Legislative Assembly of Alberta

The 30th Legislature
Third Session

Standing Committee on Families and Communities

Ministry of Education
Consideration of Main Estimates

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Standing Committee on Families and Communities

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Standing Committee on Families and Communities

Participants

Ministry of Education
- Hon. Adriana LaGrange, Minister
- Christine Sewell, Assistant Deputy Minister and Senior Financial Officer
- Andre Tremblay, Deputy Minister

9 a.m. Wednesday, March 9, 2022

[Ms Lovely in the chair]

Ministry of Education
Consideration of Main Estimates

The Chair: I would like to call the meeting to order and welcome everyone in attendance to please take their seats. The committee has under consideration the estimates of the Ministry of Education for the fiscal year ending March 21, 2023.

I'd ask that we go around the table and have the members introduce themselves for the record. Minister, please introduce the officials who are joining you at the table.

Member LaGrange: Thank you, Chair. I have with me Andre Tremblay, deputy minister; Christine Sewell, assistant deputy minister of financial services; Emily Ma, acting executive director of K to 12 fiscal oversight. In the gallery I have Dan Karas, acting assistant deputy minister, system excellence; Jeff Willan, assistant deputy minister, strategic services and governance; Jennifer Flaman, assistant deputy minister of curriculum; Nicole Callihoo, assistant deputy minister of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit education; Kindy Joseph, assistant deputy minister, program and system support; and several other of my team members, including my chief of staff, Nicole Williams.

The Chair: My name is Jackie Lovely, and I'm the MLA for Camrose and the chair of this committee. We'll begin starting to my right with introductions.

Mr. Hunter: Grant Hunter, Taber-Warner.

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: Jeremy Nixon, Calgary-Klein.

Mr. Yao: Tany Yao, Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo.

Mr. Smith: Good morning. Mark Smith, Drayton Valley-Devon.

Mr. Amery: Good morning. Mickey Amery, Calgary-Cross.

Member Irwin: Janis Irwin, Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood.

Ms Hoffman: Sarah Hoffman, Edmonton-Glenora.

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

The Chair: We'll now go to the members participating remotely. Please proceed, Member.

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

The Chair: I'd like to note the following substitutions for the record. Mr. Nixon is substituting for Mrs. Frey, and Mr. Stephan will be substituting for Mr. Gotfried for a portion of the meeting, from 10:45 to noon, and Member Irwin is substituting for Deputy Chair Ms Sigurdson. Finally, Mr. Yao is substituting for Mr. Reid.

A few housekeeping items to address before we turn to the business at hand. Please note that the microphones are operated by *Hansard*. Committee proceedings are being live streamed on the Internet and broadcast on Alberta Assembly TV. The audio- and videostream and transcripts of meetings can be accessed via the Legislative Assembly website. Members participating remotely are encouraged to have your camera on while speaking and your microphone muted when you are not speaking.

Remote participants who wish to be placed on the speakers list are asked to e-mail or send a message in the group chat to the committee clerk, and members in the room are asked to please signal to the chair. Please set your cellphones and other devices to silent for the duration of the meeting.

Hon. members, the standing orders set out the process for consideration of the main estimates. A total of six hours have been scheduled for consideration of the estimates for the Ministry of Education. Standing Order 59.01(6) establishes the speaking rotation and speaking times.

In brief, the minister or member of Executive Council acting on the minister's behalf will have 10 minutes to address the committee. At the conclusion of the minister's comments a 60-minute speaking block for the Official Opposition begins, followed by a 20-minute speaking block for independent members, if any – and I see there is – and then a 20-minute speaking block for the government caucus.

Individuals may speak for up to 10 minutes at a time, but time may be combined between the member and the minister. The rotation of speaking time will then follow the same rotation of the Official Opposition, independent members, and the government caucus. The member and the minister may each speak once for a maximum of five minutes, or these times may be combined, making it a 10-minute block. If members have any questions regarding speaking times or the rotation, please feel free to send an e-mail or message to the committee clerk about the process.

With the concurrence of the committee, I will call a five-minute break near the midpoint of the meeting; however, the three-hour clock will continue to run. Does anyone oppose having a break? Don't all speak at once.

Ministry officials may be present and at the direction of the minister may address the committee. Ministry officials seated in the gallery, if called upon, have access to a microphone in the gallery area and are asked to please introduce themselves for the record prior to commenting.

Pages are available to deliver notes or other materials between the gallery and the table. Attendees in the gallery may not approach the table. Space permitting, opposition caucus staff may sit at the table to assist their members; however, members have priority to sit at the table at all times.

If debate is exhausted prior to six hours, the ministry's estimates are deemed to have been considered for the time allotted in the schedule, and the committee will adjourn.

Points of order will be dealt with as they arise, and individual speaking times will be paused; however, the speaking block time and the overall three-hour meeting clock will continue to run.

Any written materials provided in response to questions raised during the main estimates should be tabled by the minister in the Assembly for the benefit of all members.

The vote on the estimates and any amendments will occur in Committee of Supply on March 21, 2022. Amendments must be in writing and approved by Parliamentary Counsel prior to the meeting at which they are to be moved. The original amendment is to be deposited with the committee clerk with 20 hard copies. An electronic version of the signed original should be provided to the committee clerk for distribution to the members.

Finally, the committee should have the opportunity to hear both questions and answers without interruption during estimates debate. Debate flows through the chair at all times, including instances when speaking time is shared between a member and the minister.

I would now invite the Minister of Education to begin her opening remarks. Minister, you have 10 minutes.

Member LaGrange: Thank you so very much. It is a great honour for me as minister to be here to discuss Education's $8.4 billion 2022 budget in main estimates. I'll now give you a brief overview as I've already introduced all of my team here with me today. I'm

going to have to tell you that I have an A-team. I'm very thankful to all the great people beside me and behind me that make education so great in Alberta.

I'd like to give you a brief overview of the commitments our government has made in the latest budget to ensure that all students can access an excellent education while also ensuring we are prudent with the public money that we do spend. Budget 2022 is moving the province forward to a time of economic recovery and prosperity, where Albertans have opportunities to build their skills, pursue their passions, and support themselves and their families.

Through Budget 2022 Alberta's government continues its strong support of the education system. We are increasing our investment in education to ensure students continue to receive a world-class education that enriches their lives and prepares them for success beyond school. I'm very pleased to say that operating support to the education system as a whole will increase by more than $700 million over the next three years to support students and teachers and to address cost pressures.

In 2022-2023 this increased funding will ensure school authorities can hire the required number of teachers and support staff; address increases in property and vehicle insurance premiums; build foundations for rewarding careers with updated curriculum; expand educational choice with additional opportunities in science, technology, engineering, mathematics, and the trades; and mitigate the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on student learning.

Acknowledging the challenges the pandemic caused, we will be holding school authorities' operational funding allocations harmless after unexpected enrolment fluctuations caused by the pandemic. This means that operational funding allocations for all school authorities will be the same or higher than the '21-22 school year. An important promise we made to Albertans during the last election was to maintain or increase funding, and that commitment remains strong.

As always, our goal is to drive as many dollars as possible to the classroom and away from administrative costs. In fact, 94.7 per cent of operational funding goes to public, separate, and francophone schools, who serve 92.2 per cent of the total student population. Just 4.1 per cent is allocated to independent schools and ECS operators, who serve about 6.3 per cent of the students, and 1.2 per cent of operational funding is allocated to support the 1.5 per cent of Alberta students who choose to attend charter schools. The funding model continues to give school boards maximum flexibility on how they manage their resources as they know how to best address their students' needs. Alberta students deserve a high-quality education that starts with stable, predictable funding for school authorities.

We are increasing our strong operational support for the education system by investing an additional $142 million in '22-23, $269 million in '23-24, and $301 million in '24-25. No one could have predicted the lower enrolment experienced due to the pandemic. As everyone knows, more than $130 million in COVID mitigation funding was provided to school authorities in the current school year, funding that would have otherwise been removed from the system.

As we move forward with the upcoming school years, we are committed to sustainable and predictable funding for enrolment growth. As I said earlier, we are continuing to hold harmless to the 2020-21 school year, where we saw significant and unpredictable fluctuations in enrolment. To be clear, enrolment is less than what school boards have been projecting. Despite those lower enrolments, despite growing school board reserves, we are still maintaining funding to the system and adding funding for additional supports.

Three major grants will receive rate increases beginning in September 2022. We are increasing the base instruction funding rate by 1 per cent to help address cost pressures such as staffing, inflation, and salary grid movement. We are also increasing the operations and maintenance rate by 1 per cent to assist with rising property insurance premiums.

9:10

The transportation grant will receive an additional $39 million over the next three years, which is a 4.6 per cent rate increase. This will assist with vehicle insurance premiums, fuel costs, and new driver training. Additionally, as enrolment growth is realized in future years, it will be fully funded. We know that the cost of enrolment growth is significant and that growth creates ongoing pressures in future years. This is part of our commitment to provide schools with the resources required to support safe learning for students.

As you know, we are also continuing on updating the curriculum. The renewed curriculum will help prepare our students for a rapidly changing labour market, which is placing an ever-increasing premium on adaptability and transferable skills. As announced in December, implementation of the new K to 6 curriculum will begin in September of 2022 with three subjects: mathematics, English language arts and literature, and physical education and wellness.

Over the past few months the single most frequent question I have received is: how will we be supporting this implementation? We will be supporting curriculum implementation with $191 million in curriculum funding over the next three years, including $59 million in year 1, which is the '22-23 year. This significant investment will cover resource development, the procurement of learning and teaching resources, and teacher professional learning. Further details on implementation will be shared soon.

The pandemic has presented many challenges to students, educators, and parents. In particular, we have seen delays in student learning and mental health impacts. Students will need supports, whether for academic, social, emotional, or behavioural needs. I also heard this from many school authorities. That is why we are providing an additional $110 million over the next three years, including $30 million in year 1 to provide needed supports to address student well-being, learning gaps, and mental health. The funding will support wraparound services for the students who are most in need. We'll announce more details later this spring.

Without a doubt, the K to 12 education system plays the key role in preparing students for the world of work. Alberta's government is making sure that students have every opportunity to pursue their chosen career path and personal interests and succeed in Alberta's dynamic job market. New funding will expand education opportunities for vocational education, with focused programming in both the skilled trades and STEM fields, under the Alberta at work initiative.

We are also providing more than $2 million to support dual credit in career and technology studies enhancements, with more details to be announced soon. This funding will support Alberta students' access to work-based learning and postsecondary credential opportunities in high school that bridge them to careers, trade designations, and to jobs. We will also invest $3 million over three years to provide financial literacy education to junior and senior high school students.

Moving on to school infrastructure, work will continue on all projects under way, and the 2022 capital plan invests $2 billion over the next three years for school projects. This includes funding to support 15 priority school projects and continue work on the over 50 previously announced projects and maintain existing schools: $118 million over the next three years to support the continued implementation of the modular program to address the most urgent needs for additional space across this province; $209 million over three years to support the maintenance and renewal of existing

school buildings through the CMR program, which is the capital maintenance and renewal program; and $300 million over three years in school authorities' self-directed capital projects.

Our education funding model, with its weighted moving average, will also continue to ensure predictable, sustainable funding for school authorities.

To conclude, I will stress again that all school authorities will be held harmless due to the pandemic, which means that they will receive the same or more if they are growing school divisions in operational funding for the '22-23 school year.

Now I am happy to turn it back over to you, Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

For the next 60 minutes members of the Official Opposition and the minister may speak. Hon. members, you will be able to see the timer for the speaking block both in the committee room and on Microsoft Teams. Member, would you like to combine your time with the minister?

Ms Hoffman: I'd be happy to, because I think it usually leads to better dialogue and outcomes for debate if the minister is willing.

The Chair: Minister, what's your choice?

Member LaGrange: My choice is block timing.

The Chair: All right. We'll go with block timing, then.

Ms Hoffman: So it's 10 minutes at a time, Madam Chair?

The Chair: Yes.

Ms Hoffman: Okay. It's too bad. Maybe the minister will reconsider at a future time. I'll have her let me know if that's the case.

I want to begin by recognizing everyone who was involved in creating the budget. I know it takes a village, and thank you to them for being here to help us get to more details. I think the world is paying attention to what's happening in democracies around the world. I think one of the key pillars to good parliamentary democracy is transparency, openness, and trust. Hopefully, we can increase some of that here today and use it to help us make good decisions on behalf of Alberta students and the staff who serve them.

The top outcome – I almost said learner outcome – in the business plan is around Alberta students being successful, and that really is the focus of what I'll be discussing here in this first chunk of time. I will say that it shocked me when we were in the lock-up this year that not only in the budget documents there wasn't a number for the projections of students for this upcoming school year – I've been in many lock-ups, probably more than a decade's worth of lock-ups – but for the first time officials didn't give us the number of students that were either currently registered in school or projections for the upcoming school year.

Last year the projection for the year that we're in currently was 726,000. I would like clarification on what the actual number is this year because when we checked the website again most recently, what was posted about two weeks ago – I didn't check again this morning. Perhaps it's been updated and this will be a very quick answer, but the numbers that were posted publicly on Alberta Education's website were still projections for a school year that we're more than halfway through. So I'd like to have the responses begin with the number for the actuals. Within that, it would be very helpful for us to have a breakdown of at least divisions 1, 2, and 3, particularly as we know that last year a significant number, as the minister mentioned in her opening remarks, of students who were projected to come to school didn't come to school.

