

Legislative Assembly of Alberta The 29th Legislature **First Session**

Standing Committee on Public Accounts

Fildebrandt, Derek Gerhard, Strathmore-Brooks (W), Chair Gray, Christina, Edmonton-Mill Woods (ND), Deputy Chair

Barnes, Drew, Cypress-Medicine Hat (W) Bhullar, Manmeet Singh, Calgary-Greenway (PC) Cyr, Scott J., Bonnyville-Cold Lake (W) Dach, Lorne, Edmonton-McClung (ND) Gotfried, Richard, Calgary-Fish Creek (PC) Hunter, Grant R., Cardston-Taber-Warner (W) Loyola, Rod, Edmonton-Ellerslie (ND) Malkinson, Brian, Calgary-Currie (ND) Miller, Barb, Red Deer-South (ND) Payne, Brandy, Calgary-Acadia (ND) Renaud, Marie F., St. Albert (ND) Smith, Mark W., Drayton Valley-Devon (W)* Turner, Dr. A. Robert, Edmonton-Whitemud (ND) Westhead, Cameron, Banff-Cochrane (ND)

* substitution for Derek Fildebrandt

Also in Attendance

Jabbour, Deborah C., Peace River (ND)

Office of the Auditor General Participants

Merwan Saher Robert Driesen Maureen Debaji Auditor General Assistant Auditor General Principal

Support Staff

W.J. David McNeil	Clerk
Robert H. Reynolds, QC	Law Clerk/Director of Interparliamentary Relations
Shannon Dean	Senior Parliamentary Counsel/
	Director of House Services
Philip Massolin	Manager of Research Services
Stephanie LeBlanc	Legal Research Officer
Sarah Amato	Research Officer
Nancy Robert	Research Officer
Giovana Bianchi	Committee Clerk
Corinne Dacyshyn	Committee Clerk
Jody Rempel	Committee Clerk
Karen Sawchuk	Committee Clerk
Rhonda Sorensen	Manager of Corporate Communications and
	Broadcast Services
Jeanette Dotimas	Communications Consultant
Tracey Sales	Communications Consultant
Janet Schwegel	Managing Editor of Alberta Hansard

Standing Committee on Public Accounts

Participants

Ministry of Education Lorna Rosen, Deputy Minister Mark Swanson, Executive Director, Field Services

Northland School Division Donna Barrett, Superintendent of Schools Colin Kelly, Official Trustee

Tuesday, October 27, 2015

[Ms Gray in the chair]

Mr. Smith: Good morning, everybody. My name is Mark Smith. I'm the MLA for Drayton Valley-Devon, and I'm substituting for Mr. Derek Fildebrandt this morning. I'm going to gratefully and willingly relinquish the chair to the deputy chair, Ms Gray, and I'll just be attending as a regular member, okay?

Ms Gray.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Smith.

I am Christina Gray, MLA for Edmonton-Mill Woods and deputy chair of this committee. I would like to call this meeting of the Public Accounts Committee to order and welcome everyone who is here.

I will ask that the members joining us today around the table introduce themselves, and then we will check if anyone is on the phone.

Mr. Malkinson: Brian Malkinson, MLA for Calgary-Currie.

Ms Payne: Good morning. Brandy Payne, MLA for Calgary-Acadia.

Ms Miller: Barb Miller, MLA, Red Deer-South.

Mr. Westhead: Cameron Westhead, Banff-Cochrane.

Dr. Turner: Bob Turner, Edmonton-Whitemud.

Ms Renaud: Marie Renaud, St. Albert.

Mr. Dach: Lorne Dach, Edmonton-McClung.

Ms Jabbour: Debbie Jabbour, Peace River.

Mr. Loyola: Rod Loyola, MLA for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

Mr. Gotfried: Richard Gotfried, Calgary-Fish Creek.

Dr. Barrett: Donna Barrett, Northland school division.

Dr. Kelly: Good morning. Colin Kelly with Northland school division.

Ms Rosen: Lorna Rosen, Deputy Minister of Education.

Dr. Swanson: Good morning. Mark Swanson, executive director, field services, Alberta Education.

Mrs. Debaji: Good morning. Maureen Debaji, office of the Auditor General.

Mr. Driesen: Rob Driesen, Assistant Auditor General.

Mr. Saher: Merwan Saher, Auditor General.

Mr. Cyr: Scott Cyr, MLA for Bonnyville-Cold Lake.

Mr. Hunter: Grant Hunter, Cardston-Taber-Warner.

Mr. Barnes: Drew Barnes, MLA, Cypress-Medicine Hat.

Dr. Massolin: Good morning. Philip Massolin, manager, research services.

Ms Bianchi: Hello. I'm Giovana Bianchi, committee clerk.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you very much, everyone.

A few housekeeping items to address before we turn to our business at hand. The microphone consoles are operated by *Hansard* staff, so there's no need for members to touch them. Please keep your cellphones, iPhones, and BlackBerrys off the table so that they do not interfere with the audiofeed. Audio of committee proceedings is streamed live on the Internet and recorded by *Hansard*. Audio access and meeting transcripts are obtained via the Legislative Assembly website.

Our first item is approval of our agenda. If we do not have any additions, could a member please move that the agenda for October 27, 2015, be approved as distributed? Moved by Mr. Barnes. All those in favour? Opposed? The motion is carried.

We now have approval of minutes from our October 20, 2015, meeting. We have two sets of minutes for approval, so we will need two motions. First, let me just check: are there any amendments or errors found in the sets of minutes that we're reviewing? Okay. Seeing none, if a member could move that the minutes of the October 20, 2015, Standing Committee on Public Accounts meeting with Alberta Environment and Parks and Municipal Affairs be approved as distributed. Moved by Mr. Westhead. All those in favour? Opposed? The motion is carried. Okay. That was for the first motion.

Then that the minutes of the October 20 Standing Committee on Public Accounts meeting with the office of the Auditor General be approved as distributed: moved by Ms Miller. All those in favour of approving the second motion? Opposed? The motion is carried. Thank you.

Now we will move on to the bulk of our meeting today, our meeting with Alberta Education and Northland school division. Members should all have a copy of the briefing documents prepared by committee research services and the office of the Auditor General. Status reports on outstanding recommendations from the Auditor General for Alberta Education were also made available to the members.

