



Legislative Assembly of Alberta

The 30th Legislature
Second Session

Standing Committee
on
Families and Communities

Ministry of Education
Consideration of Main Estimates

Wednesday, March 10, 2021
9 a.m.

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Second Session**

Standing Committee on Families and Communities

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Standing Committee on Families and Communities

Participant

Ministry of Education
Hon. Adriana LaGrange, Minister

9 a.m.

Wednesday, March 10, 2021

[Ms Goodridge in the chair]

**Ministry of Education
Consideration of Main Estimates**

The Chair: I would like to call the meeting to order and welcome everyone here this morning. The committee has under consideration the estimates of the Ministry of Education for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2022.

I would ask that we go around the table and have members introduce themselves for the record. My name is Laila Goodridge, and I am the MLA for Fort McMurray-Lac La Biche and the chair of this committee. We will begin to my right.

Mr. Dang: Good morning. Thomas Dang, MLA for Edmonton-South and acting deputy chair of this committee.

Mr. Neudorf: Good morning. Nathan Neudorf, MLA for Lethbridge-East.

Mr. Smith: Mark Smith, MLA for Drayton Valley-Devon.

Ms Glasgo: Michaela Glasgo, MLA, Brooks-Medicine Hat.

Ms Lovely: Jackie Lovely, Camrose constituency.

Ms Pancholi: Rakhi Pancholi, MLA, Edmonton-Whitemud.

Ms Hoffman: Sarah Hoffman, Edmonton-Glenora.

The Chair: Now we'll go to the members participating virtually. When I call your name, please introduce yourself for the record.
Brad Rutherford.

Mr. Rutherford: Good morning. Brad Rutherford, MLA, Leduc-Beaumont.

The Chair: Mickey Amery.

Mr. Amery: Good morning, committee members. Mickey Amery, MLA, Calgary-Cross.

The Chair: Richard Gotfried.

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

The Chair: Due to the current landscape that we are in, all ministry staff will be participating in the estimates debate virtually. Minister, I will ask that you please introduce yourself and any of the officials who are joining you who may be speaking on the record.

Member LaGrange: Happy to do so. With me today I have Andre Tremblay, deputy minister; Brad Smith, assistant deputy minister, financial services; Emily Ma, director, budget and fiscal analysis, financial services. I also have representatives from my ministry who are ready to help me answer any of the questions that may come forward: Paul Lamoureux, acting assistant deputy minister, program and system support; Jeff Willan, assistant deputy minister, strategic services and governance; Tracy Imai, chief of staff for the deputy minister's office; Chris Bourdeau, communications director; Richard Arnold, acting executive director for the K to 12 fiscal oversight sector; and Alysson Blaine, manager of policy and strategy, deputy minister's office.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

I would like to note the following substitution for the record: Mr. Dang as deputy chair for MLA Lori Sigurdson.

Before we begin, I would note that in accordance with the recommendations from the chief medical officer of health, attendees at today's meeting are advised to leave the appropriate distance between themselves and other meeting participants. In addition, as indicated in the February 25, 2021, memo from the hon. Speaker Cooper, I would remind everyone of committee room protocols in line with health guidelines, which require members to wear masks in the committee rooms and while seated except when speaking, at which time they may choose to not wear a mask.

A few housekeeping items to address before we turn to the business at hand. Please note that the microphones are operated by *Hansard* staff, and 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. Those participating virtually are asked to turn on their camera while speaking and to please mute your microphone when not speaking. To be placed on the speakers list, virtual participants should e-mail or send a message in the group chat to the committee clerk, and members in the room are asked to please wave or otherwise signal to the chair. Please set your cellphone and all 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 a member of Executive Council acting on the minister's behalf will have 10 minutes to address the committee. At the conclusion of her remarks a 60-minute speaking block for the Official Opposition begins, followed by a 20-minute speaking block for independent members, if any, and then a 20-minute speaking block for the government caucus. Individuals may only speak for 10 minutes at a time, but time may be combined between the member and minister. The rotation of speaking time will then follow the same rotation of the Official Opposition, independent members, and then the government caucus, with individual speaking times set to five minutes for both the ministry and the member. These times may be combined into a 10-minute block. On a final note, please remember that all conversations must flow through the chair at all times regardless as to whether or not speaking times are combined. 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. Is anyone opposed to having a break? Wonderful. We will co-ordinate with the other group to have a break at the midpoint so that we're not, both groups, going for a break at the same time.

Ministry officials, at the direction of the minister, may address the committee. Ministry officials are asked to please introduce themselves for the record prior to commenting. Space permitting, opposition caucus staff may sit, appropriately distanced, 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 the six hours, the ministry's estimates are deemed to have been considered for the full time allotted in the schedule, and the committee will adjourn. Points of order will be dealt with as they arise; however, the speaking block and the overall three-hour meeting clock will continue to run.

Any written material provided in the 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 or any amendments will occur in Committee of Supply on March 17, 2021. 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, and as a courtesy an electronic version of the signed original should be provided to the committee clerk for distribution to committee members.

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

Member LaGrange: Thank you so much. Thank you for joining us today to discuss Education's 2021 budget and main estimates. As everyone knows, we are in the midst of an extraordinarily challenging time for all Albertans, and the government's overall financial approach has shifted as a result. Budget 2021 protects lives and livelihoods, with a historic investment in health care while laying the foundation for economic growth. Through the prudent management of tax dollars Alberta's government can continue to invest in priority areas to ensure Alberta emerges from COVID-19 stronger than ever.

One of these priority areas is our kindergarten to grade 12 education system. Before I take questions, I'll give you a brief overview of the commitments our government has made in the latest budget to ensure that all students can access a high-quality education while also ensuring we are prudent with the public money we spend. I'm pleased to say that Budget 2021 offers stability to the K to 12 education system by maintaining funding. This means no school board will receive less operating funding next school year than they did in the 2020-21 school year. Our commitment to funding the education of young Albertans remains even within the fiscal challenges that the province is facing. Alberta has one of the best funded education systems in Canada, and, as always, our goal is to drive as many dollars as possible into the classroom. As seen on page 102 of the fiscal plan, the Department of Education funding and operations line is the same as last budget, at \$7.621 billion. These are the dollars the province provides to school authorities to operate as well as to run the Department of Education.

Reductions in anticipated spending of reserves and the use of own-source revenue by jurisdictions is expected to decline this fiscal year. Total consolidated support for the education system is maintained at approximately \$8.3 billion. Some people have erroneously reported that this means we have cut \$160 million from education. This is simply not true. Alberta's consolidated budget includes reserve and own-source revenue spending by school boards. Last year we projected boards would increase their reserve spending as the system transitioned to the new education funding model. This budget we project boards won't spend as much of their reserve dollars, and our consolidated budget of \$8.3 billion reflects that projection.

9:10

Our investment in education has been maintained. Again, I point everyone to the Department of Education funding and operations line in the fiscal plan. It remains at \$7.621 billion. The strong financial support provided by Alberta's government also shows up in the robust financial health of school authorities. At the end of the 2019-2020 school year school boards reported a total of \$384 million in operating reserves as a surplus and \$222 million in capital reserves. This was an increase from the previous year, which was \$363 million and \$208 million respectively.

Alberta students deserve a world-class, high-quality education, and that starts with stable funding for school authorities. As you know, this upcoming September we will enter the second year of the new kindergarten to grade 12 funding model. Our commitment to stable and predictable education funding is why we introduced the model for the current school year. It means the enrolment changes have less of an impact on funding, and it supports appropriate planning for school authorities, who will receive their funding commitment letters well ahead of the school year. The 2021-22 funding manual will be posted and each school authority's funding profile will be provided by the end of March.

The education funding model is a simplified, flexible system that has fewer funding envelopes and reporting requirements. These are all characteristics that the system told us they wanted to see. It also allows us to take concrete action to put education spending on a more sustainable path for the long term. Starting in 2019, we maintained the Education budget because enrolment and inflation over the previous 15 years had grown by 58 per cent but operating costs had grown by 80 per cent. In 2020 operating costs continued to outpace enrolment and inflation. You can see that on page 103 of the current fiscal plan.

Looking ahead, maintaining our education investment at its current level along with the introduction of the updated funding model should get us exactly where we need to be. Turning to the model's weighted moving average approach, we know that education partners were concerned with how it would affect funding levels due to the declining enrolment this year because of the pandemic. We heard our partners loud and clear. I'm pleased to say that the boards will not be penalized because of this unexpected event. This means we are maintaining education funding to school authorities despite the decrease in enrolment. This decline in enrolment is significant across the province. This year we have 9,300 fewer students in our schools than the year before. In Budget 2021 the decision not to penalize schools means that \$130 million will remain in the system that otherwise would have been removed due to declines in enrolment. In addition, school boards can continue to request approval to use their school board reserves if needed. This COVID-19 mitigation funding further demonstrates our commitment to provide school authorities with the resources they require to support safe learning for all Alberta students.

Moving on to learning support funding, we continue to value our series of grants within this envelope, which includes program unit funding, commonly referred to as PUF, and the specialized learning support grant. With the new funding model, changes were introduced in the structure of these supports. At that time I committed to monitoring the impacts of the new model. Therefore, we are providing an additional \$40 million to the learning support envelope of grants. Alberta Education will continue to examine the funding under learning support funding grants in order to ensure that our most vulnerable students and children are supported. More information on this matter will be communicated to school authorities in the coming weeks.