It was reported that the majority of that were students whose families didn't register them for kindergarten, for a variety of reasons. One of the biggest ones that the minister has acknowledged was their desire to keep their children safe. I think an important question for the framing about "Are we setting Alberta students up for success?" would be: how many actually registered for kindergarten this year, and did all of those students who were projected to be in kindergarten last year indeed register for grade 1 this year? The breakdown in the early years, I think, is an important piece, but also the divisions 1, 2, and 3 numbers would be very important for us to be able to be aware of: is Alberta Education, the minister setting students up for success, outcome 1?

We'll stay in the fiscal plan for a little bit. At this point I'm going to draw your attention to schedule 21. In this year's fiscal plan it's on page 212. It's probably different by plus or minus five pages in prior years. On schedule 21 it's titled Full-time Equivalents, and it's broken down by a variety of ministries as well as agencies and the SUCH sector. That includes schools when you're looking at Education. It has the number of certificated staff, so those would be teacher certificates, and it also has the number of noncertificated staff.

When we compare this year's certificated staff number that's published in the government's fiscal plan to prior schedule 21 fiscal plans, we see that there's a net reduction of almost a thousand teachers in Alberta schools just in the time that the current government has been leading the education system. I would certainly say that that will make it very difficult for us to achieve our goals around students being successful with far greater needs, as the minister has highlighted, given the chaos that students have endured over the last few years in particular as well as the reduced staff complement to support those students.

Yeah. Can the minister explain why under her government there are about a thousand fewer teachers working with students than there were prior? What does this decline in the number of teachers say about the government's commitment to providing the best education to the youngest Albertans? What does it say about the government's decision to remove class size reporting, which was done in the province of Alberta for many, many years?

9:20

I think that parents have been able to draw very clear conclusions over the last three years, and I think that if we want to – and I sincerely hope we all do – achieve outcome 1 and high levels of success for all students, making sure that they have adults working with them, specifically certificated teachers and educational assistants, will be key to that.

In the business plan there is also key objective 3.2 – it's on the next page of the business plan – and 3.2 talks about bolstering the teaching workforce in high-demand regions and high-need subject areas. That's a very, you know, broad target. The performance metric related to that – there's only one – is around standard of acceptable and standard of excellence on achievement tests for math and language arts. What would bolstering the teaching workforce mean to the minister? Can the minister tell us over the last three fiscal years what the student-to-teacher ratio was, and can the minister tell this committee what the student-to-teacher ratio is expected to be for the periods of the business plan, so '22-23, '23-24, '24-25? What is the target that we're actually going to be measuring, that objective?

I did mention this last year. I have to say that the significant reduction in the actual business plan, the core business plan, in terms of specifically the metrics – having one metric that doesn't feel related to most of the actual key objectives is, I think, highly problematic. There are many people who've rightfully said that if something's important to you, you measure it, and I would say that

if something's important to building trust, you should also report it. So questions around the class size generally or, rather, the student-to-teacher ratio for the three years the minister has currently been in the position she's in as well as the next three years, through you, Madam Chair, would certainly, I think, help address some of the trust concerns that parents and staff have raised with me.

Measuring class size and reporting was something that was done consistently by prior Conservative and NDP governments but has been eliminated under the UCP, so a response on why that was done and how that is in any way going to increase trust or confidence when it comes to the government caring about class size, student-teacher ratios, and the success of students in their opportunities to learn from certificated professionals.

Many parents have raised class sizes with me specifically as an issue that they're concerned about, so can the minister tell the committee again about those? I asked for the general roll-up numbers, but I think it would also be important for specifically divisions 1, 2, and 3, in line with the Commission on Learning report that sets targets and ranges for those years.

In preparation for the current budget that we are considering, did the ministry attempt to undertake any analysis of the significant learning loss that we all know happened over the last two years? I regularly hear from parents who talk about – one, her daughter started kindergarten in 2019 and hasn't had a year where she's been consistently able to go to school and have stability in her education. Not knowing anything different, obviously, we can't say that she lost learning. Learning isn't something that you find or you lose, but she certainly had opportunities that were taken away from her that could have resulted in increased opportunities to have a positive educational experience.

What kind of analysis is actually being done on learning loss and the impacts of COVID-19 to date, and what is the minister actually going to do to bring students back up to the standard we were at previously? Definitely, class size, educational assistants, and enhanced supports for one-on-one opportunities, not just in grades 2 and 3 but in all years, would be fundamental. If the ministry didn't look specifically into learning loss here, have they done interjurisdictional comparative analysis to see what other places across Canada and in the west and, really, internationally have done?

The Chair: Thank you, hon. member.

We'll then go over to the minister for a response.

Member LaGrange: Thank you very much for those very good questions, and I will try and cover all of my response to all of those questions as quickly as possible. Ten minutes isn't very much time.

I do want to start – the reason I'm wearing yellow and blue is obviously our allegiance with Ukraine. Our thoughts and prayers are with all of them, and I know the members opposite and everyone here in this room send their thoughts and prayers as they go through a very tragic time.

You're absolutely right, member opposite, for sharing that, in fact, the hallmark of a great democracy is the education that they have, and having a good, strong education system is something that we value. Obviously, our government values it very much because we have increased it by over $700 million, and I'll be happy to go into the details.

The first question in terms of the success of our students – well, of course, to have a well-funded education system will ensure that we have the supports and the resources that students require to make them successful. Student numbers have been updated, and I know that, you know, this is probably slightly later than it has happened in other years because of something that we strategically did to support our students with special needs. We've allowed for assessments to take place right up until the 1st of December every year now. That does skew some of the numbers, so we needed to make sure that our numbers were accurate. Therefore, we have those numbers up to date. They are on the website, but I'm happy to table the projection numbers and the head count numbers that have been put forward.

I can share with – I can use names, right?

The Chair: Yes.

Member LaGrange: Okay.

I can share with MLA Hoffman that you are, in fact, correct that the projection for the '21-22 school year was 726,000 students. I just want to back up a wee bit because last year when we were in estimates, I was able to point out that while we were funding to the projected head count – and this is what we're funding. We're holding harmless. We're funding 730,030 students. So 730,030 students are funded under the projected head count for 2020 even though in 2020-2021 we only had 705,917 students attend school. We are holding harmless again for the '21-22 year. While the projection was 726,654, the actual count was 716,868. We're still funding 730,000 students. Actual bums in seats, so to speak, in the '21-22 year are 716,868. Those numbers are indeed up.

You are right to share that kindergarten numbers were the numbers that were most affected. We are still having school authorities do their registrations for kindergarten, so I do not have those numbers at this point in time.

Anything I missed from my team before I go on? [interjection] Okay.

Schedule 21 on the thousand teachers. If the members of the opposition took, you know, a proper read through the budget, they would see that, in fact, there are 160 more school staff next year, including over 100 new teachers. The projection is just that, a projection. The members of the opposition know that the government does not hire or, in fact, fire teachers; school boards do this. The facts are that with an increase in funding and our commitment to once again protect school boards from their overprojections due to COVID, the math on a thousand fewer teachers next year just does not make sense. The facts are that the budget projects more teachers, not fewer. Government spending on education is up $700 million over three years, and school boards hire and fire teachers, not our government.

Again, school boards are also sitting on almost half a billion dollars in reserves. I just want to draw your attention, and maybe some of you already know this because I have mentioned it in question period and beyond. At the start of the pandemic school board reserves were sitting at $363 million. As of August 31, 2021, they are sitting at $464 million, an increase, a significant increase, I might add. We have always – and it's always been my aim that more dollars get pushed to the front lines because that's where you have a significant impact on students, teachers, and educational assistants.

9:30

Again, the reality is that Alberta's education system and Alberta's public school boards remain extremely well funded, and the decision to increase or decrease staffing is theirs. My job is to ensure that they have those dollars available, and then they make those staffing decisions for their school authorities.

On class sizes, yes, there was a class size audit, which, in fact, showed that we had spent $3 billion without actually addressing the issue. As we know, class sizes alone do not affect the classroom environment. It's the complexity within the classroom. So you could have a very small class size, but if you have very high-needs

students in that class, then that becomes problematic. We are continuing to work with school authorities, and the best way we can assist school authorities to reduce class sizes and to ensure that they have the proper resources and supports is to increase funding for special needs, which we have done. Last year I added an additional $40 million. We're sitting at over $1.4 billion in our special-needs funding, which is the special learning fund. Beyond that, we are continuing to add to the overall budgets of school authorities, and we've held them harmless when they've lost student numbers. There are many things that we're continuing to do to address that particular issue.

On bolstering the teaching workforce, again, school authorities have the ability, the autonomy to do what they need to do for their school authorities. We know that in Education 98 per cent of all the funding of my overall budget goes directly to school authorities so that they can make sure that they have the right staffing configuration, that they also have the supports and what they need to ensure that their students are successful.

On learning loss, we have been looking at this very closely. As the member opposite knows, last spring we had assessments done in the early years. We continue to look at that feedback. We added an additional $45 million. This was up and above all of the funding that we had already included. So $45 million went to address learning gaps within our education system for grades 1 to 3, and I have been hearing great, great results from that. I was at a school last Friday where the whole focus of the school – it was a Calgary public school. It was an elementary school. They took me around to show me the strategies that they're utilizing, and to great effect, to counteract that.

As well, we've been working with superintendents, who, of course, are the administrators overseeing their school authorities, working with them to find out: where are the gaps, and where are the needs? As you know, I've allocated $110 million over three years to look at addressing gaps but also looking at mental health and wellness within our students. That's up and above. We want to leverage those dollars, as far as mental health supports go, by working with other ministries as well.

We also started the e-Tutoring Hub for grades 4 to 12 to provide another support system, a support for teachers and for parents to work with their children to address any gaps that may have occurred. Again, we are continuing to keep a close eye on this, looking to make sure that we have what is required and continue to assess where necessary and provide supports where needed as well.

Is there anything that anyone on my team would like to add in this regard? Andre, was there anything you'd want to add?

Mr. Tremblay: Sure. Just to really quickly pick up on the minister's comment, in the spring of 2021 we actually rolled out two assessment tools for grades 1, 2, and 3 just to get a better understanding of how students were doing during the pandemic, and that actually helped form the foundation of the $40 million, that the minister just referred to, that went directly to school authorities to provide pullout services to students that may be actually struggling with basic literacy and numeracy. We know that those three grades are quite critical in terms of building a foundation for kids long term in the school system, so providing those assessment tools for free to school authorities really helped school authorities to understand what might be happening in those early grades, which ultimately helped us with that overall programming. That went out just before Christmas, and there's another round of . . . [A timer sounded]

The Chair: Well, that's good and loud, isn't it?

Thank you to the minister's team.

Back over to the member.

Ms Hoffman: Thank you. Again, just to clarify, there are two more blocks like this – is that correct? – on the first rotation.

The Chair: Yes. You can see on the big screens here that that's the full remaining time. Then your time is the red allotted.

Ms Hoffman: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Just to, again, piece together the last section of responses to the opening remarks, the minister noted in the opening remarks that the base funding grant is only going up by 1 per cent. Just now, through the sharing of this year's actual at 716,000 students and the projection that was mentioned by the minister, 730,030, that is more than a 1 per cent increase just to enrolment numbers. And in the opening remarks the minister said that that base funding grant was supposed to include things like contract negotiations and other increased needs. If she didn't say that, I'm happy for her to clarify. That is what I recall in her opening remarks around the base grant and what it was to include.

Certainly, if that wasn't what she intended to say, I'm happy to receive accurate information, because it definitely won't be sufficient to address significant increased learning needs that, as has been mentioned, were negatively impacted, particularly over the last two years, increased enrolment of greater than 1 per cent for this upcoming school year, and obviously there are contract negotiations that have been awaiting the government's attention for quite some time, not to mention the increased need for significant investment in mental health. I don't think any parent I have heard from in recent memory has said that their child is doing better in terms of their mental health now than they were two years ago. Certainly, there was a lot of work still to do then, and I think we did address some of it but not to the scope that we need to as a society.

Back to the question that I led off on. Yes, tabling the actual enrolment numbers for each of those divisions, in particular the kindergarten numbers, or reading it into the record during the next exchange: either would be acceptable. I would really appreciate having the information, that isn't available today, prior to being expected to vote on the main estimates. I think it's only fair to all members that we have the information to back up the budget before we're asked to make a decision about the budget.

Lastly, we talked about learning loss and looking at other jurisdictions that have taken upon themselves to enhance opportunities for students to make up those gaps. Ultimately, we're looking for some information around assessments that have been done and other programs that are going to be launched, because the ones to date certainly haven't been sufficient. If the ministry could speak to this or table it with the committee at the end, it would be appreciated.

Also, a significant issue that relates to some of the information that was just shared. I absolutely read schedule 21. I saw the net number that was reported there. I also looked at schedule 21 for the last three budgets, and the comparison is between what the certificated teacher number was prior to the current government being elected, the UCP being elected, and what the certificated teacher number is in the budget being proposed. It's not just looking at schedule 21 from this year, but it's looking at schedule 21 going back three years. What I'm looking for ultimately are some answers about the teacher shortages that we've been experiencing.

While the minister is correct in saying that she doesn't sign contracts with teaching staff, that it is school divisions – what was called "district" is now being called "division" – that sign those contracts, the minister certainly has a responsibility, in accordance with the actual business plan outlined here, to address the educational needs. Specifically, one of the key objectives, 3.2, is around the teaching workforce. The minister puts that as one of the

targets, one of the outcomes. It would be fair for the minister to report to us on what tools will be used to deliver our desire to bolster the number of teachers in the workforce, which is one of her objectives for this upcoming year.