I'd like to officially welcome our guests. Thank you for being here. Our guests are here to discuss the recommendations from the Auditor General's report of March 2015 related to systems to improve student attendance in the Northland school division. We'll start by asking Deputy Minister Lorna Rosen to make an opening statement of no more than five minutes on behalf of Alberta Education after which we will give Dr. Barrett and Dr. Kelly an opportunity to add brief comments, and then we will open up for questions from the committee.

Ms Rosen, you have the floor.

Ms Rosen: I want to thank you for the opportunity to provide an update on the implementation of the Auditor General's recommendations regarding Northland school division. In the Auditor General's March 2015 report three recommendations were offered for establishing systems to improve student attendance in the Northland school division. Two of the three recommendations were directed at the Northland school division, with the remaining recommendation directed at the Department of Education.

The first recommendation accepted by Northland was to develop an operational plan with short- and long-term targets for improving student attendance. The Auditor General also provided specific direction as to what the operational plan should include; for example, measurable results and responsibilities, documentation of related costs and required resources, and a specific timeline for implementation.

The second recommendation to the school division was to improve its guidance and procedures for schools to consistently monitor student attendance, benchmark acceptable attendance levels, and manage and follow up on nonattendance. For the department the Auditor General recommended that it exercise oversight of Northland school division by ensuring that the division develop and execute the recommended operational plan to improve student attendance and that the operational plan identify the resources needed and how the results will be measured, reported, and analyzed.

On our end the department has made progress toward implementing the Auditor General's recommendation to exercise additional oversight over Northland school division. In response to the recommendation it was decided that the department would be better served by taking a broader and more strategic view of making improvements in Northland rather than exclusively focusing on enhancing oversight related to student attendance. The minister decided that this fresh approach is necessary and approved the establishment of a crossministry committee. Its mandate is to develop a strategic plan to explore all options for improving governance and student achievement in Northland school division.

In late July representatives from Education, Health, Aboriginal Relations, and Human Services were named to the crossministry committee. The team is focused on developing strategies for improving governance, student attendance, and student achievement as well as for reducing the achievement gap between First Nations, Métis, and Inuit learners and nonaboriginal learners. The key learnings and insights that emerge from the work of the crossdivisional team can be leveraged to inform practice across the province.

Alberta Education will continue to monitor and oversee Northland's efforts to develop and implement a strategy to address student achievement and success across the division. In summary, progress toward implementing the Auditor General's recommendations has been made over the past few months.

I want to thank you again for the opportunity to present this morning.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you very much, Ms Rosen.

Dr. Barrett or Dr. Kelly, do you have anything to add?

Dr. Kelly: Again, thank you for this opportunity this morning, and thank you for providing us an opportunity to share what Northland school division has done to address the Auditor General's recommendation regarding student attendance.

It was recommended that Northland school division develop a plan to improve student attendance and develop an operational plan with short- and long-term targets to improve student attendance. We are pleased to report that Northland school division's attendance improvement initiative has been implemented, and schools are making students aware that every day counts. Divisionwide attendance has increased by 2 per cent over the previous year. Two schools have achieved attendance at 90 per cent or better, 11 schools have achieved 85 per cent attendance or better, and 15 of our 24 schools saw improvements.

8:40

In terms of measurable results and responsibilities the division is looking to increase the number of students achieving over 90 per cent attendance by 5 per cent. All schools have established attendance committees and are implementing the divisional followup procedures for nonattendance, and all schools will be providing specific evidence of success to the board and to the communities four times per year.

The Attendance Improvement Initiative report provides 29 recommendations to address attendance within the jurisdiction. The recommendations are made to schools and to the central office. All schools have developed incentive programs to encourage regular

attendance, and these vary from school to school. Some schools have initiated conversations and support from industry to help with their attendance initiatives. We are working with community partners and local media to increase awareness about the importance of school attendance, and schools are required to call home and make home visits if students are absent.

We have a division-wide budget in place to support the schoolbased strategies and division attendance celebrations at year-end. Schools are required to provide expenditure evidence related to attendance improvements. We have reallocated \$200,000 to support our attendance improvement initiatives: \$120,000 was used to hire our student data and education coach, and another \$80,000 was allocated to schools for support.

We have estimated that it would cost the jurisdiction approximately \$2 million to fully implement all of our 29 recommendations: \$1.5 million would be used to hire community liaison officers, approximately \$200,000 we would allocate to student transportation, and we would also look to hire a divisional attendance lead.

The division has been working to improve attendance for a number of years. Our division-wide attendance committee was established in 2014 to review practices with respect to attendance and gather information from schools. Our division-wide attendance improvement initiative began in September of 2014 with the establishment of school-based attendance improvement committees. The Attendance Improvement Initiative report was board-approved in January of 2015. The report requires action on all 29 recommendations.

Our school principals were introduced to the attendance improvement initiative in February of 2015. All schools are required to submit detailed attendance improvement plans. Schools will report on the implementation progress four times a year.

It was also recommended that Northland school division monitor and enforce student attendance and improve its guidance and procedures for the schools. We are pleased to explain the implementation process to address recommendation 3 in the Auditor General's report. This recommendation includes three categories.

For consistently recording and monitoring student attendance, the division attendance lead, who is our associate superintendent, provides attendance improvement oversight, including communications, supervision, and resource support to schools. We have a student data and education technology coach, who provides training to our school secretaries, administrators, classroom teachers, and central office personnel to ensure consistent and accurate attendance data. Our attendance is entered into our Maplewood attendance tracking system. Processes are established to ensure regular and consistent school-based monitoring on a daily, weekly, and monthly basis.

The division has also established a protocol to ensure appropriate follow-up for all of our nonattenders, and at the school level principals are responsible for ensuring that student attendance is consistently recorded and that there is a follow-up on all student absences. As also recommended by the Auditor General, we have set our benchmark for attendance at 95 per cent.

Thank you.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you very much, Dr. Kelly.

I would now like to invite our Auditor General to make an opening statement on behalf of the office of the Auditor General.

Mr. Saher: Thank you, Madam Chair. Student attendance in the Northland school division remains unacceptably low. We have recommended that the Northland school division develop an

The Department of Education must exercise oversight of the division's plan to improve student attendance. In our view, oversight of a student-centred approach to improving attendance results is the key to not failing another generation of the division's children.