Another area of interest is always student transportation. Continuing with our theme of maintaining and being stable in this area, funding for transportation will be at \$310 million, which is the same as last year. I remind you that last year's budget added \$15 million to this grant envelope.

As you all know, starting this year government and education partners will begin to implement the largest curriculum renewal project in Alberta's history. This work starts with the release of the draft kindergarten to grade 6 curriculum in the coming weeks. This step leads us towards classroom validation in the fall, prior to the province-wide implementation the following year. By 2024-25

school year we expect that an entirely new kindergarten to grade 12 curriculum will be taught in Alberta schools. We have set aside funding to support this work, which is included in the Department of Education's operations line from this fiscal plan. I have also made it clear that future funding for curriculum implementation will not come out of the classroom.

Now, moving on to the 2021 capital plan, I'm pleased to say that Alberta's government continues to invest in schools. We are earmarking \$2.1 billion over the next three years to maintain existing schools, work on previously announced projects, expand the modular program, and support 14 additional school projects. The capital plan provides \$114 million over three years to support the continued implementation of the modular program to address the most urgent needs for additional spaces across this province. This is a significant increase over last year's three-year budget target. This year alone we will allot \$90 million, which is the highest ever single-year investment in the modular program. We will also continue to invest in playgrounds, which is an important initiative for me as well.

Looking specifically at operations and maintenance and capital maintenance and renewal, flexibility and capitalization remain key aspects of these programs: \$651 million will go to operations and maintenance, which is the same as last year, and \$103 million is for capital maintenance and renewal. I will also remind you that this is coming on the heels of last year's accelerated capital maintenance and renewal dollars, announced last spring. An additional \$250 million program was accelerated, accelerated hundreds of projects, and supported thousands of jobs.

I'd like to now briefly touch upon the department's administration budget. The ministry is committed to finding efficiencies and saving money. While approximately 1 per cent of Alberta's Education budget supports the administration of the Department of Education, we are showing leadership in reducing administrative costs. This allows us to push more dollars to school authorities to provide to front-line services.

Looking at next steps over the coming weeks, as I mentioned earlier, the department will be reviewing student learning support funding. School authorities will receive their funding profiles by the end of March once those decisions are made.

To conclude, I will stress again that all school authorities will maintain . . .

The Chair: Minister, your time has now elapsed. Thank you.

For the hour that follows, members of the Official Opposition and the minister may speak. The timer will be set in 20-minute intervals so that you are aware of time. Members are asked to advise the chair at the beginning of their rotation if they wish to combine time with the minister's. Ms Hoffman.

Ms Hoffman: Thank you very much, Madam Chair. I'd be happy to share my time with the minister if she's comfortable doing so at this point.

The Chair: Minister, would you like to share time?

Member LaGrange: I would prefer to do the block timing.

The Chair: No worries.

Ms Hoffman.

Ms Hoffman: Yeah. Let's try that for this block, and maybe the minister will reconsider for the next. Here we go. I want to begin by acknowledging that six hours will go fast. We've been through estimates before, once in this format and once in an even more

truncated form in the Legislature, and I appreciate all of the work that's gone in through department officials and the minister's office in preparing for today.

I'm hoping that we can really dig into some of this information, particularly given the change in how the lockdown was done this year and the embargoed information shared. Typically we would have officials, including some of the folks who are in the room today, come and brief the opposition members during the budget lockdown, but that wasn't done this year. We did have a brief period of time with some Finance officials, so there is going to be probably more concrete information required this year in this process than we've required in the past.

Definitely through you, Madam Chair, and through the minister, I would love to hear direct, concrete answers from some of the folks in the department with regard to some of the questioning that I'll be engaging here right away. I also want to say that I understand that not everyone will have every answer at the top of their information available today and that written responses are certainly welcome as well. Ideally, it would best inform and support democracy if we had those responses prior to being asked to consider voting on the actual budget itself. I want to start with, you know, all of those understandings before we really start digging into this more deeply.

I want to say, just in terms of framing, that one of the pieces of information we were able to acquire during the lockdown was the hard number for how many were actually enrolled this year in schools. Normally I think that information is reported from school divisions to the minister's office at the end of September and then relayed to the public shortly thereafter in the fall, but this year I understand that the minister extended that time for reporting back the number of students until December. When I checked last week, I don't think that the actual numbers were on the department website yet. There were still projections that were there.

9:20

I know that the projection was 715,000 and that the actual is 706,000, based on what we were notified of when we asked these questions of Finance officials in the lockdown, and that the projections for next year are 726,000, as the minister noted, a significant decrease between what was projected for enrolment this year and the number of students who actually showed up but an even bigger increase in the upcoming year for the number of students who are projected to be registered in school.

I also want to acknowledge that when I say "in school," it doesn't mean that it needs to be in the physical building; it's students who are registered in a variety of ways for educational opportunities, including many this year who are registered for remote, online learning. I know that there are many high schools, for example, where in excess of 50 per cent of the student population has registered for online learning, well, I guess, emergency remote learning, through a variety of different online mechanisms. Most are still tied back to the student.

I do want to acknowledge that there is going to be a significant increase in the number of students going to school this next year in whatever format that might be, and many Albertans have expressed to me their deep concerns that this budget doesn't take that increased enrolment into consideration.

The first document I'd like to begin with is the business plan for this year. The business plan, in my experiences prior – generally as an Albertan I read this document as a commitment or a contract or even a covenant between the stewards of the province, the government and the representatives of the government, and the people of Alberta who are receiving the services. I have to say that my jaw dropped when I saw that it was only two pages this year. In the past it's been 11. Even if you count the one table of numbers,

this year it's three, so that's a huge reduction in the amount of information that government is setting forward in their commitment, in their transparency, in their objectives, and in their key measures from where we've been in the past and not just in the past under PC governments or NDP governments but even in the past under this UCP government and this minister. This is a significant erosion of transparency and, I would argue, democracy.

I guess one of the questions I have is: why is the minister moving so aggressively to really truncate and fail to shine a light on what her actual priorities are for education as we move forward? When you simply compare last year's business plan to this year's business plan, there's a huge erosion of that transparency and, in turn, trust. I always like to compare the last business plan to this one. I think that that's a good habit to get into because not only does this business plan tell you what the government cares about for this year, but it tells you what they've decided not to prioritize that they used to prioritize.

Something that really stood out to me is that previously there were four key objectives. There are still four key objectives, but one of the four key objectives previously, even last year, was funding the education system to provide learning opportunities that enable student success. The fact that that's been removed, that that's not a key objective for the Ministry of Education, I think, is a very significant disservice to the minister, to the department, to everyone who receives this information, and ultimately to students, who are supposed to be the beneficiaries of education.

Just to reflect on some of the changes to the key objectives section, 1.1 is now about implementing the curriculum as opposed to compiling it – fine – 1.2 is similar to a previous one as well; 1.3 is new. So 1.2 is around provincial assessments, 1.3 is now also about provincial assessments, and 1.4 used to be 1.3, essentially. So there is a doubling down on provincial assessment, standardized testing, and an elimination of the minister's objective around funding the education system to provide learning opportunities that enable student success.

I guess the question there would be: who told you that it shouldn't be a priority to enable student success? Through you, Madam Chair, who said that it was appropriate for us at this time, when very few Albertans, including the minister, are focused on provincial assessments – I appreciate that the minister did respond to calls from parents, from students, from staff groups as well as the Official Opposition around removing some of the stress around provincial standardized tests, including diploma exams, this year. But now the minister is saying that she's only going to focus on four key objectives this next year – and two of them are about provincial assessments, standardized testing – and that none of that focus is going to be around learning opportunities to enable students' success, based on her actual business plan. I think that that is a disservice to the people of Alberta. Who said that it should be a priority for us to add double focus to provincial assessment, and who said that the key objective around funding the system to enable success shouldn't exist? That definitely is counter to the feedback that I receive daily from students, staff, and families in this province.

Also, continuing on page 31 of the business plan, most students, staff, families have told me that they want an education system that provides smaller class sizes, more educational assistants, improved access to technology and digital supports, but there wasn't anything about that added. Instead, as I remarked, modernizing provincial assessment was stated as being the key priority. If there are only four key priorities and only a two-page business plan, that seems to reflect what the minister's focus is on.

The minister did refer to stable, predictable funding, and part of the other component on that that we lobbied for together when we were school board trustees was "adequate." The minister seems to

have removed any reference to adequacy in terms of funding and just focused on stable and predictable. I want to highlight that when you do that, it is absolutely stable and predictable to say, "I'm not going to give you enough; I'm going to not give you enough, and I'm not going to give you enough in perpetuity," but that isn't actually what enables successful student experiences and learning opportunities.

As I mentioned, we know that student enrolment is down significantly from projected. When we asked school authorities for where their greatest enrolment reduction was, many have said kindergarten as well as years 4 and 5 and high school. Presumably, high school completion rates, as a result, will decrease because students are spending less time either upgrading or acquiring the requirements that are necessary for high school completion. So another question is for the minister to tell us how this was taken into consideration in performance metric 1(a), because it doesn't appear to have been in my reading of this very succinct objective, as outlined by the minister.

The other piece would be that I have grave concerns that failing to disclose the actual enrolment until this point in the school year, when we're about to embark on the fourth quarter, I don't think enables us to ensure that those students who aren't learning in school or aren't learning remotely have an opportunity to glean the education that they are entitled to. I would like to know . . .

The Chair: Ms Hoffman, I'll let you finish your sentence.

Ms Hoffman: Thank you.