Also, we know that there have been significant substitute teacher shortages. We've seen this reported repeatedly over the last two years, especially during the waves of delta and omicron. It would be important for us to receive information on what's going to be done to bolster the substitute teaching supply. I know that most divisions still are not hiring substitute teachers at present given their budgetary pressures. What's being done to address the issues, and what lessons have been learned from the significant staffing shortages that schools and, in turn, students experienced over the last two years?

9:40

Most parents and staff have told me that they want the education system to provide smaller class sizes, more educational assistants, improved access to technology and digital supports. Instead, in outcome 1's key objectives, on page 31 of the business plan, two of the four measures under "Alberta students are successful" are about standardized provincial assessments. One is about implementing grades 1 and 2 assessments in language arts and math, and the second one is about modernizing online assessment capabilities.

My key question would be: what groups or individuals said that this should be the government's key focus? It definitely hasn't been a dominant theme that parents have been raising with me or school staff or school divisions for that matter. Who's been lobbying for, you know, two of the four key objectives related to student success being focused around standardized assessments and, particularly, provincial assessments for grade 1 and grade 2 students, six- and seven-year-olds? We pushed back hard as a society to remove the requirement for PATs in grade 3. That was led by a PC MLA, and that was supported by all sides of the House, and now we've certainly seen a significant move in the opposite direction. It was Genia Leskiw who moved that motion, and the government followed in turn. Why is it that we're pushing so hard for a provincial assessment? I think that we all know that if you have more teachers able to work with six- and seven-year-olds, you'll be able to have a greater real-time, authentic, lived experience assessment in a classroom and be able to tailor instruction to those learner needs.

Again in the business plan, outcome 1 is that Alberta students are successful. Outcome 2: First Nations, Métis, and Inuit students in Alberta are successful. The only measurements with regard to those are high school completion rates, which I think are one important measure, but often they are many years delayed from when we would like to see real-time impacts on those goals. The metrics are certainly problematic, and I would like to know why it is that the government has reduced the number of metrics so substantially and why it is that only these two remain when they really don't have a direct impact to many of the key objectives, how implementing a grade 1 standardized assessment can be measured by looking at high school completion rates. They are completely disconnected, and you're not measuring your impact on the objective if you have a performance measure that is completely out of line.

In terms of outcome 4, key objectives around the education system being well managed and well governed, we would like to have some reporting on the most recent year's actuals. Safe, caring, and healthy: those are things that we always measure around students', staff's, and family members' sense of safe, caring, and healthy student learning environments. What were the actuals for 2018 through to the present on the safe, caring, and healthy assessment, and how do we determine if the targets that are actually here, performance metric 4(a), are aggressive enough or if they are in line? Having information on where those performance metrics 4(a) have been, 2018 to the present, I think will give us an understanding of if we're reaching far enough or if our reach is out of whack. So receiving information on where those assessments have landed I think would be incredibly important.

I will take just the last 40 seconds in this section to speak generally to the frustration that so many families with students who are disabled felt in particular over the last two years. An equity education, of course, includes having access to the right supports to be successful, and that certainly wasn't the case when more than 20,000 education workers were given notice by the minister of their termination through a tweet on a Saturday. It didn't create an opportunity for us to focus on equity and actually support the students who have the most complex needs. That is something that I would like to hear the minister respond to and what she is doing in this budget to correct that.

The Chair: Thank you, hon. member.

Now back to the minister for response.

Member LaGrange: Thank you so much. A lot of areas to cover there. Certainly, happy to answer these questions. On the base funding we are increasing base funding to 1 per cent. The member opposite did talk to the fact that, you know, we are seeing inflation and all the rest of it, and I'm happy to actually share with MLA Hoffman that, in fact, we are still funding way above enrolment growth and inflation.

I have a chart before me that I'm happy to share copies with all the members here. In 2004-2005 to 2018-2019 operational funding increased by 80 per cent in Education while enrolment growth increased by 25 per cent and inflation by 33 per cent, so 80 per cent in comparison to enrolment growth and inflation at 25 per cent and 33 per cent. From 2006 to 2021 we saw operational funding increase by 61 per cent in comparison to enrolment growth of 23 per cent and inflation of 29 per cent. In 2007-2008 school year to '21-22 we see operational funding increases of 48 per cent whereas enrolment growth grew by 24 per cent, inflation by 26 per cent. You know, we can look at the curve that is still – we're funding way above what – the operational funding increases are way above what enrolment growth and inflation is as a standard.

The other thing that I can share is that in the 2019 MacKinnon panel report it found Alberta's per capita spending was higher than anywhere in Canada despite the higher levels of funding. The outcomes were not any better and in some instances worse than other provinces. We are then looking to ensure that we have – (a) we want to make sure that we have a well-funded education system, but we're also wanting to ensure that we're getting good value for dollar for that education system.

There was a question around mental health. Yes, we have seen that mental health concerns have increased over the last two years, particularly throughout the pandemic, in our young people. I am so proud that our province was the first province to put funding out there, and in fact at one point we were higher than any other provinces combined in mental health funding of $53 million as a province. A good portion of that went to supports within our young people: the Kids Help Phone, we added additional supports in jack.org, and so many other supports during that time period. I know that school boards focused on this as well.

Again, that's why it was very important for me to add an additional $40 million in last year's overall funding envelope for special needs, because we know they did feel more of the challenges, and we continued to provide that support. To continue that on, it was important to add an additional $110 million over three years. It's $30

million this year and $40 million in each of the next following years on that particular front. Am I missing anything before I move on to the next? Okay.

I'm very proud of the fact, when the member opposite was asking about interjurisdictional supports and scans, that we were one of the very first provinces to start addressing learning gaps and learning issues. We did assessments last spring when other provinces hadn't even returned to school yet, their children weren't even in school yet. Ours were back in school, and we were looking to address those learning gaps. We added $45 million. We started with grades 2 and 3 in the fall. We are now in the process of grade 1, providing those supports to grade 1, and that was because we were listening to the system, to the education system, those on the ground telling us that early interventions in these early years are going to make the most significant impact. They will have the most significant impact in addressing the gaps as well as setting up the students for future success.

We heard from the system that they wanted to delay the supports for grade 1 because they wanted those children, some of whom did not attend school the previous year – if they were not in kindergarten, because we did see lower numbers in kindergarten, they entered grade 1. They wanted those children to acclimatize, that they would be able to then have some training and some supports for those children to get used to being in the classroom before they actually assessed them.

9:50

The assessments took place here in January, and then we have now supported them through the funding. The funding has gone out. So school authorities can now – and the way that we're supporting them was actually hiring additional teachers or educational assistants or subs so that those teachers could do small-group training with those students. They could take those students out and do targeted supports.

As I said earlier, I was in an elementary school just last Friday, and my gosh the work that's going on and how well those students are doing and getting back up to speed is incredible. It was the one thing – as I went and toured the classrooms, the principal and all the teachers were just very, very supportive of the programs that we have put in place. In fact, we have been very fortunate to have Dr. Georgiou, who is world renowned and who the Alberta Teachers' Association has given awards to for all of his work that he has done in the early years in literacy. That is really making a huge impact. We're utilizing a lot of the work that he's done in our new K to 6 curriculum, particularly in the early years in literacy.

Again, there are a lot of great things going on, and happy to continue sharing more and more about that, as I'm sure there'll be more questions as we move forward.

Addressing teacher numbers. Again, I believe I answered that before. In fact, by our numbers those numbers are going up, providing school boards with all the additional supports in dollars, $700 million over, as I said, three years. When we look at the number of substitute teachers as well, that number did go down during the pandemic. As everyone knows, oftentimes substitute teachers are teachers who've retired who still want to continue on in the profession, giving back and perhaps earning a little extra income, but oftentimes they are older teachers. I know there was a hesitancy and there was some concern by older teachers during the pandemic, as there was in every other field right across the province.

One thing that I can share that is going to help with our overall numbers is to graduate more teachers. I know right now that many school authorities do have advertisements looking for teachers to hire, and I know that postsecondaries – particularly, Red Deer Polytechnic has now received the opportunity to provide a full bachelor of education program. There are actually going to be more teachers that are going to go through that postsecondary program and graduate and be accessible to the system as a whole.

I know that there are many opportunities for school authorities utilizing the dollars that they have, and I know that they have growing reserves. I like to see school board reserves healthy. That being said, we have always advocated that those dollars be utilized to full impact, and where they can be best impacted is in the classroom. Teachers, educational assistants in the classroom are certainly going to make the difference.

On outcome 1 digital – one of the mentions – I addressed teachers and EAs. Another item mentioned was digital support, you know, connectivity. We know as a province that when we had to transition to online learning, the connectivity was a huge, huge concern, so we've navigated through that. It also showed the gaps that we have. Just recently the Minister of Service Alberta was able to share that we are going to be spending over $300 million to improve connectivity across this province, particularly in our rural areas, where I know first-hand, being a farmer myself, that it can be spotty. And when you have children that are requiring that from time to time, it is problematic. The $300 million: that will also have some federal matching to it, is going to be stretched so that we can actually deal with some of the connectivity issues in this province and provide more digital support for our students.

In terms of the goals on high school completion rates we were asked to trim down – and this was a number of budgets ago – our number of goals that are actually in the budget, but they can be found online. The full complement of those goals can be found online. We have so many more goals in Education. I always hate having just this short small number in . . .

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Back over to the member.

Ms Hoffman: Thank you very much, Madam Chair. Through you to the minister, I'm going to do the next chunk all on capital pressures that boards are facing. This relates to the business plan page 65, initiatives supporting key objectives, where there's discussion about the dollar amounts as well as the modular and new builds as well as modernizations. Also, it relates to the capital plan page 159. I'm just going to read one sentence here. It says:

> These projects will support enrolment growth in communities that continue to see population growth, preserve and modernize existing facilities and consolidate underutilized space, thereby reducing maintenance costs in those communities experiencing enrolment or population decline.

This has been one of the constant frustrations, I think, for many school authorities throughout the province, that when they don't get enough money through general capital announcements or plan operations and maintenance or infrastructure maintenance and renewal funds, money is inevitably taken away from instructional supports, so teachers, educational assistants, and moved towards having to maintain buildings that are not in an appropriate state for safe learning opportunities.

I'm going to go through a few school districts, and the really great thing is that they are all posted publicly. Three-year capital plans are posted publicly, and I want to highlight some of the projects that were submitted to the minister but that aren't being funded at all in this budget.

For context, during the time of the previous government, during those four years, there were on average 60 projects every year, and we've had about 60 projects total under the current government. This year the government has reported 15 projects, but only 11 of those are either actual modernization funds or new build funds. The

other four are around planning. So it is a significant decline from the kind of investment in capital that Albertans needed and still need given the significant neglect of critical infrastructure, including schools, for so many years under Conservative austerity budgets.

One that probably has received the most attention here in our capital city is the Edmonton public capital plan. The very first project certainly relates to underutilized space, as highlighted in the capital plan page 159. Their number one ask was around Delton school for replacement. The minister has highlighted in the media that that school isn't at capacity, and that's exactly one of the things that they want to address, the size of the building and the quality of the building to make sure that kids who go to that Delton school have an excellent opportunity for an education and they can stop spending money that should be directed towards in-school instruction on maintaining a building that's beyond its life cycle.

There was another replacement school and – again, just for framing, districts are asked to submit three different capital plans. One is for new builds, one is for modernizations, and the third is further consolidated, so there are three different lists that get submitted, and definitely in past years we've seen times where maybe a modernization wouldn't be funded which was number one but a new build would be funded which was number one on the new-build list. So using only the consolidated or aggregated three-year capital plan to justify not giving public school students in Edmonton any new infrastructure, I think, is disingenuous.

To highlight again some of the key projects: Delton, number one; Spruce Ave, number two; McConachie, which is in northeast Edmonton, desperately needs a junior high, a capacity of nearly 1,000, because kids in that area are being bused far and for a long period of time; Glenridding Heights in south Edmonton, desperate need of a junior-senior high. Not a typical build, but because it's needed schools for about the last three years in that area, now they've put in a request for a combined grade 7 through 12, 2,400 students. For context, that's about the size of Jasper Place high school or Harry Ainlay high school. Like, a large building in desperate need. I think that by neglecting Edmonton public students, it actually does say something about where the government, and particularly the minister, stands on actual school choice.

10:00

I want to begin by saying how grateful I am that we are getting some kind of building. Catholic schools are great for parents who want to choose Catholic education, but there are many parents who also want to choose a public education, and they deserve to have an investment in their school choice as well if the government wants to actually use that frame to try to justify the decisions that they're making around funding.

In addition to the two projects that were announced for Edmonton Catholic, they also need a new school for Heritage Valley – that would be a K to 9 – and they also need a replacement school in the areas of St. Jerome and St. Bernadette. There are still projects in the year 1 capital plan that haven't been funded even when those two have been. These plans don't come out of thin air. Extensive work goes into informing the work and the decision that go into those. [An electronic device sounded]

Sorry. My CO_2 monitor is not happy with the air quality in this room. I guess I'll turn it off.

Calgary public desperately needs Diefenbaker high school modernization; Nickle school, grades 5 to 9, a modernization. Saddle Ridge in northeast Calgary is a proposal for a 5 to 9, brand new. Again, these are areas of the city that continue to grow and are far underserved in terms of their needs for new schools that I'm highlighting. Cornerstone needs a new high school. Calgary Catholic, Nolan Hill, kindergarten to grade 9: we need a new school. Walden, kindergarten to grade 9: we need a new school. We also have heard – I'm sure the minister has heard many, many times about the desperate need for a Catholic high school in west Calgary. This is something that is long overdue. They also had modernizations for St. Bonaventure and St. Teresa of Calcutta in just their year 1 plans.

This many projects would have been consistent with approximately the number of projects that we had under the NDP government's time, when we were doing about 60 projects a year as opposed to 11 that are being actually funded in this project. Again, I want to acknowledge that there are four planning projects, but I'm talking about actual construction projects. Significant losses for the four largest districts, which, again, are growing. The capital plan says that they will continue to see population growth, that there will be schools in new communities that continue to see population growth. Clearly, this budget doesn't come close to addressing the needs that we have in just the four largest metros.

I'm also going to highlight a couple of other schools that I know are in desperate need of renovation or modernization or replacement. One is with Holy Family Catholic. Their number one ask is for St. Andrew's in High Prairie to be replaced. That's something that's been on their list for a very long time, and I know that the people of High Prairie were hoping they'd see some movement on that but none in this budget here.

Also, recently I met with the francophone school boards, and two of the five boards – the one that represents the far north: the number one need is for a francophone school in Fort McMurray. For the school division that's slightly south of there, their number one need is for a francophone school in Lac La Biche. I guess the question that many are asking me is: how can the government continue to neglect these areas where equity is such a deep concern? The francophone community certainly has brought forward reparations that need to be done according to, obviously, justice but also to court cases that went through the justice system around access to francophone learning opportunities. Those two projects: I think many were expecting to see them in this capital plan, but there's nothing.

There's also mention in the text around capital for charter schools and capital for collegiates. I think that Albertans deserve some clarity on what collegiates mean to this minister. I know there was a time where there was a proposal for a collegiate between Edmonton public, Edmonton Catholic, and NAIT, but that certainly would be, you know, a public under a public, Catholic, francophone educational opportunity, but in this budget the language has been grouped with charters. Is the minister proposing something outside of the public, Catholic, and francophone system for capital investment? Those weren't listed in the 15 that were announced last Friday, so where would this money be coming from for additional capital for projects that aren't public, Catholic, or francophone? What's the burning pressure on this? Why is it something that's not actually broken up into a line item? If it is part of an aggregated line item, what line item would that be?

Ultimately, my main thrust of this is that there is a significant sense of injustice in the way that capital is being doled out under the current UCP government and that it is not keeping up with growth. It isn't acknowledging that there are old buildings in need of retirement and to be replaced by adequately sized buildings.

The Chair: Thank you, hon. member.

Now back over to the minister's team.

Member LaGrange: Well, thank you so much. I would have to disagree with what has been shared because it just shows that – I believe the member opposite doesn't understand the capital process, in fact, which is kind of surprising because I do believe the member

opposite was a school board trustee. She should understand that, in fact, we have $2 billion in flux right at the moment. When she stated that they put forward 60 projects a year, those were not 60 new projects; those are done over a time span. If we're using those numbers, in fact we have 66. Our government has 66 projects, including the 15 that were announced.

When we look at the process, it's a very robust process; it's a gated process. It is one that the Auditor General recommended and was accepted in 2018, under the previous government. There are 10 gates. I'm happy to go through all of the details on that, but I think I want to share some other information, and towards the end, if I have some time, I will certainly look to share that.

As far as modulars go, we have spent the most on modulars in any particular time, in one time in government. Last year I announced just shy of $90 million for modulars. Unfortunately, due to labour shortages – you know, labour shortages – as well as the fact that there were supply chain issues, we haven't been able to have all of those completed, but we expect that they will be completed in short order here. But we are spending, over the three years, $117 million on modulars.

When it comes to francophone school authorities, I'm happy to state that since 2019 there have been six new schools announced for francophone school authorities right across this province. In the last decade, in fact, we have had 21 new schools built for the francophone community because we take our legal obligation very, very seriously. We want to make sure that those students do have the supports necessary. They also were part of the modular program and very, very happy to, you know – and I can go into details as to which schools were announced in previous years and what they have received and how we will continue to support our francophone community, as we support every school community.

The member opposite would know – MLA Hoffman would know that we receive just shy of 400 requests from all school authorities right across this province every single year. Of course, we have to go through that gated, very robust process, and I'm happy to detail that very soon and ensure that the projects that rise to the top of the list are the ones that are in fact needed the most. I am happy to say that we have announced 15 new projects.

I was surprised to see that Edmonton public wasn't on the list, that they did not make the cut. As the member duly noted, that particular school that was their number one was not in an enrolment growth area. In fact, it has 69 per cent utilization rate, and it was not a health and safety issue.

I did a little more digging. I'm a person who likes numbers, so I did a little more digging. The member would probably know these numbers. I'm talking about completed schools. In 2016 Edmonton public completed five brand new schools. In 2017 Edmonton public completed 10 new schools, that came online. In 2018 they had three new schools completed. In 2019 they had two new schools completed. In 2020 they had three new schools completed. In August 2021, last August, there are currently six projects under way for Edmonton public school division.

I looked at their jurisdictional current capacity; that is, the number of students spaces they have available in Edmonton. Right now they have 131,746 student spaces available. Their projected enrolment for 2022 is 107,337 students. They have significantly more space available. This doesn't include the modulars that we have allocated to that school, and as I said, we made record investments in modulars. Edmonton public was the happy recipient of a number of those modulars – I don't have the number right offhand, but I'm hopeful to have that shortly – that, again, can address enrolment areas' pressures in certain locations.

10:10

The way the system works through the gated process which the Auditor General recommended was, in fact, that school divisions who put their priorities – then it goes through the system. If it was a priority for the school authority to have a new school in a growing community, they would have put that as their number one or, at the very least, their number two. In this particular case I believe it's number three, perhaps even number four or further down.

Again, when we have so many demands, so many issues, if it isn't a health and safety issue, if it isn't addressing enrolment growth, if it hasn't passed all of those pieces, then obviously there are other pressures that we need to address, and it appears that there is a great deal of capacity up and above student enrolment numbers.

The only thing I can imagine is that perhaps – and I don't believe this. Hopefully, this isn't the reason why: they didn't put that particular school as number one, the one that's in the high enrolment area, the high school that the member had mentioned – I'm sorry. I don't have the name of it in front of me, which is the McConachie school. Perhaps it's because there's so much space in other schools that they would prefer to bus their students to those other schools rather than put that as their number one. You know, that is an assumption, and maybe it's a wrong assumption.

Again, we are looking at ensuring that all school authorities have schools built in areas that are needed. I'm going to read you some of the projects that were announced this year because I do believe there is real value for education in Alberta as a result of it. Like, a solution for Evansburg and Wildwood: it's taking older schools and a couple of older schools that have reached the end of their lifespan and ensuring that a new school is built to support students right across their jurisdiction. There's a solution for Milk River for the Horizon school division; the one that I mentioned earlier, the Grande Yellowhead school division; public school division solution for Evansburg; the Horizon school division's solution for Milk River.

The Peace River school division is a solution for Manning. It's helping those rural communities who are seeing, at times, enrolment decline ensure that they have a new, modern facility for their students to learn in and also addressing where you have schools that, you know, as I said earlier, have reached the end of their lifespan, need perhaps – rather than having two or three schools here, there, and everywhere, they're moving into one more modernized location.

In Northern Gateway school division, the solution for Valleyview; the Westwind school division, a new high school in Raymond; the new elementary and junior high school in Legacy and the new middle school in Evanston, which are both in Calgary, those two schools; the Edmonton new school in Lewis Farms-Secord; a modernization and addition of the Acme school; a modernization and addition of the Bow Valley high school for Rocky View school division; the new high school in Camrose for Elk Island Catholic school division; and the new high school in Castle Downs-Dunluce, which is in MLA Hoffman's counterpart's area for the opposition.

Again, these are 15 schools in addition to the 51 projects already going on in this province. We are committed to ensuring that our students are in excellent, safe learning environments, which requires new schools, major modernizations, modulars added when they're needed so that those communities can grow and then shrink when those communities get older. We continue to provide resources through the capital maintenance and renewal fund, the infrastructure maintenance and renewal fund, operations and maintenance funding, which will see a 1 per cent increase, all of these to ensure that our schools are as up to date and as functional as possible for our students, that they're clean, safe spaces.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

That concludes the first portion of questions for the Official Opposition.

We'll now move over to independent members for 20 minutes, but before we proceed, I just wanted to give you an update. I hear there will be fresh coffee after the government members do their questions, so something to look forward to.

Go ahead, Member. Would you like to combine your time with the minister?

Mr. Barnes: Yes, please.

Minister, is it okay to go back and forth and combine our time?

Member LaGrange: I'd rather go with block timing still, please. Thank you.

The Chair: All right. We'll go block.

Proceed, Member.

Mr. Barnes: Okay. Thank you, Madam Chair. I appreciate it. Thank you, Minister, and thanks to you and your entire department for all the work you do for Alberta families and Alberta children in particular.

I want to start with your key objectives 1.3 and 1.1 on page 31. Key objective 1.3 is to implement grades 1 and 2 assessments in language and math to help assess progress in the critical early years, and 1.1 is a little more inclusive for K to 6. You know, we've talked a lot about money today. We always talk a lot about money in education. I want to talk about the value that we're getting for the $9 billion annually already that the Alberta contributor, the Alberta taxpayer, pays. It's up $600 million from just two years ago. I've heard that enrolment has been static the last two years, from 705,000 to maybe 716,000 children, and a $600 million increase.

Now, unfortunately, a lot of my information and where I'm coming from is anecdotal, but it's where I have to start. I've heard from some experts and teachers and some curriculum developers that, unfortunately, the Canadian curriculum and the success of Alberta children have slipped from the top rankings in the world to maybe as low as 28th in the world when we measure our children compared to children around the world. When I've talked to these same experts about K to 6, a lot of them say that on numeracy and literacy, in grades 2, 3, and 4 especially, as many as 35 per cent of our children are not up to standard or not up to world competition, and that's horrific.

I know a few teachers, and I called them, and I said: "Could this be true? Could it be that 35 per cent of our K to 6, our grade 2s and 3s, are 35 per cent behind in literacy and numeracy?" The answer I got was yes. I would love to hear a different story on that.

I'm pleased to hear that you guys have recognized it. I did hear from Deputy Minister Tremblay that I believe it was $40 million going into early intervention for K, 1, 2, and 3. We're spending $9 billion already. What's $40 million more going to do without the right target, without the right measurement, without the right outcomes? Rather than just the money being dumped in, I'd like to hear how we're going to do it.

I want to hear some thoughts on the curriculum, too, as it relates to your key objectives 1.1 and 1.3. I'm grateful to be here 10 years, but I'm surprised that we've been talking about new curriculum for 10 years, all three governments: first the PCs, then the NDP, and now the UCP. We don't ever seem to get there. Personally, I'm surprised at the disengagement and the conflict – I don't know if "conflict" is the right word – with teachers and providers. I mean, whenever I want to do something in business or in my family, it's best to get the people that are going to be delivering it onside. You know, teachers and educators come to my office and talk about how the curriculum has not been properly fleshed out in terms of when the information is presented to the right ages and that kind of thing. I mean, I know our time is precious, but I would just like a 30-second or a minute statement on how we're going to engage our key front-line workers in this.

I want to go to the throne speech and a promise that was made just a week ago. I'm just going to quote it. It'll just take a second.

> Parents know what is best for their kids, and Albertans have long supported pluralism as a key principle in our education system. That is why the government will bring forward a package of regulatory improvements to help create new charter schools and better support existing charters to realize the promise of

choice in education.

10:20

Choice is a way to have parents more involved. Choice is a way to potentially correct these problems that I've talked about and know about, but I want to talk a little bit about home-schooling. This government talks about home-schooling and their support for it. My three boys went through the public system with great success, and I know a lot of home-schoolers have had great success, but when I talk to them, what I'm being told is that the average home-schooler gets $800 for parent-directed traditional education and up to $1,600 annually if they fully integrate into the boards. What are we doing to help fund these home-schoolers, these home-school families when most of the funding goes to the board?

You know, this is, I think, my fourth estimates. I've asked every other department about what the effects of inflation are going to be. I think the Canadian government puts out that inflation for families is 5.5 per cent annually, and everybody I talk to thinks it's over 10. My goodness, the ability for parents to really focus on their children is going to be seriously challenged, so I think it's time to increase support there.

Support for special needs. I was glad to hear in the throne speech that there was going to be some more support for that, but it's a consistent problem. Almost every month in my constituency office parents who have challenges with their children feel that money isn't allocated or put properly across the school boards and the schools for special-needs students and the outcomes of that. Instead of money, I wonder, if we're measuring this, if we have some things we'd like to help the school boards with.

I want to talk a little bit about pensions. On page 33, pension provision – it's the very last expense item – you have $118 million credit in 2020-21, $95 million forecast for this year, and then it falls off. Treasury Board and Finance's expense column shows that we're still paying $500 million a year for the pre-1992 teachers' pensions, and I asked the minister how much longer that would continue. Unfortunately, I don't think he had an answer that night, so if you'd have an answer for how much more the Alberta taxpayer owes on that, I'd appreciate the answer.

Also under the ministry, on your revenue side you have $125 million in premiums – oh, I'm sorry. For the estimate it's $173 million in premiums, fees, and licences. I'd like to know about schools fees and where those are and if that contains anything else other than school fees.

You also have $179 million in other revenue. What is that $179 million?

Transportation is in there. I know that funding rural transportation is a huge concern and is very, very challenging with the carbon tax, the cost of gas, the challenges in rural Alberta. I'd like to know a little bit about how that's going and the contracts that have been put in place. I'd like to know about that.

And reserves. I'm concerned about reserves, too; $464 million is about 7 per cent of the $6.5 billion that gets paid in instruction, but

we've been talking about this for several years. What's your plan to do something about it? I'd like to hear a plan. I'd like to hear a plan that, you know, allows school boards to protect against the vagaries of financial life, but I'd also like to see as much money as possible in Alberta families, in Alberta communities.

Back to the testing. You know, there's a business principle that you can't manage something unless you measure it. Again, I'm concerned when I consistently hear that our school system has slipped from what was top drawer. If I'm wrong, please, I'd love to hear that, but I'd like to, you know, hear a plan on how we're going to actually measure how well our kids and our families are doing.

Thank you again very, very much for your time.

The Chair: Thank you, hon. member.

To the minister for response.

Member LaGrange: Thank you. You covered a lot of ground, so I'll try to cover a lot of ground in return.

You were talking about assessments. Let's start there. Yes, assessments are very important. We know that what is measured gets addressed; therefore, we are looking to continually improve on our assessments. We had the College of Alberta School Superintendents do a review of what currently is being utilized in the system, particularly in our early years, so that we have a good handle, because every school authority has the ability to tap into whatever assessments they would like to use. Of course, there are provincial assessments that we use, the PATs, the SLSs, which is the specialized learning supports – no. I've got SLS stuck in my brain. No, the learning assessment. Then we also have the diploma exams. So we have numerous assessments throughout all of the education system.

As we all know, with diploma exams, in deference to the COVID pandemic, we had to look at, you know, what was doable, particularly through the various phases, the waves that we had. In the fall we went to ensure that students have the ability to – right now we're at a weighting of 10 per cent for the spring diplomas, that were just done recently. Anyways, all to say that we have numerous assessments happening across the system, but what does that tell us? Does that tell us that our education system is any better? As you'd indicated, depending on which assessment tools you're looking at, whether it's the PISA scores or the TIMSS, we have seen declines in certain areas or stagnation in others.

Throughout the curriculum development we are looking to address those areas, so in curriculum, particularly K to 6, we've had a focus on literacy and numeracy. That's been very important. That is why we had assessments done in the spring on literacy and numeracy, and further to that, we added $45 million, because what research was telling us – and we were one of the first jurisdictions to look at this across Canada – was that if we focused on particularly those early grades, we would have better success in ensuring that they caught up and were able to continue on with their educational journey. That's why we did add that $45 million, to address those particular targeted areas in grades 2 and 3, and grade 1 is now starting, as I had indicated earlier.

The new curriculum is, you know – and you were right to say that it's been decades in coming. I was a trustee for 11 and a half years before I got into the role that I'm in now, and throughout that whole time period we were talking about new curriculum. There were various ministers of Education who had different ideas about bringing it forward, and there had been work that had been done. We had spent to date $64 million, and nothing had actually finished and crossed the finish line. I felt very strongly that we need to get it over the finish line. We actually need to have new curriculum in front of our students to address the very things that you were talking about, the declines or the stagnation in certain subject areas.

So we have worked diligently. It has been a very transparent process. You can go online. You can see all of the things that we've done, from the new guiding framework to the ministerial order on student learning to, you know, tens of thousands of people being involved in surveys, to putting out draft curriculum, to having engagement sessions, to having education partners be involved to curriculum working groups, which are current teachers, to my department, who have seconded teachers that come out of the classroom to work in our department so that they can work on curriculum, and they are in those targeted grades. There are so many people, tens of thousands of hours being worked on curriculum renewal so that we can address the very things that we need to address, making sure that we have a robust curriculum that actually focuses on skills and knowledge but ensures that we are setting our students up for the realities of today's world because it is a modern world, and they need to be able to fit into it.

10:30

You were right to say in the throne speech that choice in education is a hallmark of our government. It has been. It was something that we ran on as a government, and we are so blessed and fortunate in Alberta to have so many different opportunities for students. They can attend a public school, they can attend a Catholic school, they can attend a francophone school, they can attend a charter school, they can attend an independent school, and they can home-school. The public charter schools are actual public schools that have been in existence for quite some time. They are research focused. They were initially conceived to be incubators for new methodologies of teaching, new research-based pedagogy, new ways of doing things. They are very much focused on being aligned with postsecondary, with research. In fact, we want to bring that knowledge and those learnings and those successes back into the regular public system.

Again, since 2008 – I'm just going back in memory here. I believe since 2008 there has not been a new public charter school. In fact, we had a cap previous to the Education Act and to the Choice in Education Act. There was a cap of 15 schools. We sat at 13 schools since 2008; 2008 was the last new one previous to our removing the cap. We are now at 15 charter schools. Well, what does that mean? That's an additional 500 students that are attending a charter school that is focused on a particular philosophy, whether it's vocational or whether it's STEM or whether it's one of the many other – you know, there's the music academy, there's the land-based Indigenous charter school. There are many opportunities in those areas. Again, charter schools represent 1.5 per cent of the population but only receive 1.2 per cent of the funding.

There are opportunities as well to address special needs. I know you talked about inflation. I know I mentioned inflation earlier, when I had my chart that showed that we have been funding well above inflation cost and enrolment growth for many, many years, decades, in fact. We are continuing to address what is most needed within our schools.

Sorry. I'm not sure I'm going to be able to get through all of your questions, but I'll do my absolute best here.

We are certainly addressing transportation. As I said earlier, transportation costs – we have 300,000 students on a mode of transportation every single day in this province, and it's well over, I believe, 10 million kilometres a year travelled. When we look at the fact that we have added 4.6 per cent increase this year to address some of those rising costs, this is on top of 5 per cent last year and on top of 5 per cent the year before.

The very reason that I started the Student Transportation Task Force was to look at: are there efficiencies that we can find within the education system to address issues that every single school authority is facing in transportation? When you look at the fact that, you know, right now we have approximately about 43 out of the 70 school authorities that are sharing transportation, well, yes, that is great, but is there more that we can do? Can we have procurement of bulk fuel? Can we have procurement of school buses to gain further efficiencies? Those are all of the things that the task force was looking at. They came forward with recommendations. We also did an audit of number of school authorities to determine what the actual expenses are and where we can find improvements. We are very committed in the '23-24 year to bring forward and act on some of these recommendations.

I'm also working with the Minister of Transportation, Minister Sawhney, because some of the recommendations actually are within her purview. You know, one of the things that we heard from school authorities was that our buses cannot go over a certain speed, which is not the posted highway speed.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

That concludes the first portion of questions for independent members.

We'll now move over to government caucus for 20 minutes of questions from the members. Would you like to combine your time with the minister?

Mr. Amery: My preference would be to keep it the way it's been going if that's okay with the minister. Is that your preference?

Member LaGrange: I would prefer to do block timing as well. I don't think my voice could take it otherwise. Sorry. Thanks.

The Chair: Please proceed, Member.

Mr. Amery: Thank you very much, Madam Chair. Good morning to you, Minister LaGrange, and good morning to your team as well. I want to take this opportunity on behalf on my colleagues on the government side to thank you for being here today and answering the questions that all members have for you. I found it particularly relevant in your answer to MLA Barnes with respect to independent charter schools and generally the choice that this province provides to parents who have children in the education system. Be it as it may, I think it's important for parents to have the choice to decide what type of education their children receive.

We have a lot of questions for you this morning. Certainly, I think my colleagues are all eager to get in on this, so I'm not going to take a bunch of time with preamble except to say to you that I want to talk a little bit about what you were talking about earlier and segue right back into that parental choice topic.

I want to point you to key objective 4.2 under outcome 4 and specifically "Alberta's K-12 education system is well governed and managed" of your business plan. It is stated there: "support choice with a variety of schooling options for students and parents within the education system." One of the things that I have been advocating for a long time – and I think you're well aware of that – is standing by the choice that parents are always in the best position to make decisions with respect to how their children should be educated, and I think that sentiment is echoed by all of the members on this side of the House. Now, having said that, Minister, I want you to please go into a little more detail about how Budget '22 specifically supports parents' choice in education. I know you touched on that earlier in your responses, but I'd like for you to discuss a little bit more about that. I also want to know what has been built into the capital plan to support this objective as well.

I want to refer you as well to key objective 4.2 and expanding to 4.4, which both seem to continue to discuss school choice. Those two key objectives are related to increased schooling options for students and parents. More specifically, key objective 4.4 references changes to financial and governance practices for private schools, which we know in Alberta are more commonly referred to as independent schools. Can you explain to this committee why this is a priority for you and speak a little bit about what changes your department is contemplating with respect to governance and financial practices for private schools?

In addition, Minister, we hear from many members, often from the opposition, if you will, that funding is being taken away from public schools in order to increase funding for private schools and charter schools. I want to give you the opportunity to answer a few questions and elaborate more about this as well. First, Minister, can you confirm if charter schools are in fact publicly funded by the government or if they receive their funding independently through their tuition, through parental contributions, or whatever that may be? I think you said earlier today that a very small percentage was funded publicly, but I'd like for you to elaborate on that if you could. I'm also wondering if you can discuss how much of this actual funding goes to charter schools from the government.

10:40

Finally, Minister, I'd like to see if you can address the topic of wait-lists with respect to charter schools. As you may recall, I spoke to you in your office about one of the charter schools that was operating in Calgary . The issue of wait-lists is a real problem with respect to that particular school and, I would venture to say, for most of them as well. I'm wondering if you can discuss for us here today what the plan is for charter schools and addressing their wait-lists. Can you tell us how many students are currently attending charter schools, how long their wait-lists are, to the extent that you can comment on that, and how you're planning to address this as well?

I assume that the earmarks in funding in the capital plan might help address these issues, but I'm wondering if you can discuss whether or not there is a plan to expand the cap or the number of charter schools, I should say, going forward in the future?

I think with that said, I'm going to yield my time to another of my colleagues to continue asking questions for this block. Thank you.

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: Thank you, colleague. Thank you, Minister, for taking the time here with us today and for all that you've done for our children throughout the pandemic and your leadership. I just wanted to dive in, talking about COVID a little bit and talking about the impacts on our kids and what we're going to do to help our kids pull through this.

As you know, I'm a father of four school-aged children and have seen the impact the pandemic has had on them in different ways for each one of them. I know that for my son, his mental health was a concern throughout all of this because he was isolated from his friends, from sport, and other things throughout the pandemic. Actually, my oldest daughter thrived; she did really well with the at-home learning and online learning. It was more so my twins, that are now in grade 5. There was some concern – I've heard similar concerns from parents in my constituency. They were in grade 3 when this happened, which is a pivotal year for them, and I've just seen that loss of time in grade 3 kind of linger into grade 4 and into grade 5. So my questions are kind of going down the path about: how do we help our kids who have fallen behind throughout the pandemic in regard to helping them get caught up and address some of the educational concerns that we've seen throughout all that as

well as some of the mental health challenges that we've seen on that?

Just going to page 129 of the fiscal plan, it highlights that Budget 2022 is putting $30 million of targeted funding to support students experiencing academic challenges and create school environments supporting students' well-being and mental health, with $110 million being allocated over a three-year period. That's great news. Just wondering, Minister, if you can please highlight which budget line this $30 million is allocated under and how this funding will be used to support students and teachers across the province. Then I'd like to know how much discretion school boards are going to have in regard to the allocation and use of this funding. Obviously, different districts are going to see different challenges. And then what is the ministry doing under this budget to ensure that students who are being home-schooled also have access to these important services? These students have also been impacted throughout the pandemic. Sorry. Just checking the time.

In addition to the reference in the fiscal plan, under outcome 4 of the ministry's business plan, which can be found on page 32, key objective 4.1 speaks to students' well-being and positive mental health. As I've already mentioned and have experienced with my own children, we know that the pandemic has had some serious implications for our students' mental wellness. That evidence also shows that students have experienced academic learning loss, especially in early years. I know that I've asked this a bit, but I do want to, I guess, reinforce – I'm hoping you can get into more detail on supports for students experiencing academic challenges or who may require additional mental wellness supports throughout all of this. I believe you had mentioned that more details are going to be coming in the spring, so hopefully we can get a little bit of a sneak peek here today.

In addition to mental well-being of students and teachers, there have certainly been concerns around physical safeties in school. Every time schools were reopened, it was up to Education to ensure that students could return to the class safely, and I'm glad they were able to do that and the work that was done. It was then up to schools to implement the guidelines and safety protocols.

Page 129 of the fiscal plan states that Budget 2022-2023 has $13 million to be put towards ventilation improvement projects for the school safe indoor air initiative. I'm wondering, Minister, if you can explain for the committee the importance of this project and how this will improve the safety of our students and our teachers. Then, I don't see this initiative actually delineated under the capital plan, so wondering if, Minister, you can clarify under what line item that allocated funding is coming from for this initiative.

Thank you, Minister.

The Chair: Thank you, hon. member.

I see that Mr. Gotfried has now left us, and we've had Mr. Stephan join us. Mr. Stephan, would you like to introduce yourself, please, to everyone?

Mr. Stephan: My pleasure. Jason Stephan, MLA for Red Deer-South.

The Chair: Thank you so much.

Now we'll turn it over to the minister.

Member LaGrange: Well, thank you so much. Great questions and looking forward to answering all of those. Yes, indeed, you know, to start with parental choice, that is certainly something that is very near and dear to all our hearts because we see the success of choice in Alberta. The fact that parents have the ability and actually have the right as the primary caregivers and the first educators of their children to choose the type of education that they want for their children – and we have a very long, proud history of supporting school choice, that we are going to continue with. Part of that is ensuring that we do indeed fund all the choices that are available. Everyone is the taxpayer. Everyone ensures that they support education throughout this province, so respecting the choices that are made is very paramount.

In Budget '22, speaking to your question about the capital plan to support this objective, we've provided $25 million over three years to support collegiate programs and charter school expansions in the education system. This would cover costs associated with facility leases or expansions like rental or third-party spaces. Also, we have provided in this budget $47 million over three years to support school infrastructure for charter schools and collegiate schools to provide new and improved student spaces across the province, for acquiring furniture and equipment or leasehold improvements.

Really, when we look at ensuring that there's equity across the system, this, of course, was something. You were right to say that, you know, public charter schools have had long waiting lists. In fact, in '21-22 there were 15 charter schools in the province serving 10,519 students. They represent 1.5 per cent of the student population, but they only receive 1.2 per cent of overall funding. When you look at the wait-lists, charter school growth has been largely constrained starkly due to the legislation where there were limitations on the number of charter schools, enrolment caps, and the lack of facility space. In fact, I heard that many parents who wanted to put their children into charter schools would put their children at birth, once those children were born, onto the waiting list. The Education Act lifted the cap on the number of charter schools and the Choice in Education Act removed enrolment caps.

Existing charter schools have wait-lists in excess of 5,500 students, and much-needed space is needed to address this capacity. Many charter schools have long wait-lists but simply cannot expand because of a lack of space, so we are providing that short-term support of $25 million over three years for lease space. But also we must examine more permanent solutions, and part of that examination will lead us to spend $47 million over three years – again, it's over three years – in capital investments to support collegiate programs and charter school expansions in the education system. This includes new schools and a charter campus concept.

The whole collegiate idea actually started between two of our public schools and NAIT. The NAIT collegiate started with Edmonton public and Edmonton Catholic looking at an opportunity to build a collegiate, which, in fact, is another pathway for students to get involved in vocational schools and STEM programming with more focus. For whatever reason, that did not transpire under the previous government and I think the government even before that. There had been a lot of time invested in that, and there were numerous reasons, but it did not actually materialize.

When we were developing our platform, a platform commitment that we made was that we would revitalize that collegiate concept. We know that in Alberta we are going to be short approximately 30,000 tradespeople in the next decade, so we need to do whatever we can to encourage our young people to enter into those fields. Providing a collegiate program is just one of those avenues.

10:50

I'm also happy to say that we provided capital funding to Acme for the Golden Hills school division because they have a very unique concept where they partner with businesses and with their local community to ensure that they are in fact giving students a heads-up. They've got a really neat concept that I'd love to explain in more depth.

One of the other questions was: can you explain this priority and speak a little bit about the changes? The education system has a number of delivery methods, including public and separate, Charter, independent, francophone, and home education. As I said, in 2019 Alberta's government engaged with more than 50,000 Albertans to share their views on educational choice through an online survey. The results concluded that 62 per cent of respondents were satisfied with the amount of choice that Alberta has. The government of Alberta did follow through with our platform commitment by passing the Choice in Education Act. I was very proud to be the minister to move that forward. We also committed to offering educational choice that includes independent schools and home education alongside a strong public education system so that parents can select the path that they feel will best help their child reach its full potential.

Some of the changes we're looking to make as we move forward are reducing red tape. Red tape is something that bureaucracies tend to get bogged down in, and I know many of you know this. In Education we're looking to streamline. I'm happy to say that we've already met the 25 per cent goal, which is above our goal for this current year, of reducing red tape. We certainly want to ensure that we do have good oversight. We want those dollars accounted for and that they are going to good use, but we also want to eliminate that red tape as much as possible.

I guess one other thing I could – I've heard a lot of misinformation about charter schools. I do have a document – it's the 2020 education survey highlights, that I'm happy to share with everyone – that really shows income by type of school, and it really shows that all education supports all types of income, socioeconomic status, individuals in their schools. There's very, very little deviation from whether it's a public school, a Catholic school, a francophone school, a charter school, a private, independent school, or home education. They all roughly serve the same socioeconomic diversity within their schools.

Going to the other question that was asked – and I'm sorry; I do like to chat – COVID is going to be a big, big area, particularly in learning disruptions and mental health. With over a billion dollars of accessibility by our school authorities, we continue to provide ongoing supports. You know, we were in constant communication with our school authorities, with our education partners. We have seen a lot of highs and lows throughout the pandemic, but we have been able to navigate it and, I would say, navigate it quite successfully given that our students were able to remain in the classroom, learning in person as much as possible and probably more than any other jurisdiction in all of Canada.

But it took a lot of effort, as you rightly noted, MLA Nixon. There was a lot of effort from everyone right across the system, so a huge shout-out to our teachers and our administrators who were constantly making sure that the students were safe, that their staff were safe, that we were following all of the guidelines that we were receiving from the chief medical officer of health and her team that were always accessible to us to make sure that the supports were there.

You asked to highlight which line the $30 million for learning loss disruption is on and to address mental health and wellness. It's on page 73 of Education's estimates under the program 3.2, learning support funding, allocation of $1.4 billion, which is targeted to support funding for student well-being and mental health. Overall, we have $1.4 billion, but this $30 million is in addition to that $1.4 billion. This sits outside of that $1.4 billion. We are going to take those dollars, that $110 million over three years, and we're going to leverage that. We're actually talking to other ministers, the Minister of Health and the Minister of Children's Services, and any other ministry that is even marginally involved in helping us address some of the concerns that we are seeing.

As you may or may not know, I am a rehab practitioner by profession. I have worked with the developmentally disabled all my life. I had a younger brother born with Down syndrome that led me into the profession, so I am a huge proponent of early intervention. When the early intervention research that we are seeing . . .

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

That concludes the government members' first block of questions. We'll proceed to our five-minute coffee break. Enjoy, everyone.

[The committee adjourned from 10:56 a.m. to 11:04 a.m.]

The Chair: Now we move to five minutes of questions from the Official Opposition, followed by five minutes of response from the minister. As mentioned, members are asked to advise the chair at the beginning of their rotation if they wish to combine their time with the minister's time. Please remember that discussion should flow through the chair at all times regardless of whether or not speaking time is combined.

Please proceed.

Member Irwin: Okay. Thank you, Madam Chair. Five minutes. Oh, my goodness. I forgot it was five minutes. Yeah. Thanks. I want to just give thanks to all the folks involved in the budget documents as well and, of course, the Education staff, who I know are working hard, and, of course, everybody across the province, all the teachers and education staff in schools, too. You know, I just wanted to note – and it will tie to the business plan, I assure you – just reflect as well on Ukraine. Obviously, as you said, our hearts are with folks.

I was thinking – you know me, Minister, my background in curriculum – about our world-renowned current social studies curriculum, and in grade 3 students currently consider India, Tunisia, Peru, and Ukraine. I note in your drafts – and, again, I'm only privy to the drafts that I see online, so things may have shifted – that you have removed any references to Ukraine. Friendly suggestion: you may want to consider the explicit naming of Ukraine in future social studies drafts given the impact of this community on the development of Alberta and the historic and ongoing contributions of the community.

Let's talk a little bit about curriculum specifically and, obviously, tie this into 1.1, page 31 of the business plan, implementing a new K to 6 curriculum. As well, I'll tie it into outcome 3.1 in the business plan, which is the supports and professional learning and so forth needed for implementation. You did note in your opening remarks some funding related to implementation. I was typing furiously, but I would like some clarification on the numbers. How much specifically is allocated to implementation? I believe you noted $59 million in year 1. I would love you to flesh that out a little bit.

As I noted, you know that I had the opportunity to work on curriculum and did a deep dive into research on development and implementation. We know that the evidence is clear that, first, effective implementation is a costly endeavour, and it requires a number of essential conditions to be addressed by all stakeholders in order to be effective, things like a shared vision, leadership, research, resources, teacher professional development time, community engagement, to name a few. To that end, have you dedicated resources to research capacity within the ministry to track success of implementation? Do you have a framework in place for how success will be measured? I don't see any indicators in your business plan, so I think that is a fair question.

Now, on resources, similarly, I don't know if you have specific dollars allocated to resources. You may have mentioned it in your

opening comments, but I don't see a line item. When we're talking about resources, we're talking about beyond textbooks but online learning supports and so on. Just wondering how specifically that's going to be managed and what funding will specifically be allocated to resources.

Professional development is, of course, absolutely essential as well. Teachers need to have PD opportunities, and we know, Minister, that this is an entirely new process for teachers. Historically, curricula were developed subject by subject, implemented subject by subject, not multiple courses at once. This will be a whole heck of a lot for teachers, particularly those K to 6 teachers, who are often teaching multiple subjects and also, let us remind everybody, teaching right now in the midst of a global pandemic. They've got a lot going on. What supports specifically for PD will be in place? Will the ATA be involved in these conversations? Will they be provided, perhaps, an increase in their grants to support PD funds?

Piloting. I want to ask about piloting as well. We know that fewer than 1 per cent of teachers are involved in piloting; I think, about 2 per cent of students. This can't possibly be a large enough sample size. More worrisome than that, I think, is a concern around not being representative of the broader Alberta population. So I wonder: do you have demographic information on students who are involved in piloting, Indigenous, francophone, you know, various socioeconomic backgrounds? And for those who might say that that's not relevant, it certainly is relevant. It does matter because we all know or maybe we will know now that kids do need to see themselves in curriculum. Really, really important that we have a diverse representative sample when it comes to piloting. What will be the indicators of its success for that curriculum pilot? Will those indicators be publicly shared? If the pilot is not successful, what will be the next steps?

The Chair: Thank you so much, hon. member.

We'll turn it over to the minister for a response, please.

11:10

Member LaGrange: Well, thank you so much. Yes. Agree with you that our hearts and minds are with people of the Ukraine, all of those that are in the Ukraine as well as those who are in other countries, many of whom are – I believe we have over 300,000 of Ukrainian descent right here in Alberta. We do appreciate all that they have done for this province and how supportive they are of education because, as you say, as we all say, education is a way to ensure that our young people will have the knowledge and the skills necessary to move forward. Hopefully, they will do a better job than we have done to ensure that countries remain democratic, but we will continue to fight that good fight as we move forward.

In terms of social studies I'm happy to say that we did announce prior to Christmas that we would be relooking at the social studies blueprint, which is the scope and sequence. We are listening. We said all along that we are going to listen to Albertans, that we're going to listen to teachers, we're going to listen to administrators, we're going to listen to school boards, we're going to listen to all of our education partners that wanted to be part of the process. We have had tens of thousands of everyday Albertans look at the draft curriculum and provide their feedback. I've provided over a million dollars in school support to education partners so that they could do the deep dive and give us that really rich feedback that we needed to make refinements. I'm happy to report that that is moving forward, and it's been very, very successful.

I said from the very beginning that we would be open and transparent. There is a website with all of the information on it to keep everyone up to date as we move forward. We wanted to hear all the good, the bad, and the ugly. We have heard it all, and we are taking it into account and working with the feedback that we're getting, because at the end of the day the only goal that I gave to my department in curriculum was to end up with the absolute best curriculum possible in front of our students. They have taken that to heart, and they've been working really, really hard on that.

In terms of curriculum implementation, yes, to be successful, we have to have a strong, robust way of implementing it, which requires dollars. That's why I'm very proud to say that we have done the math that we feel we will need to implement successfully, and that's $191 million over three years, $59 million in the first year. I just want to remind everybody that this current year, that we are in, we had allocated $6 million because we knew that we were just starting the piloting and we wouldn't be into full-fledged implementation, but that $59 million will cover supports, professional development for teachers, resources. It is targeted. It's outside. I didn't want any school authority having to utilize their dollars that they use in instruction for implementation. That's why we added all these additional dollars up and above.

Maybe I'll back up just slightly to say that we have the Curriculum Implementation Advisory Group right now, that has been meeting, that is going to advise us on how we are going to actually move forward on implementing the math, the English language arts, and the phys ed. When we have that specified and nailed down, then we can better determine how we're going to allocate those $59 million. That is to come, and I hope to share that information very shortly.

Part of being in today's world is that we have to have things in digital format and shared accessibility amongst all teachers. We do have the new Learn Alberta website, and we developed a resource unit. I'll turn it over to my deputy minister, Andre, to share with us what that looks like and what the website looks like.

Mr. Tremblay: Sure. Thanks, Minister. MLA Irwin's question on teacher resources is a critical one. Thanks for conveying that. We actually established a special group that is largely comprised of front-line teachers within the department under an executive director with a sole focus of ensuring . . .

The Chair: Thank you so much, Member.

Now we will go to the independent side.

Mr. Barnes: Okay. Thank you, Madam Chair. Just five minutes a block again, I presume, Minister? Okay. Thank you.

I mentioned in my last block, you know, over 10 years of working on the curriculum, and here we are at a point in time where I believe you've lost the key involvement and engagement of our key providers, the teachers. Many of them have come to my office in the last little while with another issue with the very, very same concerns, and that's Alberta teachers' discipline. They're concerned with the government wanting to get involved in that. They're concerned that it may do a couple of things. It may make the teachers' union – instead of a promoter of making sure teachers' discipline is in order, it may actually refocus them as a protector of the teacher facing the issue.

They're also worried about the cost. I understand that now it's a cost that the teachers themselves pay the burden of. Where's that extra money going to come from at a time when our taxpayer is already stretched to the max? I guess I would just want to hear something from you or caution you that, you know, it's important to bring the stakeholders along at every step. I wonder about your thoughts on that.

Then for the rest of my time I kind of want to rehash some of the things I mentioned earlier. I had mentioned that I had been hearing that the Canadian school system has slipped to 28th in the world

and that Alberta has slipped within Canada. Where do you think we're at? What are the real measurements going to be? When we're here a year from now or for those that are here three years from now, how are we going to know that we're improving? How are we going to know that we're helping give our children the future that we can and the future that they deserve? What are those measurements going to be?

I liked when you said in your remarks "success of choice." Choice in education has been successful, and, yes, Alberta has led the way. I know you're not the Finance minister, but I would sure like to hear you say that you will advocate for more money, even from the existing budget, for home-schooling, more money for choice. Again, you know, if it's accurate that we've slipped, then changes have to be made. I think it's more important to measure and look for value for money than it is just to put more money into it, but money is important. Especially when we're spending $9 billion in education annually, I think there's a lot we can do to better focus those resources. So thank you for that.

I asked you last time – and I know time was limited. We have $138 million in revenue from premiums, fees, and licences. How much of this is school fees paid by parents? What is the balance? In other revenues, the 2021-2022 forecast, we have $125 million. Please, if you could take a little bit of time and tell me what parents are paying to have their children in mainstream public school and what the rest of those revenues are.

I would greatly appreciate it if you have some insights on this. I know that a lot of parents pay extra to have their kids in the extra school curriculum activities as well. They probably don't show up on here. At this time just a special shout-out to so many of those teachers that work extra hours to make those clubs and athletics happen for our children. It's greatly appreciated by all of us, I'm sure.

I asked last time about the reserves: $464 million in reserves. Again, the payroll is $6.5 billion, I believe. I believe that "Instruction – ECS to Grade 12" is payroll expenses. What is a fair reserve? You know, you say that you want less, but what is your target? What should they have for the vagaries of financial life and the ups and downs, keeping in mind that there is only one taxpayer and inflation, utilities, insurance, and all those other costs that our families are facing. It would be so nice.

I also know that for the property tax educational assessment, the province's share has been increased by 1.5 per cent. I'd like to hear a little bit about the hardship that that may add to municipalities. I mean, 1.5 per cent is a small number, but across Alberta properties it's probably in the hundreds of millions. That will have some effects on municipalities and their ability to provide services, for sure.

Okay. If you could do your best to answer those, I'd appreciate it. Thank you.

11:20

The Chair: Thank you so much, hon. member.

Now we'll go over to the minister for her response.

Member LaGrange: Thank you so much, and I will do my best to answer. Again a long list, but I will do my best.

On the teacher discipline, I brought forward the students first act, which was Bill 85, last fall to address some of the issues that we were seeing. Alberta is an outlier compared to every other province in Canada as well as when you look at any other profession out there in terms of having the union oversee teacher discipline. Again, this is something that we wanted to address. There had been concerns expressed by numerous ministers of Education previous to myself, and certainly it was one of the things that I saw first-hand when cases were coming across my desk early on as Minister of Education. It actually just broke my heart as a mother of seven children, a grandmother of seven, as someone who's invested a lot of my life, over 11 and a half years, as a school board trustee to see the cases that were coming across my desk that needed our attention. When we're such an outlier, we need to fix things.

Bill 85, the students first act, was the first step – and I was very clear that that would be our first step – in addressing the issues with teacher discipline. We are now going to have an online registry where all teachers will be registered. It will be a public-facing website location that anyone can go to and look at the certification status of a teacher that is registered within our province. It can be a teacher that is under the Alberta Teachers' Association, which is the vast majority, or it can be a teacher that's in an independent school or a charter school that doesn't have affiliation with the Alberta Teachers' Association. All teachers will be registered, and if there is a cancellation of a certificate or a suspension of a certificate due to professional incompetence or unprofessional conduct, then that will be recorded there.

We will also have an expedited process where, if someone is criminally charged for a crime that abuses children and affects the safety of children within our school system and the general public – there would be an expedited process. There does not have to be a hearing. That will also be taking place. There's the streamlining of the process of the committee structure as well as making sure that every teacher has a criminal and vulnerable sector check when they're hired and every five years after that.

You know, there have been some very public cases, which has highlighted that we need to move further faster, so I will be bringing forward legislation which will take the next step. The next step is to actually remove the Alberta Teachers' Association from oversight of the teacher discipline process. I've actually had teachers come up to me, administrators come up to me and say: "This is long overdue. Please bring us into line with other professions." I had one just the other day, a teacher who came up and felt that the process had totally failed her as a teacher and is happy to speak out on this particular matter. Are we going to move forward on this? Yes, absolutely, and I look forward to bringing legislation forward this spring. We have been engaging with all the education partners, including the Alberta Teachers' Association, on feedback and consultation on what this could look like. I'm looking forward to bringing that forward.

On the curriculum and on education in general and on our scores, et cetera, I agree with you. I was a trustee for 11 and a half years, and we were always looking to bring forward a new curriculum. Unfortunately, that hasn't happened prior to our government taking office, but I'm very committed to ensuring that we are going to actually implement in September 2022 three subject areas of English language arts, mathematics, and phys ed and wellness. What that looks like: I have the curriculum advisory group advising me on how we are going to transition that in, but I'm really looking forward to bringing that forward.

On home-schooling, yes, we do provide supports to home-schools, and in fact we are in regular consultation with home-school communities, their associations, and their membership, looking for what they want. The vast majority are not actually looking for additional dollars. One of the key areas that they felt they needed was special-needs supports for the students that they have with special needs. So we're actually looking to address that gap as we speak. There are dollars allocated in my budget to address that gap.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Minister.

Now we'll turn it over to the government members. Please proceed, Mr. Nixon.

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: Thank you, Chair, and thank you again, Minister. Last time we had the chance to talk, I asked some questions about learning loss and students' mental wellness and shared anecdotally kind of my own experience with my kids. I've certainly heard concerns from many parents and educators within my constituency. Of course, with my kids, they come from a very healthy home and have two parents who were there. We've done a lot of extra work with our kids to help them overcome that.

Unfortunately, MLA Amery and I threw a lot of questions at you last time, so I wanted to give you a chance as well to address what we're doing around students' mental wellness and learning loss that we saw throughout the pandemic. What do we know about that, beyond kind of anecdotally, and what are we doing specifically to address that? How is this funding going to be used to help support students and teachers throughout the province? How much discretion will school boards have around this?

Then I wanted to dive into another topic that I hit on but that, unfortunately, we didn't have time to address, and that had to do with physical safety within schools. It's something that I heard a lot about throughout the pandemic as well from parents. On page 129 of the fiscal plan it states that Budget 2022-2023 allocated $13 million towards ventilation improvements. I'm wondering if you can talk about that. This is for the school safe indoor air initiative. Specifically, I'm wondering if you can explain for the committee the importance of this project and how this will improve safety for students and teachers.

Continuing on with the school safe indoor air initiative, I will say that it is my understanding that funding of this initiative actually comes from a transfer from the federal government, and perhaps that's why it's not singled out as a line item here. I'm wondering if you can speak to the guidelines currently in place for HVAC and HEPA in schools. I'm also wondering: do schools receive funding to maintain these systems normally, or is this the only funding that they will have available for them to be able to upgrade the air quality if needed?

Lastly, I'm also wondering if throughout the pandemic the government has invested any other money in this type of initiative.

With that, I will pass it over to MLA Hunter.

Mr. Hunter: Well, first of all, Minister, I wanted to thank you and your team for helping the government to get to balance. That is something that I've tried to thank each of the ministries for. I know that this was a crossgovernment approach and strategy to be able to help get us to a balanced budget. I know that there have been lots of pressures on Education to be able to – obviously, there's never enough money – get the job done, but you've done a phenomenal job. I want to recognize you for the work that you have done and your team has done to be able to hold the line and to make sure that we are providing good-quality education at fair prices to Alberta taxpayers. Thank you so much for that.

I also wanted to thank you for the work that you guys have done in terms of red tape reduction. I've talked to many teachers and administrators who feel that their time would be better spent in the classroom working with kids, helping them, rather than filling out multiple forms. The work that you've done in being able to decrease that paper trail that they have to follow – you said this earlier, that it's very important to make sure that you have accountability, and I think that's really what good governance is. Certainly, the work that you've done in making sure that the paperwork that they have to fill out is as minimal as possible: thank you for that. I don't really have time to go into my questions about some of the school capital plans, but we could maybe do that in the next session.

Thank you so much for your work, and I look forward to your answers.

11:30

The Chair: Thank you so much, hon. member.

With that, we will turn the time over to the minister for response.

Member LaGrange: Thank you so much. Going back to, you know, the well-being of our students, particularly through COVID, yes, we did allow school authorities access to over a billion dollars of supports and resources. But we know that, at the end of the day, it's about students and teachers. How are they doing? How are they coping? It was very important for us to ensure that as we move forward, those supports and resources are there, available for them to access.

Part of the overall findings of the child and youth well-being review – and I'm not sure if all of you are aware that there was a Child and Youth Well-being Review Panel, that went right across the province really delving into mental health and wellness of our young people, the effects of COVID on them. They interacted with school authorities and parents and community groups to find that on-the-ground understanding of what really has been transpiring. What we have found is that there have been impacts and in some areas significant impacts, as you indicated for your child. I see it even within, you know, my own family members, et cetera.

How do we address this? Well, yes, we have a well-funded support system. We have a well-funded education system at $8.4 billion. Yes, we're going to increase it by $700 million. But we also have to provide some targeted supports. As I indicated earlier, we have the $45 million in targeted supports for early learning loss, disruption that we have targeted for grades 1, 2, and 3. We did add the e-learning hub. But what more can we do? The $110 million over three years that I've allocated: $30 million of that in the current year is what we're going to look at leveraging with other ministries, as I said earlier – the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Children's Services, working with the Associate Minister of Mental Health and Addictions – making sure that those dollars are used to fill the gaps. We do know that there are a lot of supports out there – sometimes it's just even a matter of linking people to those supports – but we also know that there are gaps, so ensuring that we fill those gaps.

What we found in the review was that the average time lost while transitioning to online learning was about 3.5 months for most children and 6.5 months for children who had struggled compared to their peers prior to the pandemic. So we will be using these funds to bridge those gaps. That's just one of the gaps that we're looking at.

Schools across the province have long acted as access points to identify support opportunities, assess needs, and connect children and youth to supportive interventions. Again, sometimes the services are out there, but you just don't know how to find them. When families are going through difficult times, it is oftentimes the education system that is the link to those supports. We also know that where there are problems within the home, you know, sometimes even abusive situations that have occurred, it's often the school that is the point where it is identified, so ensuring that we have good supports in the community that can deal with situations as they arise. Our approach is proactive, with a continuum of supports that will address the ongoing and future needs.

I know I can go on and on, but I know you want me to get into some of the other questions.

In terms of that $13 million top-up to the safe return to class fund, this provides for ventilation improvement projects. Proper ventilation that exchanges indoor air for outdoor air is an important tool for preventing the spread of COVID. Ventilation projects may include heating, ventilation, and air conditioning, HVAC. This is a top-up from the federal government. I just want to remind everybody that, in fact, we had guidelines from the chief medical officer of health and the Health department that we followed and that all school authorities had to follow to make sure that their heating and ventilation systems were in good functioning order. We provided $250 million in accelerated capital maintenance and renewal funds that school authorities could use to address any issues or any concerns that they had in this area. Of that $250 million, I believe $44 million were used for ventilation, HVAC, those types of issues.

We have in operations and maintenance and in infrastructure maintenance and renewal, again, dollars that can be utilized for this very purpose, $667 million.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Minister.

Now we move to five minutes of questions from the Official Opposition, followed by five minutes of response from the minister.

Ms Hoffman: Thank you very much, Madam Chair. One of the challenges with this format is that several of the questions haven't been answered – and perhaps it's just because of timing – but it would be great if there was at least a written response to the many questions that were not responded to in the previous rotations, Madam Chair, through you, and for it to be received prior to the expectation that the main estimates be voted on.

I'm just going to take a very brief second to embrace a teachable moment. As somebody with Ukrainian ancestry – my mom and all of her relatives are Ukrainian, and it was her first language – I'm really proud of my roots and my culture. I just want to take a second, because I know that people probably don't mean it in a negative way, but it's definitely "Ukraine," not "the Ukraine." I know that that language change is something that is new, and if I can just explain why. It's because when you talk about a region, you say "the" in front of it, so "the prairies," "the Rockies," but when you talk about a nation, it's the name of the nation. The Ukrainian government, the government of Ukraine, has been very clear about their expectation and the direct name.

I just want to take a moment to acknowledge that in this space and to say that ensuring that Ukraine historical contributions as well as contemporary contributions to the world and to the place where we live and situate ourselves I think is fundamental in the curriculum. I know how proud my nieces and nephews are when they have an opportunity to learn about the contributions and about the current context in Ukraine when they're in grade 3. So a very strong plea that if indeed – and I know the minister said in the House that she wants every child to see themselves in this curriculum. There are so many issues with the social studies curriculum, but that is absolutely one of them, especially in the context of where we're at today in this place and time. I will leave that plea on the table for the consideration of the minister and the Assembly.

I do want to also correct the record. What I stated was that there was an average of 60 new schools or modernizations per year, and the response from the minister was that it was a cumulative 60 in the time that we were in government. It was 240 cumulatively, so it was an average of about 60 per year. I know that the government has announced 66 projects, that the minister has rearticulated. Again, that's about a quarter of where we were at under the previous government. It was an average of 60 per year because it was 240 collectively. Again, thank you to the minister for highlighting the projects that EPSB did have approved during that time. She listed many schools that opened in the years that the NDP was in government here for Edmonton public, but there is still a massive gap between where we're at today and where we need to be in terms of having drive times restricted, especially given how underfunded transportation is.

I appreciate that the minister did commission a review, but the actual changes to transportation don't come anywhere close to keeping up with the increased costs for both insurance as well as for fuel as well as for staff, staffing costs, and the pressures that we're seeing in an inflationary growth model, inflation that is significant locally as well as not unique to the province of Alberta. We do have massive inflationary pressures. Having kids spending less time on the bus would be a good goal to have in all parts of the province.

I'm going to go back to Edmonton public very briefly for this little minute that I have remaining in this exchange to say that the minister's opening comments around reducing underused space, talking about utilization rates, are exactly why the consolidated list included two replacement schools to rightsize the footprint for those schools and to make sure that those kids had a quality learning space to be in. My question to the minister would be: would the minister be willing to come tour Delton and Spruce Avenue schools and see first-hand the plants that she says are in good operational condition that don't need to be replaced? I'd be happy to go with her. If she'd rather I not be there, that's fine, too, but I think it's really important for the minister to know first-hand why these two projects were in the capital plan. Again, this is the aggregated list; there are individual lists as well. So if the minister wanted to address the growth pressures in the southwest or the northeast or both – they're all in year 1 because they're all needed projects – I think that that would be important for the minister to consider. What she did say in response to the earlier exchange . . .

The Chair: Member, could you direct through the chair, please.

11:40

Ms Hoffman: . . . through you, Madam Chair, is that it's fine for kids to be on the bus upwards of 40 minutes in the city of Edmonton. I don't think parents in Edmonton would agree with that.

The Chair: Thank you, hon. member. I appreciate that.

Now please go ahead, Minister, with your response.

Member LaGrange: Thank you. I'll just address the most recent comment first, in terms of Edmonton public school division. They are in control of their list. Every other school authority, every other metro school authority has created a list where they put their top priorities first. The top priority for the Edmonton public school division was a low-utilization school that does not have health and safety issues. Again, they are the ones in control of their list. If they are wanting a new school in a growth area to be their number one, then it should rise on the list as their number one.

I do think we have a very robust, Auditor General approved, gated process that I'm happy to make everyone aware of. I'm going to turn it over to my deputy minister now to just go through that gated process. It does have 10 steps. I am always happy to go and communicate with school authorities. Again, this is Edmonton public schools' list. They are the ones in control of it, and it goes through this process.

I will now turn it over to my deputy minister.

Mr. Tremblay: Thanks, Minister. Hopefully, folks can hear me okay. In 2018 the department established a rigorous process for

identifying priority capital projects from an education perspective. Just to remind folks, that's the process that resides within Education as it interacts with school authorities. Of course, all approvals for capital spending and capital projects are entertained and approved by Treasury Board.

There is a 10-step process that involves an annual intake of projects from school boards. School boards submit their capital plan to us, and in all cases it's a prioritized list that school boards will provide based on the criteria that they are using within their jurisdiction. Once we receive that list, we assign a series of evaluation criteria to it.

Just to put it in perspective, last year we received 683 project requests from across the system. Fifteen of those were approved for funding. Just imagine the magnitude of requests that are coming in for a variety of reasons across the system. The prioritization and the gated process that we use are extremely important because of just the demand, that goes well beyond our ability to fund those projects from a budgetary point of view.

Once we receive that, we assign a series of criteria to the lists that we get, and then we, in essence, use that scoring system to establish what we request of Treasury Board through the capital planning process. One of the key criteria, that I'll highlight first, is health and safety, really important. Obviously, there are evolving regulatory parameters that different levels of government might be putting in place with regard to public buildings. There may be a deterioration within a school facility that will necessitate either a significant renovation or a new school entirely, and there may be specific legal requirements that require specific funding for that particular school. Our first criteria is actually health and safety, just to ensure that those schools are suitable for students and teachers.

Obviously, the second criteria that we're using when we assess this very large list from school authorities is improved programming and delivery of services in those schools. There can be a number of different components to this criteria list. Probably the most significant one, of course, is utilization and projected enrolment. Once we've identified the safety and personal safety and health issues, we go into whether that school is in a catchment area that has high utilization, whether that school is projecting or that location is projecting significant future enrolment based on demographics that are produced by that school authority that's submitting the request. Obviously, that has a significant kind of weighting within the capital planning process.

There are other elements as well that are important. Economic impact, obviously, capital spending across multiple sectors does have a material economic impact from a construction perspective, from a workforce mobilization point of view, so that's also considered . . . [A timer sounded]

The Chair: Thank you so much to the minister's team.

Now we'll move over to the independent side. Please proceed, Mr. Barnes.

Mr. Barnes: Yeah. Thank you, Madam Chair. Again thank you, Minister. Now, keeping with the minister's preference of block questions, would it be all right if I got my five questions in in, say, two or three minutes and gave the remaining time to the minister so that she can have seven or eight minutes to answer my questions? Is that all right?

The Chair: Sorry, but the minister is still limited to five minutes' response.

Mr. Barnes: Is she?

The Chair: Yes. The time is not blocked.

Mr. Barnes: Okay, so I might as well use it, then.

The Chair: You may as well use your time.

Mr. Barnes: Okay. Thank you very much.

Minister, just five things. This is the third time that I've asked this morning about the $200 . . .

The Chair: Hon. member, will you please direct your comments through the chair?

Mr. Barnes: Okay. Thank you, Madam Chair.

I've asked three times: $260 million in premiums, fees, and licences and other revenue in the 2021 budget; now it's about $270 million. So I'm a believer at this point in time that our Alberta families are paying $270 million in school fees. The craziness of supporting families with tax credits and daycare and then retaking all of the money back from them when their children enter elementary school: I'd like from the minister a commitment to get something in writing to the Legislature or an answer to this question, please.

Secondly, reserves. Again, this will be the third time this morning that I've asked about the $464 million. Minister, I think it's just an empty threat you're making. You admitted that it's up from $363 million a year ago, $464 million today, so, Madam Chair, this continual talking about it is obviously not working. What should it be, and how are we going to get this money returned to the taxpayer or make sure that it makes things better for our children?

Thirdly, again, I've asked a couple times prior about pensions from 1992. The Alberta taxpayer, the Alberta contributor, has been paying $500 million annually to cover the pre-existing liability for teachers' pensions. How much more do we owe? How much longer does this go? Is that connected to the $95 million you have in savings? It's a credit, a reversal on the expense side. On the last expense item, pension provisions, you're estimating saving $95 million in pensions. Is that from that pre-1992 existing contribution the taxpayer makes for teachers' pensions, or are those different savings? If you have time, do you have any thoughts on what the obligation is going to be to taxpayers and contributors going forward for pensions throughout the system? You know, $500 million is one of our bigger expenses, and, of course, that dates back to 1992.

This year your ministry's estimate of expenses of $8.9 billion, up from two years ago of $8.3 billion, up from last year's forecast of $8.8 billion: it is still a 4 per cent annual increase per year. I mean, again, I would just like to know the matrix and the measurement of where the contributor and the taxpayer are getting value for that money.

Lastly, if you have some thoughts on P3 schools. In Infrastructure yesterday the Infrastructure minister talked about how some schools are going to be built under the P3 model. Personally, I believe that when the Alberta taxpayer and the Alberta people will always be in the business of providing quality education, why we would do any schools under P3 instead of using the benefits of local contractors is beyond me, especially when the design is so easily controlled and P3s have potentially hidden costs and potential unforeseens. Madam Minister, the question I'd specifically like to ask you: when it comes to whether a school is built by a P3 compared to a more traditional bid and then build system, do you have any extra maintenance and any extra online costs when it's a P3 instead of the conventional way? Is there any extra cost that the contributor of Alberta has to be concerned about?

Madam Minister, in the last 10 seconds let me thank you again and your entire team for all the work you do for Alberta children and Alberta families. Thank you very much.

11:50

The Chair: Thank you, hon. member.

With that, we will turn it over to the minister for her response.

Member LaGrange: Thank you so much. I'm sorry I couldn't get to your questions earlier. There are just so many questions, so little time. But I will now attempt to answer those.

Let's start with premiums, licences, and school fees. First of all, these are not for basic school supplies or textbooks. This is in the Education Act. They cannot be used for those items. In terms of school bus transportation fees, they cannot be allocated elsewhere either. There is actually a regulation that says that school boards cannot charge more than the cost of service. They can only charge to recoup their own expenses. On this particular portion, where these premiums, licences, and school fees exist, they are really for extracurricular activities, for, you know, hot lunch programs, for things also in terms of rentals.

We saw throughout the pandemic that a number of these fees actually went down considerably because, of course, there was online learning at times, there was less extracurricular activity, there were fewer field trips. Now we are seeing – and I think you would all agree it's great to see our kids going back to doing that extracurricular activity, to having field trips and being able to enjoy being kids again. While these fees appear to be going up, it's because we're comparing them to last year, where they had gone down dramatically before. Again, this is not something that government controls. These are, in fact, in the purview of school boards. There are parameters in terms of what they can and can't charge for, and school boards will, you know, charge what they need to charge to provide those services to kids that we want to see them have: extracurricular activities, field trips, all of those type of things that need to happen in our schools to make them that much more enjoyable because we don't want our children to have to continue not having those experiences, which are great experiences for them to have.

On the reserves, under the Education Act the oversight of reserves have been something that the Minister of Education has been overseeing over the last two years in terms of reserve spending because we did feel that reserves were starting to climb higher. There are good accounting practices that would, in fact, determine what a good amount is. Because of COVID and the fact that there have been increasing reserves, we are looking at it because my oversight, actually, as minister, was going to come off in September of 2022.

Of course, knowing that, you know, there could be potential for large numbers of reserves to be spent, which would affect the bottom line, we are looking at how to move forward with school board reserves. But it is top of mind to ensure that there are, in fact, adequate reserves because reserves are there for a purpose. We want to make sure that they are utilized properly, but we've always said, particularly in operating reserves, that we want the front lines to have the greatest impact. We want teachers and educational assistants and supports going to the front lines because that is where you are going to see the biggest impact, of course making sure that, while our administration is well looked after, there aren't dollars being diverted in that area.

Is there anything on reserves that anyone would like to add?

Mr. Tremblay: No. That's good.

Member LaGrange: Okay. On the teacher pension portion, this is something that has been ongoing for a long time. It is a shared responsibility between the teachers themselves and the ministry, so it's a 50-50 shared responsibility.

I'm going to turn it over to Christine to give you more detail in that area and what the expectation is going forward.

Ms Sewell: Thank you, Minister. Maybe I could just draw attention to page 76 of the estimates. This outlines the teacher pension plan amounts. The $385,400,000 that's seen under the statutory operating expense is budgeted for the current service cost of the post-1992 service of the teachers' pension plan for the '22-23 fiscal year. The current contribution rate of total teachers' salaries is 10.87 per cent, as established in September 2020.

The other place that you would be able to see the pension liabilities is on page 208 of the fiscal plan. Budget 2022 reflects that the liability has been fully paid in 2021.

Member LaGrange: There was a question which we'll answer next time.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Minister and your team.

We will now move over to the government members. We have approximately just under four minutes left, and that will go to the hon. Member Hunter.

Mr. Hunter: Thank you, Madam Chair. I just wanted to maybe give you an opportunity to talk about the good work you've done on red tape reduction. As I said earlier, I think it's absolutely critical to make sure that we're getting our teachers in front of the classroom, making sure that our administrators are focusing on good teaching outcomes rather than filling out forms, so if you can maybe talk about the good work that you have done there.

Also, the concept of a balanced budget creating sustainability of our education delivery: I know that you also believe in the importance of making sure that we have a sustainable education system and how that balanced budget can help us do that.

I'm going to turn the time back over to you, Minister, for that, and then we can talk about the other questions that I have in the future.

The Chair: We actually are still on the government side, and the minister does not have an opportunity to speak until this afternoon. So some of the government speakers may speak or ask questions.

Mr. Hunter: Oh. Okay. If she can't answer those, that's fine.

I would just maybe ask the questions about – I know that in this budget it did not have francophone schools included. I'm just wondering how the process works to be able to figure out the capital projects, if you can help us understand that.

I know that there were also some questions by the opposition about the capital projects in Edmonton. If you could provide us with a little bit of an outline about how that process works to be able to figure out who gets those capital projects, that would be very helpful. That is on page 154 of the fiscal plan, that talks about the capital spending projects in 2022-2023.

Also, on page 1 of the capital plan it shows that $117.6 million is being allocated over a three-year period for the modular classroom program. I'd like it if the minister could please explain what this program is and how it will benefit students. I know that some of the schools that I've chatted with are very grateful for that modular program as it is a very quick turnaround to be able to get, to fix their needs if they've got a surge. If a bunch of people decide that they're going to have their kids come back into school because they don't feel like COVID is as much of a concern anymore, we might see a surge in certain areas that we haven't seen in the past. That modular program would be absolutely critical, I think, to be able to address that need.

If the minister could answer those questions, that would be very helpful. That's all that I have, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Pardon me?

Mr. Hunter: That's all that I have.

The Chair: All right. Well, thank you so much, hon. member.

I must advise the committee that the first portion of the time allotted for consideration of the ministry's estimates has concluded. I would like to remind committee members that we're scheduled to meet again this afternoon at 3:30 p.m. to continue our consideration of estimates of the Ministry of Education.

Thank you, everyone. I appreciate your time today and wish you all an enjoyable lunch.

[The committee adjourned at 12 p.m.]

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