Our audit work on the Northland school division is at page 17 of the March 2015 report. Our audit objective was to assess if there are adequate systems to improve student attendance in the division. To succeed in school, students must attend. Attending school regularly is essential to educational achievement and the opportunity for a successful life.

Improving the educational outcomes of Alberta's First Nations, Métis, and Inuit young people has been one of the department's main goals for over 10 years. However, success has been elusive. The department has studied this problem repeatedly in the division for the past 40 years.

The most recent study was the inquiry team report in 2010. The report summarizes 10 recurring recommendations made each decade without significant improvement. We list those recurring recommendations in appendix A of our report. Yet despite the studies at least one-third of the division's students are chronically absent. That is 900 students out of 2,700 in the division.

On pages 23 and 30 of our report we set out our findings. What we found was that the division strategies have not improved student attendance. Nonattendance is acceptable as the status quo, and oversight of improving attendance results is deficient. Schools have inadequate processes and controls to ensure attendance data is reliable. Department resources are also not co-ordinated with the division's efforts to improve attendance.

We conclude that rather than more studies on how to improve education results, what is required is action, concrete action based on putting students' needs first.

Thank you.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you very much.

I am now going to open the floor to questions from members following the agreed-upon method. To start a new line of inquiry, please put your hand up with your fingers wide open. If you have a follow-up on a topic that's been discussed, fingers closed together. Please try and state your topic so that we can stay on the same topic as we proceed with our discussions.

I will let you know that we are going to try to wrap up for 9:45 so we can finish some remaining business before closing the meeting at 10.

I'd like to welcome Mr. Bhullar, who has joined us. If you'd like to provide your name and riding for the record.

Mr. Bhullar: Manmeet Bhullar, Calgary-Greenway.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you very much. Mr. Loyola.

Mr. Loyola: Thank you very much, Madam Chair. We all understand that this is a very complex problem. I appreciate that with a systems audit the Auditor General would focus on attendance as a measure they use, that we can focus on in order to improve on children's education. However, as I read through the report, there are still factors that require our attention, as everyone knows. Of these, addressing historical injustices of residential schools is one of them. That mistrust that is created between the community and institutions in general is paramount. So as we enter into our discussion, I hope that we don't lose the intersection of those two pieces with this attendance piece.

8:50

Really, I have a couple of questions based on the communitybased aboriginal teacher education program itself. I'm referring specifically to page 29 of the Auditor's report. From my understanding of the report it was given that there were net benefits to the Northland school division with this teacher education program, and I'm wondering specifically with retention to teachers: number one, does the ministry have plans to reinstate the program? Then I'm wondering – well, the Auditor's report concluded that the program was cancelled due to costs. So was there a financial assessment implemented to determine the true costs of the program, and if so, what are they? If not currently at hand, could you provide them to the committee in the future?

Ms Rosen: The community-based teacher education pilot program was actually a special pilot program developed by Alberta Education in 2008 to attract First Nation, Métis, and Inuit students into teacher training. The program targeted the northern Alberta region and aimed to increase the numbers of locally trained teachers, with the longer term goal of improving retention rates for teachers in northern and remote communities. Alberta Education funding was provided to partnering school authorities, seven northern and two urban, in a cost-sharing agreement intended to provide financial support to current school district employees to study full time in the aboriginal teacher education program, which is a collaborative bachelor of education/elementary education degree offered by the U of A with a partner college. This was delivered on an ongoing basis with funding for operating costs provided by Alberta Education. The pilot project delivery model was a change from an on-campus program to include delivery to 16 community access point sites to accommodate the home locations of the 41 northern students.

There was no conclusion drawn that Alberta Education's portion of costs was too expensive. It was a four-year, one cohort pilot project, and the focus was to test the program delivery model and immediately increase the number of FNMI teachers available for employment in northern school districts. The pilot project concluded, and further funding was not made available by the government of the day. It was a pilot project that ran its course, and there were no conclusions made as to whether or not there should be an ongoing implementation.

With respect to the cost itself over a five-year period that commenced in 2009, Alberta Education provided \$3,455,000 in conditional grant funding to school authorities. The amount represented 70 per cent of the students' costs, with the balance contributed by school authority partners. The cost-sharing agreement included the full cost of participants' salaries; education costs, including tuition, books, and fees; and associated travel costs to community access point sites and to Northern Lakes College campus as required to attend spring and summer session classes and any related activities. The total project cost to Alberta Education and participating school districts was just over \$4,940,000. I hope that answers the member's question.

Mr. Loyola: Madam Chair, I have another line of questioning, so I don't know if anybody has a follow-up question.

The Deputy Chair: We do. We have Mr. Smith with a follow-up question on the community-based teacher education program.

Mr. Smith: Thank you, Madam Chair. If this program was developed to increase the number of FNMI teachers – that's what the pilot project was all about – and if the end result was to be better attendance, what do we know about the results of the pilot project?

How many people – and my understanding was that these may have been aides that were taking courses and becoming teachers – actually became teachers? How many of them stayed in their communities and continued to teach? Did it result in better attendance? If that was the goal, what were the results of this pilot project?

Ms Rosen: Out of the 31 graduates 26 were employed as teachers in northern districts. In terms of the evaluation period with regard to what concrete results we would see from having this group of teachers available in northern districts, it's difficult to ascertain at this time because these are graduates in 2014, and we really haven't had a significant amount of time to actually determine what experience we can gain from their approach to teaching in their own communities. I do believe that we have confidence that there will be some good results.

One of the things that I would like to see and that we're working on is a more established performance evaluation approach so that we can actually ask some specific questions with regard to the results that we may, in fact, expect to see with these particular teachers and then check to see whether or not we are seeing those results. I believe that now that we're two years postgraduation or almost two years, we need to actually determine how we're going to monitor performance going forward.

Mr. Smith: On that same line, is there money being set aside to be able to do that? I mean, it would seem like a reasonable thing to expect, that if we're going to pour money into a pilot project, which I think is a really good idea, by the way – is there a plan for following this up and bringing the results back to this committee?

Ms Rosen: I think that the plan that we have for following up is actually to determine what future iteration of this program we might implement, how that might work, and identify the successes, that we can really establish on an evidence-based approach, that these 26 teachers have implemented or have effected in their communities and take what's good from the program and see how that can fit in in terms of future supports or future iterations and then make a case for that going forward. The short answer, Member Smith, is that yes, we are going to be looking at that. That's one of the things that our new First Nations, Métis, Inuit division is looking at in a significant way.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you very much.

I have a new line of questioning from Mr. Cyr.

Mr. Cyr: Thank you, Madam Chair. This topic is on attendance goals, my first question. Having a 95 per cent attendance goal is considered to be almost a perfect attendance for most schools. Is it realistic to expect to go from one-third chronic absence to 95 per cent attendance?

Dr. Barrett: Thank you for the question. We chose the 95 per cent target – I think 95 sounds very high. We looked at 90 per cent, and 90 per cent would mean that we would say that it was acceptable that students missed half a day of school a week. When we selected the 95 per cent, we looked at research from urban divisions in the States, actually, and their target was 95 per cent as a target that allows students to be at school enough of the time that they are not missing instruction. This year we monitored attendance and looked at what percentage of our students were already meeting that benchmark, and when we monitored throughout the year, we had slightly over 40 per cent of our students that were at the 90 per cent range and 13 per cent already at the 95 per cent range, so I think

that it is a target that we believe will be a level of attendance that will ensure that students are successful in school.

What we are looking at in terms of our improvement targets is that we want to look at a 5 per cent improvement in the number of students that are reaching that goal, which we think will help them to be successful in school. The research that we looked at particularly focused on the importance of this percentage at kindergarten and grade 1. Students who start missing school in those first two years are really at a disadvantage in terms of developing literacy skills. We wanted to set the same standard that, you know, the research was suggesting. It's a long-term target, but we do want our students to be successful, and we are documenting forward movement towards that target.

9:00

What we saw over the year as we watched the data as students moved was that by setting that target, we had significant movement, actually, from the 90 to the 95 per cent bracket. Students that are already interested in school and where their families are connected to school: they're shifting up. So I think we'll see movement up along the way.

The Deputy Chair: I have a follow-up question on attendance goals from Mr. Westhead.

Mr. Westhead: Thank you, Madam Chair. In terms of the 95 per cent goal, which, you know, sounds like it has a solid basis for why you chose that number, can you tell us a little bit about the timelines by which you expect to achieve that goal? Are there incremental steps along the way like milestones that you're looking for? You know, I would expect that there would be specific dates that you're expecting to achieve that target by.

Dr. Barrett: Yes. We're looking at a 5 per cent growth goal for this year. We had a 2 per cent improvement goal last year. We're looking at 5 per cent this year because our plan is fully developed and we are really working with our communities. That's our improvement target. Yes, it will take us a number of years to get there, but I think that we want to bring everyone up. We will be looking at bringing students up from wherever they are to as high as we can get them.

Mr. Westhead: Is there an actual target date to achieve that 95 per cent?

Dr. Barrett: Well, we would look at – we don't have a long-term target date. That's our ultimate goal.

The Deputy Chair: I have a follow-up on attendance goals from Mr. Hunter.

Mr. Hunter: Thank you, Madam Chair. Dr. Kelly, you talked about appropriate follow-up when there's an absence. Can you give us a little bit of understanding about what appropriate follow-up means?

Dr. Kelly: We will monitor the attendance of every student. As students are absent, appropriate follow-up could include phone calls home to the parents. It could also include home visits by our school principals or teachers. For those schools that employ a school-community liaison, it will also require visits from those folks, those employees, over to our schools as well.

If you go through the very specifics of the plan, it lays out a number of steps - and I'll get Donna to bring it over to you - that we have as a follow-up to every student who is absent from our schools.

Dr. Barrett: One of the things that we appreciated about the recommendations from the Auditor General was that we did have discrepancies in our schools in terms of how they followed up on attendance, and as part of our attendance plan we've developed a division-wide protocol that all of our schools are to follow in terms of what is supposed to happen after each absence. So every absence is followed up with a phone call. After three days' absence there is a next level of intervention, and students would be flagged for closer monitoring. We look at the difference between excused and unexcused absences in terms of follow-up. One of the things about attendance is that student absences are a flag that there is an issue, but what that issue means and what's going on that creates that absence are very different in different circumstances. So it's really important that we do have this follow-up and monitoring.

Each of our schools has an attendance support committee. So after a student has had more than three days' absence, they will be flagged to have the situation reviewed at the school level, and other agencies and supports will be contacted so that an intervention program that's personalized to what the circumstances of the student's absence are is put in place.

Dr. Kelly: In addition to that, there is also the line of communication between our school improvement committees and our local school board committees, which are elected trustee positions, in all of our Northland schools. They will of course be briefed and well informed and able to provide input into any kinds of attendance initiatives or attendance issues that are being faced in the communities.

The Deputy Chair: We have a follow-up on this thread from Mr. Smith.

Mr. Smith: Thank you very much. After having been a teacher for 30 years, I understand the real value of communication between the parents and the teachers and the school and the local committees that you've set up. I guess the question and one of the frustrations that I always felt as a teacher – I mean, there's a big difference with a child in grade 1 or grade 2 that's missing class, which is probably on the parents' shoulders. By the time you get to grades 11 and 12, the students have legs and can make their own choices. So there's a very big difference between the type of student that you're dealing with.

When it comes to the communication with parents and teachers, you know, if you are a high school teacher and you're expected to contact that parent every time there's an absence and if you've got one-third of your students being absent, chronic absenteeism, you could be making 35 phone calls at the end of each day trying to get a hold of those parents. How are you logistically building in time for teachers to be able to contact parents? You said: go to homes. When is that happening? You know, as a teacher I understand that I've got a lot of duties on my plate. Am I supposed to be going out to those homes at 6, 7, 8, 9 o'clock at night? How is that communication working? I mean, trying to make that phone call and seeing that it's not there the first time I phone, the second time I phone, the third time I phone, what does that follow-up really look like? It's nice to say that you're making communication, but what does it actually look like, and are you building in time for teachers to actually be able to do it?

Dr. Kelly: Mr. Smith, that's a very good question. I do have to and I think we should point out that amongst our school-based administrators and also from central office, there were conversations related to the additional workload that any kind of initiative in a jurisdiction places on teachers. There is absolutely no doubt about that.

As a school jurisdiction we have long spoken to our administrators about the benefit of bringing the school to the home and home visiting as often as one possibly can. As a former principal in Northland school division for a few years it's something that I did on a regular basis, and, interestingly enough, it is quite common within our jurisdiction for staff to take that time and go about the community. Please understand that some of our communities are small as far as our populations are concerned, so it is not, especially at a high school, 35 or 30 students per classroom. For the larger schools the initial contact as far as a phone call may come from the principal, may come from the teacher, or, as is used by a lot of systems, it could be an electronic phone call.

There is a commitment on all involved in the jurisdiction to address these attendance issues, and the communities and local school boards have been very succinct about the benefit of going from home to home and, when you can, visiting parents and having the conversations about their child or children and how they are doing. In fact, we have some schools where that's the method of operation as far as parent-teacher meetings are concerned, bringing out the reports to the homes rather than having parents come to the school. It's going to in large part depend upon the number of students, the size of the school, of course. It does require teachers taking that additional time and putting it in. It is an expectation, and it is being done.

9:10

Mr. Smith: Have you actually built time into the school day for teachers to be able to do that outside of their teaching duties, outside of their extracurricular duties?

Dr. Kelly: No, we haven't. The same holds true whether it's an initiative around attendance or whether it's an initiative around literacy, you know, where we require additional professional development time, time away, online in-servicing. It is a very delicate balance that we're definitely very well aware of because we certainly do not wish to get into a case where it is overload. It is a great question that you're asking, but I can assure you that it's something we're cognizant about and definitely keeping an eye on.

Mr. Smith: Well, when you find out how to put that square peg into that round hole, let me know – okay? – because we worked on it for 30 years.

Dr. Kelly: You know, it's very interesting. We have long said that Northland school division is a very unique jurisdiction. There are things that happen and there are expectations in our jurisdiction that are not quite the same as they are in other jurisdictions in the province.

The Deputy Chair: On the topic of following up on absences and time for teachers, I have a question from Mr. Hunter.

Mr. Hunter: Thank you, Madam Chair. My question is for Alberta Education. This, from what I understand, has been studied for 40 years. We've had a chronic problem for 40 years. Every decade we seem to revisit this issue. What is Alberta Education's ability to rectify this problem from administration?

Ms Rosen: On our own? I don't believe that this is a problem that we can address on our own, which is why the minister established a crossministry team in July.

If we look at the question that was just asked and the response and we look at, say, for example, the assumption that a high school student may in fact just choose not to attend, I think that if you go and look at the reasons why some high school students don't attend, you might find, say, for example, that they've been asked by their parents to stay home to take care of younger siblings because that's the only way that their parents can get out to work. Is that a problem that we can solve by ourselves in Alberta Education? Likely not. Can we come up with some solutions to problems such as those with the help of our colleagues in Human Services? Perhaps we can.

I think it's about stopping to look at education as if it is separate and distinct from the community because it's not, particularly in smaller northern communities where the education centre, the school itself, is in some instances and can be in others a hub to the community. I think it's about us looking holistically at the community itself: what the community needs, what are the real reasons that children are not attending school, and seeing how we can take a different approach. Taking the same approach hasn't worked for us for the last, I would suggest to you, 60 years. We're going to look at what we can do differently, what we can do together with other departments and with the Northland school division.

This is not a matter of money, not from just an education perspective. Northland school division, you may or may not be surprised to know, is the best funded school division in Alberta by Alberta Education by quite a lot. Continuing to pour money into solutions without understanding whether or not those solutions have a good chance at success I don't think is a good way for us to proceed. I'm not saying that we spend too much money on Northland. I'm not saying that at all. What I'm saying is that the way that we funded it and the way that we've approached it in the past hasn't worked, and I want to look at doing something differently.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you.

As a follow-up to, I believe, the 95 per cent attendance goals, Mr. Cyr, you have a comment.

Mr. Cyr: Yes. Thank you, Madam Chair. You've made a unilateral decision to go district-wide with a 95 per cent goal on attendance. You've set no timelines that we can see here to achieve this. It appears that you've got three different types of schools here, from what Dr. Kelly was saying: two at 90 per cent, 11 at 85 per cent, and 15 that need improvements. Is it realistic to say – and I'll go back to this again – to set targets on a district-wide goal versus a school-by-school goal and working with each one of those schools individually?

Dr. Barrett: Each of our schools is actually in the process right now, because they are developing their plan, of using the data that they have to set their own improvement goal. Our division-wide target is based on the attendance of each of the schools. So the schools with lower attendance will be looking at a 5 per cent improvement from where they are.

Mr. Cyr: Is that per year or per five years?

Dr. Barrett: We're looking at, yes, a 5 per cent per year improvement.

Mr. Cyr: Thank you.

The Deputy Chair: On the topic of our 95 per cent attendance goals I have Mr. Gotfried, Ms Renaud, and then Mr. Bhullar. Then I'm going to cut that off so that we can move on to another line of questioning.

Mr. Gotfried: Thank you, Madam Chair. First, I want to applaud all of the efforts and work you're doing to try and improve the situation for the students in your school district. I guess I've got

some concerns with respect to the data management, the IT and attendance support systems, in that in trying to measure both the problem and, I guess, the steps towards a solution, it seems like we've got a system which is skewed to possible misrepresentation of that. From the information we've been given, the default is that if somebody doesn't enter into the system, it shows as 100 per cent attendance. That concerns me because it might actually give you false indications of your success or otherwise, but it does skew things in the wrong direction, possibly, to tell you whether we're getting a proper return on investments. I just wonder if you can comment on any improvements that you're bringing into the system so that the default does not skew these results and give you false information.

Dr. Kelly: Go ahead, and I'll add a little later.

Dr. Barrett: Okay. We are aware of that problem, and we have addressed that problem. Our improvement over the last year is based on the data with that problem included. So it is a bit of a false positive, but we have addressed that this year. Our data management person that we hired – we've changed all of our protocols, so that will no longer be an issue. It will make it difficult for us to compare our 2014-15 to our 2015-16 data, but the data will be much more reliable than it has been in the past.

Mr. Gotfried: Would you agree that possibly your past use of the data underrepresents the problem?

Dr. Barrett: I would say that the biggest concern that I had as I've gone over the data would be at the secondary level, for high school students. You know, we've cleaned that up. I think that's where it may have underrepresented the problem in a couple of places in our high schools. We had some particular problems with tracking there. I think that at the elementary level and at the junior high level there is more accurate reporting of the data. But we have addressed it.

Mr. Gotfried: Okay. Thank you.

The Deputy Chair: Ms Renaud.

Ms Renaud: Thank you. Well, for the last four decades the Northland school division has been the focus of intense investigations into the contributing factors of the chronic low attendance rates. Each investigation has resulted in recommendations that have the potential to address the root causes of chronic absenteeism but did not. What has the division and what has the ministry learned from the past regarding identifying all possible risks that could again derail progress towards meeting goals and targets that address the core issues that shape student rates of attendance?

9:20

Ms Rosen: In terms of what the department has learned, I would suggest to you that even without an elected board, the department has treated Northland school division in the past as if it were just one other board in Alberta. We have respected the local autonomy that resides with a school jurisdiction, and in doing so, we have perhaps not been as proactive as we might have been in the past about working collaboratively with the Northland school division to actually think outside the box and to say: this is not a school division like every other school division in Alberta, and the strategies that we employ there and the oversight mechanisms that are quite successful for us with those other school jurisdictions don't serve us in good stead here, hence the formation of the crossministry team. While we do crossministry work in Education, predominantly around regional collaborative service delivery, that benefits all school jurisdictions, this is a different effort for us. This is an effort, I would suggest to you, as much about community building as it is about education because we see, the minister sees that that's what is going to be necessary in order to actually make some inroads into this decades-old problem. So we are looking to do things differently, absolutely.

The Deputy Chair: Finally, on the absenteeism/attendance goals thread, Mr. Bhullar.

Mr. Bhullar: Yes. Thank you. You mentioned Human Services. That got me thinking. Do you have any data about the number of children from the school division that are actually in care right now, that are in the care of the province?

Dr. Barrett: No, we don't.

Mr. Bhullar: In my tenure as Human Services minister something that I've learned is that Human Services has one of the most profound impacts on a child because they have the power to pick up and remove a child from their home and from their community. So I would really love to see the impact of Human Services as it relates to education in your community in the Northland school division, and I bet dollars to doughnuts that it's very significant. That's the first piece.

The second is: have Human Services and Education as two entities and the school division ever sat around the same table to see how children can be better supported in this? Like, is Human Services around the table in this discussion at all?

Ms Rosen: I'm going to answer the last question first. Yes, Human Services is around the table. In July Human Services, Health, and Aboriginal Relations named representatives to our crossministry team. So, yes, they're at the table.

With respect to the question about the percentage of Northland students that might find themselves in care, MLA Bhullar, I can't answer that question, but perhaps we could get back to you in writing with respect to that response if that would be satisfactory.

Mr. Bhullar: Sure. Thank you.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you. That would be appreciated. A small follow-up?

Mr. Bhullar: Yeah, just a small follow-up. Ma'am, in your time at Education have you ever seen any actual on-the-ground working teams, where Human Services representatives and Education representatives are working side by side on these types of projects? I ask this from a perspective of: in the child intervention system one of the changes I was trying to make is to have the criminal justice system work closer with the child intervention system - we signed an MOU with the Calgary Police Service - and I'm hoping my predecessors continue on with this work. But I found that working in silos is a very big challenge on the ground, and I think this could be an absolutely perfect case study to ensure that our people on the ground work together across borders as opposed to just, you know, having a team in Edmonton together. Having a team in Edmonton together is important, but how do we ensure that the people on the ground are working together so that, for example, if there's a child that needs to be placed with a foster family, they're placing that child with a foster family that keeps him in the same school division?

Ms Rosen: Member Bhullar, currently I have had two meetings with my counterpart, Deputy Minister Morhart, with respect to this specific issue. We do have crossministry representation on our team. Where the team is at right now is still in the planning stage. In terms of on-the-ground work that you're contemplating, that is very likely to be one of the strategies that comes out of the work that the crossministry team is doing.

I realize that it seems like we're just starting because we are just starting. The recommendations came from the OAG just in the spring. We worked hard to form a committee. That committee has done quite a bit of work, had quite a number of meetings, and we are working towards developing planning, all the while trying to take into consideration the status of the community, the elected board or lack of an elected board. We're juggling a number of balls in the air right now and hope to have something more concrete to report in the coming months.

Mr. Bhullar: The reason for the suggestion is just that I often feel that we in Edmonton tend to get in the way of great work that can happen on the ground. I congratulate you and appreciate the tough work you folks are doing, but whatever we can do to just allow the people on the ground to sit together, work together, and sometimes make decisions in a grey area as opposed to everything being black and white I think can really empower people.

Thank you.

The Deputy Chair: We have a new line of thought from Ms Payne.

Ms Payne: Thank you. I wanted to thank the officials from the Northland school district for coming here today to chat with us. I was absolutely staggered to hear the extent of the attendance problem in the district. As noted in the Auditor General's report, we have a chronic attendance problem with a third of the district's students. With 2,700 students that means that there are 900 students at risk of not graduating.

Setting aside the cost to those individual children and to their families, this comes at a great cost to our society. You know, these are students whose potential is being limited and whose gifts might not fully be shared. Beyond those intangible costs there's a financial cost for us to not get this right, given that the United Way of Calgary estimates that each high school nongraduate costs the province of Alberta \$16,000 annually in higher costs associated with increased use of social assistance programs, health care, crime, and lost tax revenue. The potential costs to Albertans could be hundreds of millions of dollars for each generation of division students who do not complete high school.

My question is about the relationship between students, parents, community, and the schools. Page 37 of the Auditor's report discusses the community consultations that were undertaken by the Auditor General's office. One of the key findings talks about the importance of positive relations between students, parents, the community, and the schools, so kind of creating that wraparound. I'm wanting to know: how are the department and the school administration working to build those positive relationships? Is there an overarching plan being developed or that is already in place, and can you comment on the details of the plan?

Dr. Kelly: There are a number of things that we'd like to make mention of here. Most definitely, without any exception, the kinds of relationships between students, parents, the community, and the schools are essential in anything that we do within the school jurisdiction. In my personal opinion, a key to Northland school division and to any kinds of success that we've been able to show in the past and the kinds of direction that we want to take in the future is going to be relying very heavily on involving the local community in decisions that are impacting them, and I can't stress that enough. 9:30

When we looked at the attendance initiative, the first thing that we did was go into every community. We had somebody from the central office host community meetings to talk about the attendance initiative and look for whatever input we could possibly get. So it wasn't mandated as far as the board was concerned. We didn't say, "This is it," but there was significant input that we got from the community.

We also, based on those conversations, ensured that there were community attendance committees put in place. That's their focus. They will meet on that on a regular basis. All of the information is going to go to them and, in turn, come back to our local boards and also our schools and our central office.

We do fund schools for community events. There is a budget line for all of our schools to host community dinners and any kind of community event that they deem they would like to do.

Our orientation. We changed our orientation this year to not only host an orientation for all new teachers to the jurisdiction but also ensure that all the local school board committees and the staff were given dollars so they can host a local orientation program as a follow-up to what we were doing jurisdictionally.

In our larger communities in the Wabasca-Desmarais area we've hired a community engagement facilitator. This was done in consultation with a community focus group that was put together. There is also the aspect of our local school board committees and of the local school board committees remaining intact and as a trustee ensuring we do whatever we can to receive input from our local school board committees. I want to stress just how essential it is that we have that community input and that we continue to build on that. Without a doubt one of the things that we are facing in the jurisdiction is the absence of an elected board of trustees and a sense and a feeling of disenfranchisement because they do not have elected representation, and I completely concur with that.

Other initiatives. We talked about it at the very beginning, the ATEP program. Personally, I believe it was a brilliant program. We first started our conversations on that in 1981 with an official trustee for the Northland school division of the day, and I think that you are going to see not just benefits related to attendance. There's a significant scope to having teachers from your community in your communities teaching your kids. I believe that's going to assist, and if we can do more of that, that's going to assist with the kinds of involvement and the communications that take place between the school, the jurisdiction, and our communities.

The Deputy Chair: On the topic of relationships and building the relationships between the community, the schools, and the sector rep, Mr. Smith, you had a follow-up.

Mr. Smith: Thank you very much. You know, I can't stress enough that in my 30 years of teaching that relationship is so key and so important on so many levels in education, and I think that as educators you would recognize that. It can mean the difference between a kid staying and leaving, trying or not trying.

Your community engagement initiatives are fine, but I guess I would ask you to consider two things that after 30 years I believe really impacted the students that I taught. One is extracurricular activities. I'm a secondary teacher, okay? Have you considered the value of extracurricular activities? When you're a high school student and you're going to school, you have to take the maths and you have to take the biology and you have to do the course of studies. These students, although they have some variety that they can choose – I mean, there are just sort of the core courses that they have to take, and they don't have any choice in that. The kids that I find that are not engaged often are not engaged because – you know,

you'll get a student coming into my social studies class that's reading at a grade 4 level. They're reading at a grade 4 level. How can they have the success that they need when they don't have the foundations that they need to be able to have success in that course?

Of the two things that I would ask you to look into, one is extracurricular. That's the area that the students choose to be a part of. If you've got a student that's into playing basketball or volleyball or in the drama club, if they're choosing to engage, that shows you that they haven't completely turned off from education. What kinds of things are you doing to encourage your teachers? Are you providing time for them to be able to – you know, I would put 400 hours a year, in a five-month span of time, into basketball. I chose to do that willingly. But sometimes in the world that we live in today, it would be very nice if we could find some way of providing incentives for teachers to get involved in that.

Are you providing the monetary foundation to be able to send your kids out on extracurricular trips? I know that the last time I coached, which was a year and a half ago, you know, the question was: can my kids play the 36 games outlined by the ASAA as being a reasonable number of basketball games to play in a five-month period of time, or are they going to be limited to four weekends and 12 games?

What are you doing about extracurricular, and what are you doing about assessing learning issues that create disengagement in the classroom?

Dr. Kelly: Mr. Smith, a great question. When I came back to Northland school division to do this, one of the first things that we looked at with administration was hearing from all of our schools as to the kinds of extracurricular activities that are taking place in those facilities. You're quite correct. It's a level of engagement and communication with students that's beyond the classroom instruction. This is where you build relationships.

You know, we have what I would consider fairly active extracurricular programs that are on the go in the majority of schools in Northland school division. Monies are provided in budgets for field trips, for educational field trips as well as sporting field trips. Some of our schools also do a fair amount of fundraising. We do not charge any kinds of fees to parents for any school activity in the jurisdiction. We never have and, hopefully, never will have to do that.

In a couple of our larger schools we've made additions to staff. At one school in the north where we did not have a physical education specialist on staff, we made sure that last year or the year before last we increased that staffing size to make sure that that was there.

A couple of our smaller schools do not have the numbers to be able to compete in the triple A. A lot of our schools have combined the talents that they have for extracurricular activities to have enough students so that they can have the size of a team that can compete with the neighbouring jurisdictions. Yes, that's extremely important.

I do have to tell you this as well. One thing that all community members will ask a new teacher when they come into a community is: what other kinds of activities are you prepared to do after school, you know, besides your mandated ones of having to teach particular subjects?

Mr. Smith: Thank you very much.

The Deputy Chair: On the topic of relationships with stakeholders I have Mr. Barnes with an addendum. We have approximately five minutes left – there are quite a few that we haven't gotten to – so if you can be brief.

I appreciate your answers; I appreciate your work. The Auditor General was clear. Rather than more studies, what is required is action, concrete action based on putting students' needs first. I wonder how you reconcile that with your community meetings and your community supports. Like the previous questioner, when I think of students' needs, I think of infrastructure like gyms and drama classes, shops, and technology.

That then made me think of the Prairie Rose school division, deep down south, where some of the children have busing rides of up to an hour, an hour and a half. I heard you say that you put an extra \$200,000 into transportation, so I presume that your busing requirements and lengths of trips are quite long as well. I just wonder: when it comes to putting students' needs first, are there any special challenges with infrastructure? Are there any special challenges with busing and transportation?

9:40

Dr. Kelly: We do have challenges with everything that you have mentioned. I was in a school last week and met this one young lady in a grade 4 classroom who gets on a bus at 6 o'clock in the morning and doesn't get home until 5 o'clock at night, and it's just not acceptable. The administration has already begun to address that situation by putting in place another bus run even though it's definitely going to be a small bus run, and our transportation coordinator is in the community today training a driver. We quite often have difficulties in finding drivers so that we can provide the kinds of transportation that are required.

You know, when it comes to our facilities, there is no doubt that there are some areas in some schools where we are lacking in the kinds of physical facilities that we would like to have in the community. Interestingly enough, in Northland school division, when a number of our schools were built in the '80s, they were primarily built as elementary schools. They were not built as juniorsenior high schools. We operate a number of small high school programs because we know that our students, if they have to leave the community to go into boarding home programs, don't survive. They come home. They drop out of school. So we operate a number of very small, quite expensive, really, small high school programs.

We do that because in the past the community has asked us to keep the kids at home. But in some of those schools, because they were built as elementary schools or elementary-junior high schools, we are not able to offer the kinds of CTS courses that we would like to have. We definitely have taken steps. We have a mobile welding shop as well as a mobile woodworking shop. We offer small-engine repair through mobile facilities. We do what we can in that area, but there are some schools, without a doubt, in some communities where we would and where the community would definitely like to see upgrades in their facilities.

We have a couple of communities that do not have gymnasiums; they have activity rooms. These were very small activity rooms that were built at the time the schools were constructed. You can, in most cases, have a volleyball game, but it certainly won't house a basketball game or any kind of bleachers or anything of that sort for spectators. I think that in Northland school division in the last six years we've had a new school in Anzac, a new school in Gift Lake: definitely, definitely appreciated. Those facilities are going there. We are looking towards a modernization, in phase 4, I think, of the infrastructure plan for a primary school at Mistassiniy in the community of Wabasca-Desmarais.

There is no doubt that when we look at the programs that we offer because we are in small communities primarily, we are not able to offer all of the kinds of programming that the community would like to see or that we believe, in some cases, would definitely help us with some of the areas related to attendance.

The one thing that I really appreciated about the Auditor General in the report that he did on attendance – Maureen smiles; we've had a lot of conversation related to the work that they have done. The one thing that really comes across is the emphasis on a personalized approach and how a personalized approach is required. What I appreciate about that is that when you talk about a personalized approach, there are a significant number of issues that impact student attendance, and there is no magic bullet.

I was very pleased when Mr. Loyola at the very beginning mentioned the residue of residential schools. That's a reality in our communities. That's a reality in our classrooms, and we need to begin to address it.

There are also a number of socioeconomic issues, which is why I'm really, really very pleased to hear our deputy minister – and I know she will do this – talk about the kinds of interagency cooperation. It's essential to anything that we do. It really is. This is more than an education issue.

Our programming capacity is also a significant issue for a number of our students, what we are able to offer for courses and what we are able to offer for options. When we're into a small high school program that has an enrolment of 15, 18, or 20 students, we do not have all of the specialties in those subject areas.

The long answer to your question: definitely. There are significant impacts, things that impact our jurisdiction and our students, and, yes, there is a definite need for a significant look at our infrastructure in our jurisdiction, what we are able to offer as programs, and other ways of offering the curriculum rather than a classroom setting.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you very much to our guests.

Unfortunately, we have now run out of time, and I regret that we have a fairly extensive speakers list that we weren't able to get to, everyone with questions for our guests this morning. Because we weren't able to get to so many main questions – we were on such great discussion threads – I'd like to give the members who had questions just a quick opportunity to read them into the record so that we have those questions down, and perhaps if Alberta Education and the Northland school division have any immediate thoughts on those, they might be able to reply to us in writing or follow up afterwards.

I will ask, Mr. Loyola, if you could please read into the record your question.

Mr. Loyola: Thank you, Madam Chair. I appreciate that. The question that I had was specifically about the integration of cultural and spiritual traditions in the programming and the curriculum itself. I'm just wondering: what aspects of the truth and reconciliation recommendations as well as the United Nations declaration on the rights of indigenous people are being integrated into the programming as you move forward?

I just want to say that I applaud the work that you're doing and that you're approaching it from a different angle now, and make sure that that gets into the record as well.

Thank you.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you, Mr. Loyola.

Mr. Cyr: My question is about this crossministry team that's been formed. We keeping saying that this is going to be the solution to the problem. I'd like to know if one of these teams has been formed in the last 60 years. I also would like to know what data will show. Has this been done in the past? If it has been done in the past, is it

going to work? Do they have a mandate, and who set this mandate? Who does this new committee answer to?

That's my question.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you, Mr. Cyr.

So we have a couple of questions added to our record. Thank you very much, everyone, for your participation – oh, I apologize. Have I missed a question for the record? Mr. Hunter.

Mr. Hunter: Thank you, Madam Chair. Along with what Member Loyola said about the residential schools, my question is: what percentage of First Nation teachers do we have in these underperforming schools?

9:50

The Deputy Chair: Okay. Thank you very much, Mr. Hunter.

Thank you again to our guests. It was very informative. You're welcome to stay.

The committee will do some procedural business before we wrap up for today. On our agenda: the committee meeting schedule. Our working group met yesterday to discuss the committee's meeting schedule after December 1, and the decision was made to add one additional meeting to our schedule and then to continue to work through the process of creating the schedule.

We would like to suggest a meeting on December 8 with Alberta Advanced Education and officials from the University of Alberta, the University of Calgary, and Olds College. The purpose of the meeting would be to address recommendations from the October report of the Auditor General related to for-profit and cost-recovery ventures at postsecondary institutions. We do have a long list of priorities to work through and plan to bring additional suggestions to our next meeting, on November 24, but this allows us to invite our guests for December 8. Is there any discussion or questions around this recommendation from the working group?

Seeing none, I will ask for a motion that

the Standing Committee on Public Accounts invite Alberta Advanced Education and officials from the University of Alberta, the University of Calgary, and Olds College to meet on December 8 with a focus on the issues identified in the Auditor General's report from October 2015.

Moved by Ms Payne. Thank you. All those in favour? Opposed? The motion is carried.

Other business. I would like to note for the record that a written response to a question raised at the last meeting has been received from the office of the Auditor General and will be available on the internal and external committee websites. Thank you very much for that. On the internal website, OurHouse, it can be found under the follow-up responses and on the Assembly website under supplementary resources.

Is there any other business to be raised at this time?

Seeing none, our next meeting is scheduled for November 24, 2015, with Alberta Treasury Board and Finance to discuss the government of Alberta's 2014-15 annual report, including the consolidated financial statements and the Measuring Up components. The gap in time between this meeting and our next is because of the anticipated consideration of main estimates. We're all going to have a very fun day today; I'm excited. So that is our next meeting date, November 24. I look forward to seeing you all then.

Any other additional items?

Then I'd ask that a member move that the meeting be adjourned. Mr. Hunter. All those in favour? Opposed? The motion is carried.

Thank you all very, very much.

[The committee adjourned at 9:53 a.m.]

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