I'd like to know what's going to be done through this budget and this priority setting to ensure that that doesn't happen this next year. I think it's important that we prioritize educational experiences for students.

The Chair: Thank you.

With that, we will move on to the minister for 10 minutes.

Member LaGrange: Thank you so much. I do want to tackle these very important questions that Member Hoffman has put forward, and I'll start with the enrolments. As you acknowledged, there was a decrease, but I have to share with everyone here that, in fact, the projected head count was actually higher for the '20-21 school year. I'm going to give you some actual numbers so you can see that we, in fact, have supported our school divisions to a very high level and continue to support them.

In the 2019-2020 school year regular student head count was 696,744 students. The projected head count for 2020-21 was 715,355 students. The actual head count – and these are regular students in public schools, independent schools, and independent ECS operators – for the 2020-21 year was 680,843 students. The projection for the head count for the 2021-22 year is 705,995. When we add in the home education and shared responsibility, the total number head count of students, actuals for 2019-20, was 711,843; the actual head count projection for 2020-21 was 730,030 students. Those are actually the students we funded in the 2020-21 school year, and we kept it whole.

9:30

The actual projected head count for '21-22 is 725,955. I guess I missed the actual head count for '20-21. Even though the projection was 730,000 students, the actual head count in '20-21 was 705,917, so a full 25,000 students more that we funded in the 2020-21 school year and will continue to fund even though the projection is 725,955 in this upcoming year, the '21-22 year.

As you can see, these students have been coming to school. They perhaps have gone to a different method of learning. We are so

proud of the fact that we are able to maintain funding to all of the students and, in fact, have funded school divisions beyond students they didn't even have within their classrooms. They had full access to all of those dollars.

When we look at how healthy our school divisions are in terms of their account balances, we note and I note that they have available to them as of August 31, 2020, \$383 million in operating reserves. That was an increase of \$21 million from the previous year. Even in the pandemic our school divisions were able to put away dollars to support their students because they know that these students are going to require the best possible services. Capital reserves: they were able to increase their capital reserves year over year by \$13.4 million. This indicates that we have been supporting our school divisions at the highest level possible to ensure that they are able to meet the demands, as I said, year over year. We've actually been funding the 730,000 students in this current year even though we've only had 705,000 attending.

When we look at the business plan – and give me a moment to move to my business plan – I just want to correct an inaccuracy. Our business plan is actually four pages long, not two. I would have preferred to have put everything in that I would have wanted to put in this business plan. I wanted to include all of the measures from last year and beyond to show what an excellent education system we actually do have. We are looking at all of these items that are listed here, all of these measurements and all of these outcomes.

The very first outcome, outcome 1, is “Alberta’s students are successful.” The key objectives are clearly listed under there: implementing new curriculum, reforming provincial assessment, modernizing the provincial student assessment, and increasing opportunities for hands-on learning and experiential learning. Then we go to outcome 2, which is “First Nations, Métis, and Inuit students in Alberta are successful” and so on. We actually have and are continuing to track all the other 22 items that are here.

The new Treasury Board and Finance business plan standards have pushed ministries to focus on the strategic and leave operational concerns to other internal planning and reporting documents, so that's why they're not specifically listed in this document. I would prefer to have the expanded version, but unfortunately, due to the Treasury Board and Finance direction, this is what we have to place into this new plan.

We can see that students are increasingly targeting success. We are as an education system wanting that trajectory to move further and further up the line. I hope that one day we can have 100 per cent as targets. I would love to see every single student in this province receive 100 per cent in every measurement, so that is what we are aiming for, continual improvement.

The assessments that were stressed by Member Hoffman are, of course, something that we're hearing from parents. They want to know that their students are being assessed to ensure that they are actually learning what they need to learn at the time they need to learn it. Again, I would love to have had an expanded business plan, but unfortunately, due to Treasury Board requirements, they have limited us to these numbers.

Stable, predictable funding is absolutely what school divisions wanted. If I can refer you to the fiscal plan, pages 102 and 103, you will see that we are in fact maintaining Education funding. I'd like to draw your attention to the graph on page 103, which again shows that historically we are year over year spending more in operating expense, which is more greatly significant than the actual inflation and enrolment numbers that you see in front of you.

Again, we are continuing to spend unprecedented dollars to ensure that our schools are having all of the resources that they require and access to all of the resources they require. In this year, of course, it was unprecedented, and we spent a great deal of dollars

in terms of ensuring that our schools were safe, and that amounted to about a billion dollars overall that schools were spending to ensure that they had the supports necessary to deal with the COVID pandemic.

High school completion was something else that Member Hoffman was asking about. High school completion is important for entry into the labour force and postsecondary programs. While the majority of students complete high school within three years of entering grade 10, the five-year rate for our performance measure recognizes that it may take more time for some students to finish high school. In 2018-2019, 84.9 per cent of students completed high school within five years of entering grade 10. Based on 2014-2015 to 2018-2019 data the high school completion rate has improved over time. This indicates that parents and students and schools continue to recognize that high school completion is important for students' future success.

Of the students who complete high school in five years, most, about 91 per cent in 2018-2019, complete it in three years. The three-year rate is also highly correlated to the five-year rate, which makes the three-year rate a reliable predictor of the five-year rate in subsequent years. Projections indicate that the five-year rate is likely to increase by 1 or 2 percentage points over the next few years.

In addition to those who earn a high school diploma or certificate, Alberta's high school completion rate also includes students who enter an Alberta postsecondary institution or an apprenticeship program within five years of entering grade 10. This acknowledges that students have completed the high school courses they need to continue their education in a postsecondary program. Another group comprises those who have earned credits in the minimum of five grade 12 courses, including one language arts diploma examination course . . .

The Chair: Minister, I'll let you finish your sentence there quickly.

Member LaGrange: . . . and three other diploma examination courses. I do have more to go on, but that's fine.

Thank you.

The Chair: Wonderful.

With that, we'll go on to the next 20-minute block. I will ask again: do you wish to combine your time?

Ms Hoffman: If the minister wants to continue as we have, I'm fine with that. If she wants to combine time, I'm certainly happy to do that as well. I'm happy to comply with her wish on this.

The Chair: Minister?

Member LaGrange: Go with the block.

Ms Hoffman: Okay. Not to waste any time, then, and just to confirm what I stated at the beginning around the actuals this year, I rounded. I said 706,000, not 705,917. That is reflective of what the minister just stated. Next year there will be a projected 726,000, so an increase of 20,000 students across the province without any planned increase in investment to support those students. It would be great in future years if we could have the officials attend the lock-up, as was a long-time tradition, either remotely or in person. The one piece that was different information, though, was that we were told by Finance officials that the projection was 715,000 for this current year. If that information was incorrect, I think it doubly underlines the need to have officials from the appropriate departments available to answer questions on budget day through lockdown.

9:40

We used to have performance metrics tied – and I do want to reiterate. I'm talking about the core objectives, the business plan objectives. It's one double-sided page. That's two pages. I know that there is an org chart and that there is the one-page summary of operations lifted from other documents, but the actual business plan, as I believe it to be, is two pages this year. It's one double-sided page.

We used to have performance metrics through the business plan tied to safe, caring, and healthy learning environments, and I would say: why isn't this a priority for measurement this year? Why isn't the minister showing Albertans that she cares about student safety and well-being through her actual commitment to them through the budget, through the business plan, and why aren't we measuring success against this in the upcoming year?

Also, there used to be outcomes related to First Nations, Métis, and Inuit students and their success. There were five key objectives, including strengthening education programming and policies for First Nations, Métis, and Inuit students; ensuring First Nations, Métis, and Inuit students have access to the provincial education system; and so on. This year there is one measure about high school completion rates. That's it.

Madam Chair, what do you think the downgrading of this reporting and accountability says to First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Albertans and to all Albertans? Is it any wonder that partners like the Northwest Territories are distancing themselves from our education system when it seems to be such an erosion of what once were defined commitment objectives and measured against success on those objectives?

There was a report recently in the NNSL Media. The Beaufort Delta district education council assistant superintendent informed board members of the plan during the second day of their February '17-18 annual general meeting. He said that it isn't official yet. A decision has not been finally made, but it's something you should probably be aware of at this stage, he told them. He added that the underlying logic behind making the change had been the direction of the United Conservative Party government here in the education system of Alberta, and he said that it's been disappointing from a territorial perspective. This is a quote: it's not inclusive of indigenous perspectives or indigenous ways of life; it's very conservative; I don't think it's reflective of the values here in the Territories and certainly not what we value here at our district. He said that B.C. had done a big curriculum revamp: it's all public; it's online and competency based; we think it's great, and this shift in Alberta has brought it to the forefront.

That's definitely something that has been brought to my attention, and I understand that it hasn't been brought to the minister's attention. But I think that changes to the way curriculum is done, changes in the engagement with partners, putting people with a pen who don't reflect the values of Albertans generally and the values of our partners and other educational authorities who have been part of this highlights the lack of trust and confidence in this government and this ministry, under the leadership of our current minister, and is reflective of those priorities. I would say that the business plan doubles that down. The business plan erosion of – and I get that there's a title under outcome 2 that says, "First Nations, Métis, and Inuit students in Alberta are successful," but the key objectives certainly don't reflect the kind of core competencies that we want to see in terms of greater outcomes.

The performance metric that I was referring to is the only metric around high school completion. There used to be more metrics related to student success. There are still some listed objectives, but in terms of actual things that we're measuring to be held

accountable to – I was in Treasury Board and Finance yesterday for the afternoon, and I did ask specifically about the business plans, because the business plans for Education and Health really did stand out to me as a significant deviation from the transparency that we used to hold. While it's been said here that it was direction from Treasury Board and Finance, it was made very clear yesterday in committee on the record that it was an encouragement to narrow and focus business plans, an encouragement to narrow and focus from an 11-page document to something more succinct.

I understand that. I think that the minister absolutely has the authority to push back and to say: you know, it's really important that we are consistent in what we're measuring and how we're being accountable to the people of Alberta. Also, I think it's appropriate for the minister to do something more than one double-sided page when others have certainly done more than one double-sided page. This is a significant number of dollars, and it's also a significant number of people who are impacted by this budget and the decisions around the ministry.

In the budget briefing, when we asked about the actual enrolment, I mentioned that we were told it was 706,000. I don't think that's the number that the minister confirmed – oh, no; 705,917. So that's fine. Some officials told us that the budget is based on the projection of 726,000 students, which again means that increase of more than 20,000 this year. But if we take the consolidated budget claims at their word, that means 20,000 more students without any more funding. Can the minister tell us how she expects this many additional students to be effective in their learning without any additional support?

Let's remember what happened just a few short days after the last budget estimates went through the Assembly. The minister took to Twitter and notified Albertans that more than 20,000 educational workers were being laid off. That was just days after the minister pledged in the House that educational budgets would remain intact and that students who needed educational assistants would have those available to them. That, of course, wasn't the reality. Then the minister claimed that the layoffs were only temporary and that the staff would be rehired.

But on page 182 of the fiscal plan – again, fiscal plan page 182 – we can see very clearly that there will be 37,226 certified staff, so that's a net reduction of 337 from pre-COVID staffing levels. You'd have to compare last year's fiscal plan to this year's fiscal plan to see that number because the government didn't highlight that in their presentation of it this year, but that is a net reduction of certified staff, so teachers, of 337. Then in terms of noncertified staff 25,281, which is a reduction of over 1,800 noncertified staff, again, most of them, presumably, educational assistants.

This is the change from the pre-COVID staffing levels, so there will be 20,000 more students and more than 2,000 fewer staff. How can we possibly justify having that many more learners and that many fewer adults there to support them in their learning? Everyone knows that this has been an incredibly challenging learning year, this current school year as well as last year's school year, that there have been learning gaps, social-emotional gaps, mental health struggles, and that this current school year as well as the end of last school year has been unlike any other. So when student numbers are going up and student needs are going up, why has the minister chosen to reduce the number of teachers and support staff who will be there to support these students through their learning?

This certainly can't be what parents are asking for. They can't say: what we want is more rigorous standardized testing and fewer staff to help students learn those competencies. I really have to say that the main lobbying point I've heard consistently over the last year around assessment is the need to be more flexible and

responsive to students and to have increased staffing supports and smaller class sizes to support students in learning.

Those are a couple of the points I wanted to highlight at this point. One other that I'm going to touch on is board funding. The minister has told school boards that none of their allocations will decrease in the upcoming school year, so I'd like her to confirm that. The minister has also told boards that they can receive additional funding if they have additional enrolment. Can the minister confirm that she also told this to authorities and also commit to that on the record, that there will be no reductions and that increased student count will result in increased student funding?

Lastly, the minister presented a consolidated budget that is flat. If the minister is telling us that she can have a flat global budget and that she can ensure that nobody receives less and some will receive more, that math doesn't add up. What's missing here, Minister, and how can all three of those things be true at the same time?

The Chair: Wonderful timing, Ms Hoffman.

Now on to Minister LaGrange.

Member LaGrange: Thank you for those questions. I'll just, you know, draw Member Hoffman back to a number that I had originally stated in my first round of questions, which is the 2020-21 school year total projected student head count of 730,030 students that we are actually currently funding in this current year. So in 2020-21, this current school year, we're actually funding 730,000 students, yet there was only 705,917 that actually attended by our actual head count. While the projection for next year, for the '21-22 year, is 725,966, that is still well below the 730,030 students that we are currently funding this year. I'm proud to say that we're going to continue funding those 730,000 students to school divisions and providing those extra dollars.

9:50

As I said earlier, school divisions have very healthy reserves, and I'm also proud of that. The fact is that they're projecting to use less of their reserves in this upcoming school year even in comparison to what they had projected last year. As I said earlier, while they had projected, you know – early accounts to me were that they were going to be using approximately \$60 million in the previous school year of reserves. In fact, \$21 million more were added to the reserve coffers; they went from \$363 million to \$383 million in operating reserves and, again, an additional \$13 million in capital, from \$208 million to \$221 million. I'm very proud of the fact that school divisions are well resourced to meet the needs of their own local realities.

When we look at the fact that there were fewer students, many of those school divisions chose to allocate their resources differently in terms of their staffing. As Member Hoffman knows, being a former school board trustee herself, school boards and their administration make staffing decisions. They are the ones, even with the resources that they had, that made the decisions to allocate those teachers and noncertificated staff.

I can tell you that in the projected difference from 2019 to 2021, school boards added an additional 15 FTE certificated teachers whereas in the same time period they did decrease by 1,557 noncertificated staff, EAs, and bus drivers. The decrease in noncertificated staffing is primarily attributed to school boards' planned decrease in noncertificated instructional staff such as educational assistants and classroom aides as a result of the significantly lower than expected enrolment in nonmandatory prekindergarten and kindergarten programs, including program unit funding for children in 2020-21. This drop is expected to be temporary as the system prepares for the new school year. This

decrease in noncertificated instructional staff is particularly evident amongst Edmonton school boards, public and Catholic, which accounted for approximately 44 per cent of the provincial decrease in noncertificated instructional staff.

As I indicated, while we funded for 730,000 students, that did not materialize. There were actually 705,000 students. All of those additional resources stayed within school divisions so that they could address the needs of their communities because, as Member Hoffman would know, they are in the best position to address those needs.

When I look at the comments on the Northwest Territories, I'm happy to report to Member Hoffman that I had a really great conversation with Minister Simpson yesterday morning, and Minister Simpson really – I'm sure that Member Hoffman does not want to imply that he would be lying to me. Minister Simpson reiterated that as part of their regular five-year – every five years the renewal of the contract comes up, and they will be looking at their curriculum. What he said to me is that he doesn't know where they're going with the curriculum.

In fact, he was quite happy to hear that in our updates to the curriculum, the new curriculum that will be coming out, we are going to have very, very strong First Nations, Métis, and Inuit content, that we will have probably the most comprehensive curriculum across Canada in terms of reconciliation and working towards meeting the demands within that area, that we are going to have content on residential schools. He was so happy to hear all of that.

He said that I would be the first to know if there was any change that they would be making. Right now he said that this is all speculation, that there is no truth to this. I just want to assure Member Hoffman that the Northwest Territories and Minister Simpson will in fact contact me should there be any changes in their thought pattern around which curriculum they will use. He was so appreciative of all of the information I was sharing with him, and he is really looking forward to seeing that new curriculum when it is released here shortly.

In the fiscal plan – again, I spoke to this earlier, that I would love to and, in fact, I did submit a very enhanced, robust business plan that was returned to me to trim down and truncate, but I am happy to tell you that our department staff are currently developing an online table that lists all of the performance measures beyond those included in the business plan, with current and historical results as well as a five-year trend. This information will be posted on our Alberta Education website for public access. I have felt very strongly that we need to be very transparent with our public, and this is one of the ways we will be transparent. We will make sure that all of that information is out there so that parents and the general public can look and see year over year: have we gained ground? Have we lost ground? We need to ensure that the public is very, very aware.

This is something, also, that I felt very strongly was needed to be done in terms of the curriculum development. We didn't want the members who are part of the curriculum working groups or part of the advisers or part of any portion of developing the curriculum – we wanted every single one of those members to be listed, to be accounted for, and the process to be very, very transparent, so anything that you will see in the curriculum development is transparent. I'm very happy to say, as I indicated earlier, that we have got a very robust development process and transparency process, and we will continue to do so because it is very, very important that we are accountable to the general public.

When I look at moving forward here, one of your other questions was on board funding, and, yes, no school authority will see less

operational funding. We can do this through the \$130 million in mitigation funding that we are going to provide to school boards. Again, I remind you that we will actually be funding, if the projections actually turn out to be true, the 725,000 students, approximately 5,000 less than we are currently funding right now, because, as I said earlier, we are currently funding 730,000 students.

It is very important for us to ensure that those students are – you know, of course, now we have a new model that has provided sustainable, predictable funding, which is something school boards wanted. I know that Member Hoffman, when she was a trustee, really advocated for sustainable, predictable funding. Under the weighted moving average, which is how we are able to get this sustainable, predictable funding, Alberta's education funding model frees up resources by reducing red tape and administrative costs while giving school boards the autonomy and the flexibility to invest in classrooms based on their students' needs.

Apart from the cap on system administration none of the grants in the new model are targeted, so school authorities have the maximum flexibility to allocate their resources to best meet the needs of their students. An efficient and sustainable funding model for K to 12 education ensures that all schools in Alberta have adequate resources to deliver programs in an equitable way. This is very important, that it is equitable.

The previous funding formula wasn't flexible enough to contain costs and involved too much administration. It was unsustainable, as I referred you to earlier on page 103 of the fiscal plan. You could see that exponential growth, where operational spending was way higher than . . .

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Back to Ms Hoffman.

Ms Hoffman: Thank you, Madam Chair. I just want to reinforce, when the minister talks about projecting 730,000, that 24,000 fewer showed up. I, too, am relieved that funding wasn't clawed back. I am, however, deeply concerned that 24,000 students essentially dropped out who were anticipated to be in school this year, whether that was dropping out of kindergarten programming, whether that was dropping out of years 4 or 5, or whether that was at any point in between. What is being done – and I think I asked this in the first exchange – through this budget and through policy that will feed into this budget to ensure that all Alberta students are receiving the education that I believe that they should be entitled to? Again, to reiterate, what it was that we were lobbying for together was adequate, sustainable, predictable funding through our individual advocacy as well as our shared advocacy through associations like the Alberta School Boards Association. That adequate piece is fundamental because perpetually underfunding or perpetually underproviding for those in one's care would be seen as negligence if it was within a household and it was your own family. Even if you were being sustainable and predictable in the fact that you were underproviding for your family, that would not be seen as success. Adequacy is fundamental to ensuring that we properly support students and their learning and their success.

10:00

I'm thrilled to hear that the department under the minister's leadership did actually create a far more thorough business plan, and it's lovely that it's planning on being posted. I think that it should be tabled in the Assembly if this is what fed into the actual decisions that went into this. I'm hoping for confirmation that the minister will table the enhanced business plan she referred to prior to any decision being requested by the members of the Assembly around approval of the budget.

I also want to highlight that the minister says that any school authorities who have increased enrolment will see increased funding, and that includes, I'm sure, independent and charter schools as well. There is a small contingency. I appreciate that there is one, though. Is the minister confident that she can fund increased enrolment in a variety of different potential places without taking any money away from existing school authorities?

The main reason why I ask this is because this is the first time that I can remember – and I'm happy to be corrected. I'm sure Brad has an even longer memory than I do about the actual funding manual and the one-pagers that get provided to boards. But, in my experience, for more than a decade, within a day, sometimes two at worst, for some boards, everyone had their one-pagers. They knew what the funding manual was going to be, they knew what their projections were, and they were able to act on those. This is the very first year that the funding manual and the one-pagers will be shared with those who the minister says are entrusted to make the decisions, closest to the student, and who are in the best position to be able to do so, a full month after the budget was presented, the rolled-up provincial budget.

It's very difficult for many school authorities to take the minister at her word on this when last year they actually did receive their one-pagers, and then their funding was cut substantially. Through you, Madam Chair, to the minister and her officials: what is going on that this is, for the first time that I can recall, the new standard, that we're not actually going to tell those who are being required to implement these budget decisions what their budget is until a full month after it's been considered and that we're not giving this information out prior to asking members of the Assembly to vote on it? It definitely flies in the face of transparency and accountability, and it is causing significant angst for many folks.

Those traditional one-pagers, again, have been shared within the same day, so why isn't that happening this year? Why aren't we telling schools, including school boards, how much their allocation will be exactly before we're asking this to pass its way through the Assembly?

Now I'm going to go to the main estimates for a little bit, and I'm going to focus on page 73 first. On page 73 there is a reference to how many staff – oh, my first question is around 1.1, minister's office. I see that the estimate is for flat funding this year, so I would love to have a summary of how many political staff and how many administrative staff are under line item 1.1 and how that compares to the current fiscal year moving to the next fiscal year and why the forecast below budget was in place for the current year. Oh, I didn't write down the line item. Oh, learning support funding.

Let's talk about learning support funding, which is 3.2. It's \$300 million, essentially, over budget forecast. So what happened there? That's significantly more. It's more than even what the federal funding was that was passed on to the minister to pass on to school authorities. And why are we now cutting the budget in this next year over forecast? I know it's not over budget, but it's over what's actually being spent this year by \$257 million. That is a significant reduction over what's being spent this year to support student learning. Again, we know that student needs are going to go up in this upcoming school year because we will have more students, we will have more educational gaps from the last year and a half of change and responding to the COVID-19 pandemic, and we also know that we'll have more mental health needs as well.

I do see that transportation is seeing an increase over forecast, but it's still a cut from where it was in the budget. I know that the opening remarks highlighted that it did go up under the last budget, but that definitely – the budget and the forecast don't line up there because, again, the actual forecast is down. I'm assuming at least part of that is because so many students dropped out. Again, as

highlighted by the minister, 24,000 fewer students than anticipated, so certainly far fewer are on the bus as well. As well, with the increase of remote home learning, again, fewer students will be on buses. If you look at the forecast to estimate, there is an increase, but it's essentially flat between budget and estimate. So are we not anticipating that we will have more demands when it comes to transportation?

Transportation is something that I know there was a review of this last fall. I know that Member Neudorf, who is here in the room today, was a part of that and, I believe, chaired that process. So where are we at on the policy assumptions that are driving this budget? What are the policy assumptions that relate to transportation that are being considered in this budget?

Typically we'd, again, have officials available on budget day to talk to MLAs and answer questions during the lock-up. I highlighted that that wasn't the case. One of the questions that I would have asked again this year, consistent with things that I've asked in the past, is: what are the changes to different types of program funding, including PUF? Have there been any changes made to the years that one is eligible, the ages that one is eligible, the number of hours available for programming, and the standards and benchmarks in relation to that? I know that there were significant changes made to that last year. Have we reversed some of those? Have we learned from the negative impacts of those, including the age criteria and eliminating that additional support for kindergarten? We know that many parents don't know that their child has an opportunity to benefit from focused supports until they are actually in care, because that's the time when professionals often engage with students and see where the gaps and opportunities are.

I guess the last one I'll mention under this blocked time is around the bridge funding that was put in place last year. I understand that there was a new budget funding formula that was set. We haven't seen what the funding manual is for this year, so it's hard to know what those changes are, between the changes that were made last year and the changes for this year. That bridge funding was fundamental in ensuring that the negative impacts of the model didn't have lasting impacts for all school divisions or the vast majority of school divisions. I'd love to know what happened to that bridge funding this year and what assumptions are being put into place to ensure that we don't see a significant contraction this year or next year in terms of the supports that are being seen, particularly in school divisions that are growing significantly. Has the bridge funding been sustained for this year? And, if not, how is that gap going to be made up? Is there actually a funding manual and a funding formula that we can have some understanding of how this money is going to be distributed and pushed out to school authorities?

We appreciate the presentation that's been made here. I appreciated the presentation that was made last year, and then just a few days after the budget was actually passed, last year, there were significant cuts and clawbacks. So I think it's important for us to have some clarity, some transparency, and some certainty around the bridge funding. There were significant cutbacks because there were announcements of laying off more than 20,000 educational staff, and that was done again for May and June.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms Hoffman.

Now back to Minister LaGrange.

Member LaGrange: Thank you so much, and thanks for those great questions. I'm really proud to say that, you know, adequate, sustainable funding was something we always advocated for when

we were trustees. I'm glad that Member Hoffman remembers that because that's exactly what school divisions have.

In fact, I have several quotes from school division officials. She would know the president of the College of Alberta School Superintendents. A quote on Budget 2021: we appreciate the minister's commitment to invest in specific areas where ongoing, specialized supports for students are required. Brandi from ASCA, the Alberta School Councils' Association, said that Budget 2021 prioritizes student success and supports for students with additional learning needs, priorities identified by Alberta school councils and parents. And Lorrie Jess from the ASBA, who is the president of the ASBA, the Alberta School Boards Association, said that she appreciates that Education funding will be maintained and that boards will be provided with the flexibility and autonomy to ensure that dollars go where they are most needed.

10:10

I actually had a great meeting with zone 1 – you probably remember zone 1; that's our northern school divisions, Grande Prairie and Peace Wapiti and Northland school divisions, et cetera – and they were so supportive of the direction that we went with Budget 2021. I had so many individuals, trustees thanking our government for keeping the funding the way it was. They were so supportive, and, you know, I just want to reiterate that adequate, sustainable funding has worked really well.

The weighted moving average, actually, was beneficial to school divisions, particularly as they saw enrolment growth drop. Enrolment dropped this year, and they were able to see that that weighted moving average was to their benefit. As I indicated earlier, we're funding 730,000 students, in fact, when only 705,000 were in attendance, and we anticipate, if the numbers turn out to be correct, 725,000 students, which is still less than the 730,000 students we continue to fund.

As you indicated, you know, I'm glad that you are happy that there is a robust business plan, because there is and there will continue to be, and that will be on our website very soon. I will look forward to you having a look at that on the website and then being able to see how we are moving the education system forward.

Enrolment was a question that you were asking about. Again, I highlight the fact that in Budget '21 we will be providing more than \$130 million in provincial COVID mitigation funding, which allows school authorities to support safe learning environments for all of our students. We heard very loudly and clearly from education partners to hold harmless, and that's exactly what we did.

The profiles and the funding manual. Certainly, I will draw your attention to page 73, the learning support funding, which you indicated earlier. I will draw your attention to the portion that is \$1,356,090,000, which is up \$40 million from the previous learning support funding budget. Because of the fact that we had a new funding model and it was something that I and my department had indicated we would continue to review – it was new, so we knew that perhaps there'd be refinements that needed to be made. In this particular area, because of the fact that we had students with specialized learning needs that were impacted by COVID and the fact that we wanted to examine these funding envelopes a little bit more thoroughly, I added an additional \$40 million in that envelope.

Because of that need to continue to look at that and how it will be disbursed, it was felt very strongly that it would be best to get the profiles and the funding manual accurate. So that will be brought out by the end of this March, March 31, 2021; every school division will get its profile, and they will have access to the updated funding manual. I know that this is very important to school divisions, but I have to also remind you that that is one of the

benefits of having the new funding model, that school divisions will actually have their profiles before school begins. They can do that in-depth planning that they want to do. They are able to allocate their resources, and they are able to hire staff and know securely that they actually have those dollars available to them, which wasn't the case in the past. That was something that occurred after they had the September 30 student count.

This is something that we heard very loudly from our education partners that they are very pleased with. Having access to those funding profiles so early so that they can make those critical decisions for their school divisions is something that they really, really benefit from. You know, I spoke with, again, zone 1 just yesterday. I've been in contact with the education partners, and they are quite in agreement that they're happy to receive those funding profiles and the funding manual by March 31, which gives them lots and lots of time to be able to make their staffing decisions as well as all the other decisions for their upcoming school year budget.

On main estimates, let me turn to page 73, the learning support funding, which is something that you had drawn attention to as to why the forecast overestimate is – there's a difference of \$257,000,088. The learning support funding grant supports specialized learning needs or groups of students who may require additional supports from school authorities. This includes the specialized learning support grant, the program unit funding, English as a second language and French language supports, refugee student grant, the First Nations, Métis, and Inuit grant, the social-economic status grant, the geographic grant, and the school nutrition grant.

Government is very committed to ensuring that all students and all children with specialized learning needs receive the additional support necessary in order to build a solid foundation for the future learning and success. Alberta Education will continue to examine the funding under the learning support funding grants in order to ensure that the most vulnerable students and children are supported.

Under COVID-related funding adjustments, there was \$298 million in that COVID-related funding adjustment. There was a \$248.6 million decrease for schools to reopen safely. There was a \$39.4 million decrease to front-line education workers' wage top-up as part of the government's critical worker benefit program and a \$10 million decrease for the purchase of personal protective equipment and other resources to support return to in-person learning for the 2020-21 school year.

The other funding adjustments of \$40.9 million. There was an increase to enhance the existing funding for specialized learning supports, and that includes that whole envelope, which includes the program unit funding as well as all those others that I just mentioned, which is expected to further support our education of the most vulnerable students within our communities. Again, that is where that additional \$40 million has been added to the overall funding of that envelope, and I very much look forward to bringing forward more details on how that will be disbursed in the coming weeks.

On the transportation piece, let me just flip to the correct page. Transportation is provided for services to approximately 300,000 students across the province. The transportation grant is held at the enhanced level from the 2019-2020 funding. I will just remind you that in 2019-2020 we had increased that grant by \$15 million. Again, transportation is very, very important to school authorities and school divisions.

There is also, as you had stated, the transportation task force. I have received the report. I thank the members of that task force. They did an excellent job. They have provided me with a report that

has short-term, medium-term, and long-term goals and recommendations, and I am looking forward to bringing that forward in the short term. Suffice to say that we do have very strong support for transportation, and we will continue to have strong support for transportation.

I'm looking here to see that there is continued support in the areas . . .

The Chair: Thank you, Minister LaGrange.

With that, we will move on to our first block of the government caucus. Up first we have Ms Glasgo.

Ms Glasgo: Minister, I just want to start off by saying thank you very much for being with us today and for all of your department staff. I know putting a budget together certainly isn't easy work, and all of your department officials should be proud of the work that they have done. I want to also say thank you to you for your continued engagement with my constituents. I know the people of Brooks-Medicine Hat definitely appreciate that. You've not only been in my constituency, even to some of the rural areas in my constituency, but you keep a constant tab on things that are going on in Brooks-Medicine Hat, and you're always available to speak to them, which I know is much, much appreciated.

10:20

I am going to ask you some questions about the curriculum review and rollout that is coming, which is on page 31 of the business plan. Key objective 1.1 is stated to be: "implement new curriculum, including a validation process with volunteer school authorities to gather feedback." You and I both know, Minister and everybody at this table, that our government was quite critical of the previous government for their ideological curriculum, with most of it being done in secret, of course, not knowing who was part of that. It seemed to be more focused on change, being agents of change, comrades if you will, rather than teaching children the foundations that will have them be successful in the future.

I know that with my constituents they felt that this was a continued attack on the rights of parents as well as a continued attack by the previous government and insistence that things need to change, progress for progress's sake rather than looking at what works and what has been proven to work, which is, of course, getting our students ready for success. In our platform – I'm looking at page 58 of our platform, where we promised to end the focus on discovery or inquiry learning and constructivism, focusing on proven foundational competencies, and broaden our consultations, including a wide range of perspectives from parents, teachers, and subject matter experts. I want to just thank you for the work that you've done on that so far. I do look forward to seeing those changes.

I have to say as well that this focus on developing foundational competencies is very important as we know that in this economic recession, in this time where things are quite different, we need to make sure that students have what they need and the tools that they need to be successful in the long run to be employed.

I'm also happy to see something that one of my friends actually advocated for, which is consent being taught in the curriculum. This is something that I heard from my constituents as well, that it's very important that we teach about this as part of our sexual education curriculum, and I know that the Premier was very supportive of that as well as yourself, and actually a personal friend of mine was one of the advocates for that very early on. I'm glad to hear from you and have heard from you that this will be a continuing conversation within that.

Minister, I have a series of questions, and because we're doing block time, I'm just going to kind of fire them at you. There are

about five, just to give you a heads-up. I'm sorry. My questions are – of course, I'm focusing on page 31 of the business plan document with key objective 1.1. Can you please tell us what the budget for the curriculum review process is and what line item that actually falls under?

The second question would be: what feedback have you received on curriculum changes so far? I'd be specifically wanting to hear what you're hearing from parents because, of course, we know that parents are the prime educators of their children and also the most important stakeholder with their children in the education curriculum and the education process.

Budget 2021 is maintaining education funding. Can you also explain where in the budget this money came from? We're maintaining that \$8.3 billion.

Minister, can you please give the committee an update on where in the process for the curriculum you're at?

Then, finally – and I'm sorry for being so long-winded, but with block time this is, unfortunately, where we're at – key objective 1.3 on page 31 of the business plan is focused on modernizing assessments. How will this benefit student learning with the new curriculum changes?

Minister, I would like to resign my time to you so that you can respond to those five questions and elaborate more on our platform commitment to curriculum and how that will benefit Alberta students.

Thank you.

Member LaGrange: Thank you so much. Can you hear me? Yeah? Okay. A technical glitch there.

Thank you so much, MLA Glasgo, for those questions, and I am very proud of the work that's been done on the curriculum. When I look at the key promise that this government made to Albertans, it was to renew the K to 12 curriculum. I know it's been a long time coming, but it is certainly something that has been worth waiting for. The provincial curriculum does define what students are expected to know, understand, and do in each subject and grade.

I'd also like to highlight some key points of the curriculum review as this work has been happening over the last number of years. The Curriculum Advisory Panel was appointed in 2019 to provide advice and recommendations on the development of the new kindergarten to grade 12 curriculum, that emphasizes the knowledge, the skills, and the competencies students should have when they finish high school. This is something we heard very clearly from parents and the general public, that they want well-informed students that are very capable and highly skilled when they leave our education system. The panel provided advice and recommendations to help inform the direction for curriculum that includes globally endorsed best practices, jurisdictional research, and previous engagement feedback development of a new ministerial order on student learning that provides direction on the foundational knowledge, skills, and competencies students should have through the K to 12 education system.

Of course, you have to have a good foundation before you can move forward on building that curriculum, so we built that strong foundation. In the winter of 2020 we broadened consultations to gather feedback on a draft ministerial order from parents, teachers, and subject matter experts. We had over 8,000 Albertans share their views through an online survey; 300 education partners, including parents, gave input through in-person and virtual engagement sessions.

In August 2020 the new ministerial order on student learning was released. This outlined the vision for student learning that "students will gain the knowledge and skills to form the foundations for successful and fulfilling lives, and make meaningful contributions

to their communities and to the world." That's a direct quote from that ministerial order on student learning.

Next the guiding framework for the design and development of the K to 12 curriculum was developed. This set a common direction, purpose, principles, and standards for the curriculum. We've had 19 individuals provide advice based on their subject matter expertise and lived experience in areas such as francophone matters, indigenous perspectives, literacy, social studies, science, math, and financial literacy.

Last fall the draft K to 6 curriculum went to the curriculum working group, which I will remind everyone is comprised of many teachers from across the province. I believe we were well over 100 teachers. The members reviewed draft curriculum through the lens of their discipline and subject knowledge as well as their classroom perspective. I just want to highlight that the first draft that we received had also current teachers that were working on that draft. In the coming months the draft K to 6 curriculum will be released publicly for Albertans to review and give their feedback. Before I even go further, I want to also highlight that we had deans of education as well as their faculty members also review the K to 6 draft here in the fall, and they provided their valuable feedback, which was then utilized to further refine the current K to 6 draft.

Once we had all of that feedback, we are coming very close to having a final version that we will be making public. As I just said, it will be public to everyone. It will be on our website, and everyone will have an opportunity to provide feedback back to us on that. We are anticipating classroom validation, and we're still targeting participation in schools in September 2021, so this September. We anticipate that province-wide the K to 6 curriculum will be implemented in this current year or this upcoming school year.

Page 103 of the fiscal plan states that "Alberta's government will invest the necessary resources to support teacher learning and build English and French resources aligned to the new curriculum." We are committed to funding the curriculum implementation and supporting teachers in school divisions through this process.

10:30

Regarding your question, while Alberta Education is working on the implementation, the new curriculum will come with new provincial assessments to measure the student performance on new learnings. Modernizing current provincial assessments will bring coherence to the curriculum and to curriculum assessments and communicate student learning. Assessment and curriculum are interconnected, and aligning our assessments to our curriculum is the only way to ensure that assessments produce accurate information about our students' levels of proficiency. It will ensure Alberta students can best express their learning in provincial assessments.

As you indicated, the new curriculum will have all of those elements that you stated in terms of, you know, consent and antiracism and all of those other things that you have been hearing. I am so looking forward to bringing that forward, but I want to remind people that the validation process goes for a year. What happens through the validation process is that they actually try out the new curriculum, and our teachers that will be implementing that validation process will also be providing us feedback so that we can further refine the curriculum. It will not actually be finalized until 2022, when we anticipate that all of the school divisions right across this province will then implement the new curriculum, in September 2022.

We anticipate that approximately 10 per cent of school divisions across the province will take part in the validation process, and it will be voluntary. We know that COVID is still with us, and we wanted to make sure that only those who wanted to participate can

participate. What we have done is make that a voluntary process. Teachers, schools can choose to either implement and validate one grade, one subject, or if they want, they can do the whole K to 6 within their school. This is something that's very important.

You spoke about diversity within our new curriculum. The new curriculum will reflect the diversity, the cultural perspectives, and the history of all Albertans. It will be aligned with the ministerial order on student learning that was announced in 2020. One of the items from the ministerial order on student learning that came directly from my minister's youth advisory council – and a shout-out to those great students who are in my minister's youth advisory council. They do a tremendous job and really, you know, provide valuable feedback from the students themselves. One of the things that they said was very important for them is that they see themselves reflected in the new curriculum, so that is something that you will also see in the new curriculum. The ministerial order sets the vision to guide education. It updates the curriculum and strengthens the K to 12 system. There is an emphasis on essential knowledge, civic virtues, and outcomes students need to succeed in school and throughout life. Isn't this what we want for all of our students, that they are able to succeed presently and in their future lives?

The ministerial order also provides outcomes for learning to strengthen inclusion and ensure Alberta students see themselves, as I said earlier, their families, and their communities in the curriculum. Students will learn about the rich heritage of Alberta and Canada while valuing the strengths of diversity. They will study significant events in provincial, national, and world history and how they impact our current world. There will be opportunities to demonstrate commitment to the common good by exercising compassion, empathy, and support for each other in our diverse societies.

We will have a strong antiracism component in our curriculum. Alberta's new kindergarten to grade 12 curriculum will continue to address concepts, topics, and issues related to antiracism, particularly in social studies and in the wellness education portion. Concepts, topics, and issues related to antiracism, diversity, and pluralism may also be addressed in other subject areas such as English language arts and literature.

All new curriculum will be aligned with the new ministerial order on student learning announced in 2020. It sets the vision to guide education, update curriculum, and strengthen the K to 12 system. As I said earlier, the new ministerial order will ensure all students see themselves, their families, and their communities in this curriculum, and this is also reinforced in the updated guiding framework for curriculum development, which provides the guidelines to ensure that the curriculum actually does help students develop respect and understanding for people . . .

The Chair: Minister, I'll let you finish your sentence.

Member LaGrange: . . . of different faiths, experiences, and backgrounds.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Back to Ms Glasgo. I believe you have about four minutes left.

Ms Glasgo: Well, thank you very much, Madam Chair, and thank you, Minister, for your thorough response. I really do appreciate the work that you've done and the work that you will continue to do in consulting with parents. I know that in my constituency that's been very important.

I'm finished with my line of questioning, and I would like to resign my time to MLA Smith if that's okay with you, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Yes.

Mr. Smith, the floor is yours.

Mr. Smith: Thank you, Madam Chair, and thank you, Minister, for being willing to answer questions for us today. This budget process is an important part of what we do as we serve Albertans, and I want to thank you for being willing to go through what's going to be a gruelling day, I think, for six hours. Wow.

Now, I want to focus today a little bit of my conversation on the COVID issue and how Education has been dealing with just this curveball that's been sent at them in the issue of COVID-19. You know, Education has had to address many of the stresses that have resulted from the COVID-19 pandemic. Over this last year we can see that schools were closed, causing students and teachers and parents alike to have to adapt to an online environment, and then when schools were reopened in the fall, it was up to Education and to teachers and to principals and to school board officials and to superintendents to ensure that students would and could return to the classroom safely. It was then up to the schools to implement the guidelines for the safety protocols.

You know, I'm sure that it must have just been a crazy situation for you as we began rolling out school this past fall. I know that I was talking to former colleagues and to teachers that were scrambling to try to figure out how they could cohort and how they could make sure that they were addressing the needs of their students. Of course, we know that those students are individuals, and they come from a wide range of backgrounds and have a wide range of needs. How could they help to meet those needs, and could they be able to do it, then? The principals were wondering: how do we get all of these parents and teachers and students all coming together in the fall to roll out this COVID-19 and address that?

Minister, I guess I've got a couple of questions here. One, what budget line addressed this whole thing? As we delve into the budget here, what budget line addressed the increased costs that many school boards had when they had to face this COVID-19 as they were rolling out this coming year? How much of the Education budget is targeted towards the additional costs that are going to be incurred due to the pandemic? Can you provide us with some examples of some of those additional costs, and how much money has been set aside in this budget to address those concerns? There are going to be many.

You know, when I was talking with school boards, we talked about: how are you going to handle the additional subcosts for teachers and for educational assistants? What about operation and maintenance costs for cleaning and for janitors, capital costs? In our rural districts they have to think about the problems that you're going to have if you go to a digital format again and to online learning. What about IT costs, curriculum rollout, diploma exams? All of these things could be impacted by the COVID-19 rollout. Could you maybe address that?

Lastly . . .

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Smith. Right to the buzzer.

With that, I propose that we will now go to a five-minute break. Seeing that it is 10:40, I will ask that everyone be back here promptly at 10:45.

[The committee adjourned from 10:40 a.m. to 10:45 a.m.]

The Chair: Fantastic. That concludes the break for today.

We will now move on to five minutes of questions from the Official Opposition, followed by five minutes of responses from the minister. As mentioned, members are asked to advise the chair at the beginning of their time if they want to combine their time with the minister's time. Please remember that discussions must flow through the chair at all times regardless of whether speaking time has been combined. Just for a bit of clarification to committee members, the maximum speaking time in this round is five minutes, but members do not have to take the full five minutes. The overall block remains the 10 minutes. It is possible to exchange more than once during that block, but keep in mind that you can speak for up to five minutes at a time.

With that, we will go to Ms Pancholi.

Ms Pancholi: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Minister, would you like to share time or continue block time?

Member LaGrange: Continue block time, please.

Ms Pancholi: Thank you, Minister.

Member LaGrange: Thank you.

Ms Pancholi: I will begin with following up on comments that you made, Minister, with respect to line 3.2 in the budget, learning support funding. When asked by my colleague the Member for Edmonton-Glenora about the increase to the forecast for 2020-21, it sounds like, Minister – and please provide clarification if that's not the case – that that increase from the budget for 2020 is all COVID-related funding, generalized support to the system as it relates to COVID. You referred to the PPE, the critical care worker funding, and all of that. So it's not actually – it wasn't an increase that was focused on what I understood to be the purpose of this budget line item, which is funding to support the unique and diverse learning needs of children and students generally, of course, as the line items you described that are part of that funding are children with diverse learning needs, PUF, you know, ESL, First Nation, Métis, Inuit funding. It sounds like that increase is solely about an increase to COVID funding for the generalized system, and I'd like you to confirm that.

You also spoke about the \$40 million increase from Budget 2020 that's allocated in 2021 for learning support funding. However, I'm still seeking some clarification, Minister, as to what exactly that additional funding is for. You've indicated that it was a review that was done of the student learning support funding – special support funding, I should say – and that that's what it's meant to address. I'm not sure if you've provided any detail – I don't think you have – around: what issues arose in the 2020 school year in this funding line that you believe the \$40 million is meant to address?

Specifically, Minister, I would of course point to what has become a grave concern to many Albertans, especially parents of young children with disabilities and with special learning needs, the reduction in PUF. I'm not interested in engaging in another discussion about whether or not PUF was actually cut because we absolutely know in absolute, certain terms that it was. Children who entered kindergarten were not eligible for PUF. They were eligible for the general support funding, which was significantly lower. I'm wondering if you could clarify precisely what the increase is for that, why it is increasing, and what it is meant to address. Will there be an increase in PUF?

Further, I'll follow up on questions from my colleague the Member for Edmonton-Glenora where she asked specifically about whether or not we'll be seeing an increase in PUF funding around the age criteria, perhaps to once again include, as is based in, I think, strong evidence and support, that that additional support is needed

in that kindergarten year. Will that be changing in the 2021 school year as well as the hours of instruction?

We have numerous examples, Minister, which I'm sure you've been aware of because I know you've received the correspondence, around how cutting off children from PUF supports during that kindergarten year has been devastating for these families and these children. Many felt that they were forced to go to access the service privately, in private schools or private ECS operators, and if they couldn't afford it, they simply couldn't access it. Requiring a child with severe learning disabilities, because these are children who have severe learning disabilities, to have to go into the generalized kindergarten classroom – I know first-hand many parents who did not believe that that was an appropriate way for their child to be learning.

We also know that in looking at the reduction in the numbers of enrolment for 2020, the significant drop in students or children in that year was in the pre-K and K years. Those are critical early learning years, and I think we should all be deeply concerned about the fact that that is the age group in which we saw the most significant drop in numbers of children engaged in quality early learning and early childhood education. I imagine your budget should be funding and resourcing to accommodate for those lost children and those lost years, because we know that those early years are critical for future success in education. I'd like to hear how you're accounting for that in your budget and providing additional supports to those young learners.

I also want to make a quick comment – I've only got 30 seconds – about the approach. You were saying that the system is grateful that you took the approach of being held harmless. Basically, you're saying that what the education system, after coming through an epically devastating year – the stress on students, on teachers, on educational assistants, on staff, on parents – was asking you for was to hold them harmless. What an appallingly low standard we are setting when the system is actually saying: please don't make things worse.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms Pancholi.

And now on to the minister for five minutes of response.

Member LaGrange: Well, thank you for those questions, and I'll start with the last one first. The hold harmless is holding schools harmless at actually funding 730,000 students when only 705,000 students entered our schools. We've actually funded 25,000 more students than school authorities had in their system. Giving them the opportunity to have access to all of those resource dollars and to, additionally, be able to increase reserves in a pandemic certainly, I would say, is beneficial and has been beneficial, and that is what, in fact, school divisions were thanking me for. I do believe that school boards and school authorities recognize that it has been an extraordinary year, an absolutely extraordinary year, and they have done a tremendous job. I want to give a shout-out to all of the teachers and administrators, the students out there, and the parents themselves because they really have had to go through a very extraordinary year, as you have indicated.

When I look at that line item that you were talking about, the learning support funding, the forecast that was the \$1.6 million to the \$1.3 million: again, that is the line where the COVID funding, that \$298 million of related COVID adjustments, was made. It was a decision made by accounting to put it in that line item. When you look at the fact that we have \$1.356 billion – I'm sorry; maybe I said million when I should have said billion earlier – that is now \$40 million more than the \$1.315 billion budgeted in 2020-2021. That is that additional \$40 million that I was speaking about.

In Budget 2021, which provides an additional \$40 million to the learning support funding envelope, this does include the PUF and

the SLS grants that you were speaking about. I very much heard the concerns raised regarding the changes to PUF and the new funding model. I will take the next few weeks to listen to how we can improve the new model to ensure it is working at its very best for all students. We continue to really value the PUF and SLS programs, and we want school authorities to really focus their funding on the most vulnerable. Every single student who receives PUF and SLS funding will continue to receive the support that they need.

The new funding model does provide school authorities with increased flexibility and reduced red tape to ensure that PUF is directed to those children who need it the most. You know, just so you're aware – you probably are, but I'm just going to remind you – Alberta is the only province in Canada that offers funding for education supports to children as young as two years and eight months. This is not going to change. Three years of PUF funding for independent schools and two years of PUF and one year of SLS in kindergarten for school boards remain. The independent schools get an extra year because they do not have access to that SLS grant funding in kindergarten.

10:55

These grants continue to support school authorities in the provision of a continuum of supports and services to meet the learning needs of students within an inclusive environment, and we believe that all children in Alberta, including children with disabilities, deserve an education that prepares them for success. I was a former rehab practitioner, as you might know, specializing in working with the developmentally disabled, and I know how critical it is to have early intervention. Early intervention sets our children up for success, and it's critically important to me that we get that particular envelope correct. That is why there is an additional \$40 million in that envelope. As we move forward, prior to the funding manual and the profiles being distributed to school divisions, we will address any concerns that are in that area, and we will continue to offer the maximum supports that we can to our students.

You were talking about the number of students that are attending and that there has been a decline in, particularly, the early learning years. You're absolutely right. We need to ensure that our students, particularly in the early years, are supported. That's why it is critical that we continue to fund school divisions. As I said earlier, when only 705,000 students attended but we have 730,000 students . . .

The Chair: Thank you, Minister. I'll let you just finish your sentence there really quickly.

Member LaGrange: Well, I was just going to say that, you know, the projection is that many of those students in those early years are going to be coming into our school system to reach that 725,000 projection, but I just want to remind everyone that we are still funding 730,000 children because it is important to be ready for those early learners that are coming.

Thank you.

The Chair: Mr. Smith is up next.

Mr. Smith: Thank you, Madam Chair, and thank you, Minister, for taking these questions again. We were sort of cut off, and you didn't get a chance to answer the last time we were talking together, so I'll just quickly remind you what we were talking about. We were looking at the COVID-19 pandemic and how Education has had to try to adjust to the stresses of COVID-19. My first question to you, just to remind you, was: what budget line addresses the increased

costs that many school boards have had to face as a result of COVID-19?

The second question was: how much of the Education budget is targeted towards the additional costs being incurred due to the pandemic?

The third question that I asked was: can you provide us with examples of some of the additional costs, and how much money has been set aside to address those concerns? I had thrown out to you some of the things that just sort of crossed my mind, things like subcosts for teachers and educational assistants, operations and maintenance costs that may be inflated because of COVID-19. Were there any capital costs that we need to consider, IT costs? Is it going to affect the curriculum rollout? Maybe one completely out of left field – you can consider it – is the vaccine rollout going to impact teachers or schools?

The last question I had before we got cut off was: has money been set aside to address how a new crop of student teachers are going to be able to address their practicum needs? You know, as a teacher of 30 years I had the opportunity to have student teachers in my classroom on many occasions. I always enjoyed it, and I know that when you're in a rural community, that means that often you're getting students coming from a city environment and moving into a rural environment, into a smaller town. That creates certain conditions that are important for them to have to consider, and now they have to throw, you know, COVID-19 on top of it. Is that going to affect their capacity to be able to take a rural assignment? Is it going to affect student teachers with comorbidities? Have we given any thought about that?

Thank you, and I'll await your answer.

The Chair: Thank you.

To the minister.

Member LaGrange: Thank you, MLA Smith. Very important questions. You're right; we were faced with an unprecedented year. No one could have imagined that we would be in the situation that we're in. You know, had I been told when I became Minister of Education that one day I would have to look at sending the whole school system to at-home learning in March of last year – it's almost a year to the day that we did that, made that decision – I would not have believed it, but of course we had to, and we did. We were one of the first school systems across all of Canada to indicate that we were going to at-home learning indefinitely, because we had great health officials, Dr. Hinshaw and her team, guiding our decision-making. They could see what was happening and what was going to happen in the future.

We did develop a very robust plan. We got together with our education partners. For those who don't know, it would have been the Alberta Teachers' Association, the College of Alberta School Superintendents, the parents' association, the Alberta School Boards Association. We had health officials as well involved, the department as a whole, and we continue to hear from the general public as well. We developed a very robust plan so that schools could reopen safely, children, students, could return from at-home to in-person learning, and it has been very successful. Right now I can share that .1 per cent of students and staff have active cases of COVID. In my constant conversations with the education partners – they were happening weekly; they've gone to more biweekly – we continue to problem solve. We continue to ensure that our schools are the absolute safest they can possibly be and continually look at ways to improve.

When I look at the availability of dollars to school divisions across this province, we had a number of dollars available. I guess I'll put it – because it's such a large number, it's almost staggering.

We had school authorities able to access a billion dollars of additional funds. I'll just remind everyone that in the 2020-21 school year there was an additional \$120 million in operational funding that all school authorities had access to, and then there was an additional \$250.8 million of federal funding, that I was able to disburse on a per-student basis. We also had online and at-home learning federal funding of \$12 million. We had the government's support for critical workers benefit of \$43.2 million, and again I was so happy that we were able to have the most educational support workers receive that benefit across all of Canada.

Capital maintenance and renewal funding: as you had alluded to, MLA Smith, we accelerated \$250 million of capital maintenance and renewal funding, that school divisions were able to utilize to make improvements to HVAC and to go to touchless toilets and sinks and other items that they were able to enhance in their schools so that they could address the COVID needs. There was provincial funding for personal protective equipment, or PPE, of \$10 million. We had an increase in operational funding, as I indicated earlier, of \$120 million, and we also had the access to taxpayer-funded operating reserves of \$383 million. All of this amounts to approximately a billion dollars more on an \$8.3 billion budget. Those are staggering numbers but so needed because these schools needed to ensure that the children that were coming back, the teachers that were coming back were coming back into a very safe environment.

You talked about cases in schools. Yes, I'm so proud to say that the numbers were really low and that we've seen very low transmission within schools as well. There have been times where we've had to go to at-home learning, but oftentimes that was due to staff shortages. Again, you alluded to that in terms of the substitute teachers. We have a finite number of substitute teachers who feel comfortable working in a COVID environment because oftentimes substitute teachers are teachers that have retired. But what we have seen is that schools have been able to take the plan that we had and they've been able to shift very nimbly from in-person learning to at-home learning, and I've heard from superintendents and teachers themselves . . .

11:05

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

With that, we have two minutes and 30 seconds, approximately, for Mr. Smith.

Mr. Smith: Thank you, Madam Chair. What I think I will do is just – the minister didn't get a chance to answer one of the questions that I had, and that was about the new crop of student teachers. If maybe she could just finish that off briefly, then I think we'll probably have our time done.

The Chair: Perfect.

Minister, the floor is now yours. You've got approximately two minutes.

Member LaGrange: Okay. