne: Just a couple for you, as an example: When we put in the attendance support program, it's not in relation to your son's attendance at school; it's a program that's meant to be supportive. When there's a certain number of absences, it triggers an outreach from the board in terms of the outreach saying, "How can we help you? Is there anything going on that we need to know about?" So that's a part of it. We've had that in place now for the past six months, and we're seeing some really good engagement so far. It might even speak to some of the data I provided you in my last answer about seeing some of the increases. We also have a robust family assistance support plan—

Ms. Lee Fairclough: My question, though, is more about EA absenteeism and some of the workplace injuries.

Dr. Brendan Browne: Right, so that's kind of what I'm referring to as well. EAs would be part of that—so employee family assistance, ways in which we can be supporting them to be present in school, whether there are things going on with the family that we can help with. There are ways in which we're trying to continue to engage and support our staff to know how much we value them.

The Chair (Mr. Tom Rakocevic): Under two minutes remaining.

Ms. Hilary Forgie-Resnick: The attendance support program is to manage all staff within a school board. It applies to teachers, educational assistants and paraprofessionals, and it's meant to provide them supports and identify root causes for why staff may be absent.

Ms. Lee Fairclough: Can you share with me one of the root causes that you've learned from that data?

Ms. Hilary Forgie-Resnick: I actually think one of my board colleagues may be better to say what they've seen coming out of some of the assistance programs they have in place.

Ms. Lee Fairclough: Specifically, for EAs—just an example.

Mr. Harjit Aujla: I don't have that specific data with me.

Ms. Lee Fairclough: That's okay.

Mr. Harjit Aujla: I'd be happy to comment on the impact that that program has had.

We have seen a considerable change in absenteeism overall in the PDSB as a result of the attendance program that has been put in place and actually has been in place now, I think, about two years. Our fill rates are one thing. We've also engaged, I think, extensive hiring behind the scenes, so that our fill rates remain really healthy and good. But in addition to the fill rates being healthy, what we've also noticed is a significant decline, year over year, in the number of staff who are absent. Some of that is due to the impact of this work.

Ms. Lee Fairclough: I'll just quickly ask my last question. We'll see if I can get them all in.

What controls will be put in place to ensure students are not sent home or removed from their learning environments without proper documentation, parental notification and return-to-school planning? And will the ministry monitor and follow up with school boards to ensure these requirements are being followed?

Ms. Hilary Forgie-Resnick: As I referred to earlier, we currently do not have a policy in place that encompasses the informal or soft exclusions that we have discussed on a number of occasions. We appreciate the fact that there is some work that—

The Chair (Mr. Tom Rakocevic): Thank you. That's time. We're past time.

Now we're moving on to the second and final round for MPP Pasma.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: I'm going to continue on this conversation about absences, but with a little bit of a different angle.

I would like to think that we can all agree that our kids should be safe when they're at school. We also have a legal responsibility to provide a safe working environment for the adults who work in our schools. Teachers and education workers I've spoken to have said that the number one thing that we could do to reduce violence is to increase the number of caring adults in our schools.

This particular audit flagged a concern about rising rates of violence. The Auditor General's report on the TDSB from two years ago noted that across the province, the number of violent incidents had increased 114% since 2017. What this audit makes clear is it becomes a bit of a self-reinforcing cycle, where workers are off because of high rates of violence leading to injuries and burnout. That, in turn, means that schools end up being shorthanded, which means an increase in the number of unmet needs, and unmet needs are a primary cause of violence.

This question is to the ministry. Would you agree that if workers are experiencing injuries on the job because of working conditions, an attendance management program is not going to resolve that?

Ms. Denise Allyson Cole: I think an attendance management program is part of the response, but it's not a yes-or-no answer.

In the context of special education, I think we need to understand how we're defining violence.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: Okay, but I'm asking about injuries, not about violence generally. So if a worker has been injured, how is an attendance management program addressing that situation?

1600

Ms. Denise Allyson Cole: Again, it's not a yes-or-no. I'm not going to sit here and say, "Yes. People should be working in an environment where they're being injured." We don't want that. But it's also understanding what is causing the violence that we're seeing. What are the responses that we need to put in place to address those things?

Ms. Chandra Pasma: But why would that be an attendance management program that polices the workers instead of listening to the workers who are already saying that the number one thing that we could do to reduce violence in schools is to have more caring adults in our schools? Why would we have to manage every individual worker who has had to go on leave because of an injury, instead of just listening to workers generally and working in collaboration with them?

Ms. Denise Allyson Cole: Because it is not just a one or not something else—it's the complexity of the issues that we're dealing with, you know? And attendance management—we're hearing, we're seeing the results of some of those things. But nobody is sitting here and saying that is the only response that is required.

I go out and visit schools. I sit down and talk to some of the workers in the school, as deputy minister, so that I'm understanding the complexities of what is happening.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: Okay, but imagine if you're a miner and you're being injured by falling rocks. Nobody would say, "There should be an attendance management policy for you, the worker." We would say, "The joint health and safety committee, the employer, has a responsibility to identify what has happened here and ensure that no rocks fall on workers." So, why, when it happens in an education setting, are we suddenly policing the individual worker, reaching out—as was described through the attendance support program—to say, "What happened? What's going on at home? Why is what's happening in your personal life leading to you being kicked or bitten at school?" To me, that should not be part of the solution. The solution is broader-based, but that should not be part of it.

Ms. Denise Allyson Cole: With all due respect, MPP Pasma, nobody is sitting here and saying that we're policing education workers.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: But that's what the attendance support program is. You are reaching out to say, "Why are you not here? What can we change about you that will allow you to be here?"

Ms. Denise Allyson Cole: In the Ontario public service, we do that because we recognize that workers are

complex. We recognize that people have differing needs, and it's about supporting the employees as well—it's not an either/or; it's what our appropriate response is.

As I've said before, attendance management is one part of a response. It is not the only response.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: Well, I would encourage you to meet with teachers and education workers, because I don't think that they feel that—

Ms. Denise Allyson Cole: I do that. I'm out in the school every week.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: —it is listening to them to have an attendance support program interrogate them about their lives.

I'm moving on to the issue of exclusions—and I appreciated what MPP Fairclough said about bringing it back to the kids, because when we're talking about exclusions, it's not just an inconvenience for the day. It's not just a statistic. This is incredibly disruptive to kids' lives.

In my riding, there was a family who ended up in a shelter—Arizona's family—because she didn't have EA support at school, so her parents weren't able to work.

We all know what happened to Max Simao because he was not able to be at school.

So it's incredibly important that we get this right. And I have to say, it's really disappointing that there isn't any plan from the ministry, that no work has been done.

I moved a motion in 2023, developed with the Ontario Autism Coalition, for a plan to track all exclusions, including soft exclusions.

You say that the ministry is going to work on that. When is that work going to start, and when can we expect some kind of outcome from that work?

Ms. Denise Allyson Cole: We have started to work.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: So when can we expect that tracking to be in place for families?

Ms. Hilary Forgie-Resnick: We have planned to have a policy put in place, and we need to have a consultation on the policy. The policy will determine whether or not and how they are tracked.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: So what's the timeline for that policy to be in place?

Ms. Hilary Forgie-Resnick: We would hope to have something in place within the not-too-distant future. Unfortunately, I don't have a specific timeline to share with you today.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: Not-too-distant-future, like in this school year? Not-too-distant future, before this decade is over?

Ms. Hilary Forgie-Resnick: Unfortunately, I don't have a specific time frame to share with you today, but it is work that's actively under way.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: These kids' childhoods are short. A few years is a long time in the life of a child, and we've already lost a few years here. So I think it's incredibly urgent that this work happens swiftly.

Moving on: The ministry rejected recommendation 6, in which the Auditor General said we should at least be doing a better job of tracking and collecting data on wait times for assessments. What you said in the report in response to that and what we've heard here today is that you rejected that recommendation because students with special needs can access supports and services without that assessment and diagnosis—except that I hear all the time from parents that they can't access it without that diagnosis and without that assessment. This is coming from parents around the province. I think that there is a disconnect here. That is exactly the sort of thing that you would want a survey of parents to be able to tell you, but that's another recommendation that you rejected.

And in just the past year, the ministry has placed eight boards under supervision. Parents can't even watch the special education advocacy committee meetings online. They've lost the voice of trustees. In other boards, the voice of trustees has been significantly limited as well in terms of being able to act on the concerns raised by parents. We've eliminated the school climate surveys.

I was happy to hear that the family and student support office in your board is working well, but I've heard from staff in other boards that it's basically an Excel spreadsheet tracking what phone calls are coming into the board's switchboard. It's not a good way of discovering what is happening systematically across the system.

So why wouldn't you just open that door for parents to share that feedback? If we really want to get it right, if we really want to know what's happening, why not just survey parents? What's the roadblock here? What's the obstacle?

The Chair (Mr. Tom Rakocevic): There's 10 minutes remaining.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: It's a question to the ministry, not to the boards.

Ms. Hilary Forgie-Resnick: I'm happy to speak to that.

I think, MPP Pasma, what we've talked about here a few times, and openly, fairly admittedly, is that the ministry has been really great at collecting stuff or having policies around stuff without doing the substantive work in order to do the analysis and better understand it. The student and family support offices are a first step in that direction. I appreciate the timeliness, and I can certainly appreciate, as a parent, the timeliness when you have children who are going through the system. The ministry is making a concerted effort to try to get the information we need to provide the appropriate policies and programs, to provide support. I appreciate what you're saying and the timeliness of that, but this is a big machine—

Ms. Chandra Pasma: It's not even the timeliness, though, right? If you are depending solely on what comes via a phone call or email to the student and family support office, you are not identifying all the problems. There are many people who do not know that that is a way that they could report something, or who are just so exhausted and overwhelmed from what they feel like is fighting the system that they are not going to do that.

You are missing out on the opportunity to know what is happening if you are not going to parents directly and saying, "Please tell us what is happening." And when you said you have lots of data—that's great, but you don't have the data of going directly to parents and saying, "Share

your experiences with us. We want you to be partners in fixing the system." In fact, it looks like you're trying to close every avenue that parents have of providing input into the system.

So how hard is it to simply administer a survey to parents? I don't understand what the roadblock is. You've got a department full of public officials. It can't be that hard to put a survey together and send it out via school boards to parents and then have somebody collate and analyze the data.

Ms. Hilary Forgie-Resnick: I appreciate your point. I think that there is work in that space taking place in many different ways—perhaps nothing specific, right now, to children with special education needs. But there is an avenue, and I think I spoke about it earlier when I mentioned that we're refining what we get through the student and family support offices in terms of getting a better understanding of what those inquiries are so we can go forward and determine that maybe there is an area where we need to do more extended outreach or there is something that's surfacing in terms of a trend.

1610

Ms. Chandra Pasma: Another thing that I hear from parents, including one I spoke to just this Saturday, is that they're being told that their child can't get special education support because they don't meet the criteria that are laid out under the Education Act. Your response in the Auditor General's report and here today has been, "Well, it shouldn't matter what the criteria are; it should matter what the needs are." My question is, then, why bother having criteria? If we know the Auditor General has done a good job of laying out how inadequate the criteria are, parents are saying the criteria are limiting them, if you don't want to fix the criteria because you say it shouldn't matter, then why not get rid of the criteria?

Ms. Charmaine Perera: I'll speak to that a little bit. I think when we're saying "criteria," you're referring to the exceptionalities, and they are intentionally designed to be broad to address a wide range, understanding that autism is there, and that is a diagnosis. I think that is where maybe there is a bit of a disconnect with parents and families when they hear that. But they should be broad enough, and the expectation is that they are broad enough to encompass any learning needs.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: Well, I will tell you again that what I hear from parents is that they're not broad enough. Again, that's the sort of thing where, if you had a survey of parents, you would be able to identify that there was a systemic issue and be able to address it instead of closing down avenues for parents' voices.

One of the core principles of a publicly funded education system is that we have public funding so that every child benefits from a high-quality education, regardless of where they live, regardless of how much money their parents make.

Wouldn't you agree that a scenario where some kids get help faster because their parents can pay for an assessment, while other kids have to wait or just never get it because they can't pay—that that undermines the principle of publicly funded education?

Ms. Denise Allyson Cole: I'm struggling, because we're public servants who operate in a broader context of a government system. We're here because, yes, as I've said earlier in my remarks and so forth, we want to make sure that every child, no matter where they are in the province, has the opportunity to reach their full potential.

I lived in Ontario housing. I'm a product of the public education system. Without that public education system, I wouldn't be sitting here as Deputy Minister of Education.

So, yes, we're doing what we can because we want to make sure that every child, no matter where they live in the province, has the opportunity to meet their full potential. But as public servants, as you know, we operate within a broader government context. We look at data. We look at research. We develop policy. We take things to cabinet for decision-making. We give our minister our best advice.

The minister, I know, is out and about in the province. I, as deputy, feel that it's part of my responsibility to get out there and talk to the parents you talk about. I may not be surveying parents, but I meet with parents, I meet with students, I meet with kids. That's how we get the information we need to be able to develop policies to make the system a better place.

So, no, I'm not going to sit here and say yes or no, because we do what we do because we want this province to be a better place to be able to meet the needs of all students, no matter where in the province they live.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: I'm certainly not questioning the motivations of anybody at this table today. But there were quite a few things in what you said in that answer, so can you clarify: Are you saying that this is the result of a policy choice being made by cabinet and the minister, or are you saying this is the result of your conversations with people around the province?

Ms. Denise Allyson Cole: I'm sitting here and saying that we have a system where, yes, the needs of students with special education needs are getting more complex. We're seeing the number of students with special education needs growing, and as I said in my remarks—

Ms. Chandra Pasma: I'm really sorry. I'm going to reclaim my time, because it's not actually answering the question that I asked, and I only have two and a half minutes and more questions.

Finally, to the very patient school board officials: I do have some questions for you. I'm going to start with the Peel District School Board and the Toronto Catholic District School Board.

This audit came out after you were placed under supervision. Your boards both accepted recommendation 12 of the Auditor General, that school boards update exclusion policies and ensure that all instances of exclusions are appropriately documented. I'm wondering if, since the report came out, your supervisor has issued any directives or instructions to operationalize these recommendations.

Dr. Brendan Browne: I did speak to this already, because I mentioned some of the things we've put in place since, when it comes to the work we're doing with our principals—

Ms. Chandra Pasma: Right, but was that the result of a directive from the supervisor?

The Chair (Mr. Tom Rakocevic): Two minutes remaining.

Dr. Brendan Browne: We do all of our work in conversation with the supervisors, so they'd be very much aware of our work moving forward and supportive of that reinforcement and of the fact that superintendents need to be involved in such decisions and that we're reinforcing this at the principal meetings.

Our data continues to tell us that the incidents are quite low when it comes to exclusions.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: Thank you.

Mr. Harjit Aujla: Thank you for the question.

I would echo the sentiments made by my colleague as well—that these decisions are in consultation with the supervisor.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: Would you be willing to submit in writing to the committee any directives that the supervisor has provided to the board on exclusions?

Mr. Harjit Aujla: I would have to take that back.

Dr. Brendan Browne: Sorry, can you just—

Ms. Chandra Pasma: Would you be willing to provide in writing to the committee any directives that the supervisor has provided on exclusions?

Dr. Brendan Browne: We'll take that back.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: Thank you.

To the Upper Canada District School Board: You're a smaller board. The ministry accepted recommendation 4, which calls for school boards to conduct an analysis of the shift towards inclusive special education. I'm wondering, if the ministry gives that directive, what resources would a board like yours require in order to be able to conduct that analysis successfully?

Mr. Ron Ferguson: Thanks for the question.

I think if we were given that directive, we'd be able to do that in-house. We're well-staffed to be able to conduct something of that nature if we were asked to do it.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: You mentioned that you reduced wait times, five years ago, for assessments. What did you do that worked?

Mr. Ron Ferguson: We started that work five years ago, and we prioritized it. To go back to what you said a little bit earlier there about how it should be the same around the province: When we're in a rural setting, like we are, it's not just a matter of whether or not people have the money to go and get those assessments; there's just no one to even do them in a lot of the communities. Every board has different priorities, but part of our focus on that was due to the rural nature. These families couldn't go anywhere. It might be an hour and a half drive before you could see someone. So we made that a priority. We increased funding towards that and made sure that this is something that we worked towards. I know my colleagues have said they plan to do the same and have been working on that as well.

The Chair (Mr. Tom Rakocevic): Sorry, we're at time.

We'll now move to the government side on the second and final round of questioning. MPP Kanapathi.

Mr. Logan Kanapathi: Thank you for being here and making your presentations. I have to especially thank you for the great work you do for the special-needs children; it's very, very important. Peel region—I know Archana is here; I know that girl. Thank you for the great work you do.

The Auditor General raised concerns about whether the shift towards more inclusive classrooms has not been properly evaluated. That's a very, very important concern.

The minister has since completed the 10-year provincial analysis of special education placement trends. Please explain what this work involved and how it will help school boards make better decisions for students.

Ms. Charmaine Perera: I'm happy to respond to your question.

Ministry policy does not direct school boards to move to models where students are only placed in regular classrooms. Sometimes that is called an inclusive model. There are five placement model options available to all school boards; three of them are in a regular classroom, two of them are in special education classrooms or self-contained classrooms.

Looking at that trend line that you're asking about, over a 10-year period, it did show a growth in students placed in regular classrooms with indirect support; it moved from 42.1% in 2015-16 to 54.2% in 2025-26.

1620

Mr. Logan Kanapathi: How will the ministry ensure that decisions about special education placement are based on what is actually working for the students and improving their educational outcomes?

Ms. Charmaine Perera: The ministry's position is that placement decisions should be guided by individual student outcomes and not predetermined. The ministry's data folks have looked at a methodology to look at the placement data related to student outcome data, and that would include things like the Education Quality and Accountability Office assessment results, or EQAO results; the report cards; credit accumulation; and graduation rates. Recently, the ministry has begun that work to look at that and analyze it against outcome data—so, placement against outcome.

Subject to the results of that analysis, the ministry will begin using the information to help support school boards to do their own school-level analysis and improve service delivery and resource allocation. School boards will be required to submit their findings to the ministry by June 2027.

The Chair (Mr. Tom Rakocevic): MPP Smith.

Mr. David Smith: I'd like to thank the committee for their presentations. I'm happy and delighted that I know some of the familiar faces in the room.

In October, the ministry issued a direction to school boards reinforcing requirements for identification, placement and review committees. Can you explain how this direction will strengthen accountability and ensure placement decisions reflect the individual needs of students?

Ms. Denise Allyson Cole: I can take that one. This is one where the ministry did accept the Auditor General's recommendation, and we do recognize and fundamentally believe that stronger documentation practices can indeed improve transparency and accountability for students and families.

In October, the ministry issued a communication to all school boards reinforcing their existing obligations under O. Reg. 181/98 to properly document IPRC identification and placement decisions, and reminding boards of the five placement options that are available to them through the IPRC process. The process is designed to ensure that decisions are based on individual students' strengths and needs, and the IPRCs are required to review relevant information, describe the students' strengths and needs, determine whether the students' should be identified as exceptional and make placement decisions based on that information. Before placing a student in a special education class, the IPRC must first consider whether the student can be appropriately supported in a regular classroom.

By reinforcing the existing requirements, the ministry believes that we are helping to ensure that school boards are applying the process consistently and that placement decisions are being clearly documented, and that they're evidence-based and focused on meeting the needs of the individual student rather than applying a one-size-fits-all approach.

Mr. David Smith: Can you tell me how clearer documentation requirements will help parents better understand the decisions being made about their children's education?

Ms. Charmaine Perera: I'm happy to speak to that one.

I think I mentioned this before, but I'd like to reiterate that clear documentation of the IPRC identification and placement decisions demonstrates compliance. They form that part of the larger record for educators who develop the IEPs. It documents a transparent record for student learning needs—their strengths and their challenges—the evidence used to make that determination and, where a placement is to a special education classroom, the reasons for that placement.

The Chair (Mr. Tom Rakocevic): MPP Dixon.

Ms. Jess Dixon: The Auditor General raised concerns about assessment wait times. The ministry has emphasised that students can access special education programs and services without a professional assessment or formal diagnosis. Can you explain why this distinction is important for students and families?

Ms. Charmaine Perera: I'm happy to start us off.

Every student—including students with special education needs—should have the supports they need to succeed in school in Ontario. Students do not have to wait for a professional assessment in order to get the supports that they need, to receive them. That is important because student supports should be based on the student's individual learning strengths and needs.

A professional assessment is an absolutely useful tool, as we discussed earlier, that can inform accommodations and modifications. However, it is not the only tool available to educators or to the IPRC. They certainly look at other assessments and use their own and educator professional judgment and experience as well. They look at their observations of the student in class. They consider—parents often speak about how the child learns at home—presentations, comprehension checks. And where needed, school boards have psychologists available—they have school teams available that educators and the IPRCs, as well, can work with, in order to understand what a student might need and that they can put in place without professional assessment immediately, and then any supports are adjusted as needed.

Ms. Jess Dixon: How does that allow the school to respond to the student's learning needs while families are still waiting for an assessment?

Ms. Hilary Forgie-Resnick: I'm happy to speak to that one.

To echo what Charmaine has said, there are a number of different supports that school boards can put in place. The other thing that having supports in place initially allows for school boards to do is to determine how staffing allocations might work best in this space. We've discussed some of the pieces related to staff absenteeism and how that can impact students in the classroom, as well. So when you have the supports put in place quickly, without having to wait for a formal assessment, it allows for school boards to determine where to best place their resources that they may have in order to strengthen workforce capacity and oversight and the impact on student learning.

I'd just like to speak a little bit, in a related space, to some of the pieces that we're doing around the workforce capacity area, which also helps to support having consistency in the classroom, which can help to support having student supports in place.

One of the things that we're looking to do is to move teachers into the classroom faster. Legislation has recently passed that would shorten the initial teacher training time to 12 consecutive months. A shortened amount of time means that the teachers are entering the classroom sooner. One of the requirements of the new teacher induction training program is that they must take a level of special education training. So more qualified teachers with more special education training in that space—that allows more staff to be in the place to do some of those initial assessments that we're talking about, not needing to necessarily be on a wait-list in order to get students the supports that they need in a timely fashion, and to have the capacity to have people in the classroom with the students.

The Chair (Mr. Tom Rakocevic): Nine minutes remaining. MPP Rosenberg.

MPP Bill Rosenberg: My question is again to the deputy minister.

The Auditor General identified inconsistencies in how individual education plans are developed and implemented. I know, being from Algoma–Manitoulin in northern Ontario—I have 56 small communities and the distances are hours in between, so it's a real challenge, and I know the challenge for the ministry to do this is incredible.

1630

The ministry has introduced a mandatory professional activity day focused specifically on special education and IEPs. Can you explain how this initiative directly responds to the Auditor General's concerns?

Ms. Hilary Forgie-Resnick: I'm happy to take that one.

I think that I can say safely that the ministry agrees with the recommendation from the Auditor General in this case that educators should have the knowledge and skills that are needed to support students with special education needs, and that we're continuing to invest in professional learning across the board. As I was just talking about, some of those capacity-building opportunities, professional activity days, play an important role in supporting ongoing educator learning and professional growth. There's a number that school boards get per year, and the ministry mandates three of those professional learning day activities that must take place.

For the 2026-27 school year, the ministry has introduced special education and individual education plans as a mandatory topic for professional activity days. The topic was introduced to strengthen educator training capacity in supporting students with special education needs and to promote more consistent implementation of individual education plans across the province. This will help to ensure that educators have dedicated time to strengthen their knowledge and skills in supporting students with special education needs. The training supports teachers in implementing effective instructional strategies, accommodations and evidence-based practices that will help students with special education needs participate, learn and succeed alongside their peers. The ministry has released province-wide expectations and supporting resources to help ensure a more consistent understanding of individual education plan requirements across the province.

As of October, the majority of the school boards in the province have actually scheduled these professional activity days to take place before November 30 of this year. It covers off Ontario's 14 provincial individual education plan standards, as well as the individual education plan development, implementation, progress monitoring, family engagement, ongoing review and how to update the plans. By focusing not only on creating the plans but on how they're implemented in classrooms, the training helps to equip teachers to make accommodations available to students, to monitor student progress and adjust strategies where needed to support success. As more qualified teachers get into the classroom sooner, this ensures educators continue to build expertise in special education through mandatory annual professional learning to help maintain a strong focus on supporting students with special education needs, fostering inclusive environments and addressing workforce needs

The ministry also supports professional learning through targeted investments in other areas, including special education additional qualification courses, training for principals and vice-principals, and specialized learning opportunities delivered through organizations such as the Geneva Centre for Autism and the Learning Disabilities Association of Ontario.

MPP Bill Rosenberg: It's encouraging to see that 73 of the 76 school boards have scheduled this mandatory learning already.

The ministry has also begun collecting samples of the IEPs from school boards for review. How will this additional oversight help ensure plans are not just being completed but are actually meeting provincial standards and supporting student learning?

Ms. Charmaine Perera: I will take that one.

In October, we did ask for sample IEPs from a representative sample of school boards, and we've asked for 26 from each of them. That's a rather large number, and it's because of course the ministry doesn't have actual IEPs of actual children, so we have made sure to ask for them so that we get at least one for each exceptionality—some that are in the elementary panel, some that are in the secondary panel, making sure that we have some that are students who are on an alternative curriculum, as well as students who have gone through the IPRC process, as well as students who have not, so that we can really gain a good understanding of what is working well and being done well in IEPs and what is not. The ministry expects to receive those by the end of this month. It will take the school boards some time to pull those together. Because, of course, there are privacy concerns, we have asked them to redact those. We'll assess them against the provincial IEP standards by April.

Then, we will be taking the findings from that look at the IEPs, and we will be looking at what guidance we can provide to school boards, which we will do for the beginning of the 2027-28 school year.

MPP Bill Rosenberg: That's great news. Thank you.

The Chair (Mr. Tom Rakocevic): MPP Pang.

Mr. Billy Pang: Mr. Chair, how much time do I have?

The Chair (Mr. Tom Rakocevic): You have three minutes left.

Mr. Billy Pang: That's long enough.

The Auditor General highlighted the impacts that staff absence has had on students with special education needs especially. What steps is the ministry taking to better understand these staffing challenges and ensure school boards are able to provide consistent supports?

Ms. Hilary Forgie-Resnick: I'm happy to take that one.

As we've discussed a number of times today, students with special education needs benefit from consistent access to qualified educators and trained staff who can support their learning and well-being.

School boards are responsible at the local level for staffing, hiring, attendance management and staff fulfill-

ment decisions. To strengthen the oversight of workforce capacity and its impact on student learning, the ministry has started this year to collect staff fulfillment rate data. The first provincial results won't likely be available until March 2028, but the intention is to use this data to inform us where there are gaps in terms of staffing and how we may better determine what staffing looks like in those spaces, and to help boards determine what staffing looks like in those spaces as well. It will help strengthen our understanding of the capacity of the workforce and what its impacts are on student learning.

The ministry does currently collect and analyze annual sick leave data to monitor absenteeism trends across the sector and continues to monitor workforce capacity across the education system.

We've already touched on the fact that we're looking at ways to get teachers into the classroom faster, in terms of providing support. The other thing that we have introduced is the staff attendance support program. This is a policy we've talked about previously, but I'll go in a bit more depth. It's under policy/program memorandum 171, and it requires school boards to review, update or implement an attendance support program and publicly post it by June of this year. The majority of school boards have done so—71 out of 72.

Attendance support programs are intended to identify and support employees with high levels of absenteeism by tracking attendance, establishing attendance thresholds and engaging in supportive discussions to understand and address these barriers to regular attendance. They're designed to be proactive and supportive, to understand what the challenges are early on, and to connect employees with available supports before attendance concerns become more significant. By promoting regular staff attendance, the programs can help to reduce disruptions caused by unfilled absences and minimize the need for frequent changes in classroom staffing. Consistent staffing is particularly important for students with special education needs, who benefit from established relationships, predictable routines, continuity of instruction and specialized supports. That's why these programs are intended to promote consistent staff presence in schools and classrooms, recognizing that stable and continuous supports support student achievement, well-being and effective school operations.

The Chair (Mr. Tom Rakocevic): Thank you. We're out of time.

I want to thank all witnesses for being here today and answering questions. You are kindly dismissed from committee—we have been working on how to dismiss you in the most kind way, so this is the wording that we've come to. We ask that you do so in a quiet and orderly fashion, as we are going to continue without going into closed session yet. Thank you very much again for being here.

SUBCOMMITTEE REPORT

The Chair (Mr. Tom Rakocevic): Before we go into closed session, we have a report from the subcommittee on committee business. Can I please have one of the subcommittee members read the report into the record? MPP Dixon.

Ms. Jess Dixon: Your subcommittee on committee business met on Monday, November 2, 2026, and recommends the following:

(1) That members of the committee wishing to include proposed recommendations in the first draft of a committee report submit the recommendations to the committee Clerk by email at scpa@ola.org, the week after public hearings have concluded for that report; and

(2) That the proposed recommendations will be colour-coded in the first draft report of the report by legislative research; and

(3) That all proposed recommendations received by the committee Clerk before the consideration of the first draft of the report be shared with all members of the committee in a shared confidential folder on SharePoint; and

(4) That failure to submit the proposed recommendations in writing by the deadline does not preclude members from proposing recommendations during report writing sessions.

I move adoption of the report.

The Chair (Mr. Tom Rakocevic): Any debate on the report? Are members ready to vote? All those in favour? Opposed? Seeing none, it carries.

We'll now pause briefly as we go into closed session so that the committee can commence report writing. Thank you very much.

The committee recessed at 1641 and later continued in closed session.

STANDING COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC ACCOUNTS

Chair / Président
Mr. Tom Rakocevic (Humber River–Black Creek ND)

First Vice-Chair / Premier Vice-Président
Mr. David Smith (Scarborough Centre / Scarborough-Centre PC)

Second Vice-Chair / Deuxième Vice-Présidente
Ms. Lee Fairclough (Etobicoke–Lakeshore L)

Ms. Jessica Bell (University–Rosedale ND)
Ms. Jess Dixon (Kitchener South–Hespeler / Kitchener-Sud–Hespeler PC)
Ms. Lee Fairclough (Etobicoke–Lakeshore L)
Mr. Hardeep Singh Grewal (Brampton East / Brampton-Est PC)
Mr. Logan Kanapathi (Markham–Thornhill PC)
Mr. Joseph Racinsky (Wellington–Halton Hills PC)
Mr. Tom Rakocevic (Humber River–Black Creek ND)
MPP Bill Rosenberg (Algoma–Manitoulin PC)
Mr. David Smith (Scarborough Centre / Scarborough-Centre PC)

Substitutions / Membres remplaçants
Mr. Billy Pang (Markham–Unionville PC)
Ms. Chandra Pasma (Ottawa West–Nepean / Ottawa-Ouest–Nepean ND)

Also taking part / Autres participants et participantes
Mr. John Fraser (Ottawa South / Ottawa-Sud L)

Clerk / Greffière
Ms. Thushitha Kobikrishna

Staff / Personnel
Mr. Dmitry Granovsky, research officer,
Research Services
Ms. Erica Simmons, research officer,
Research Services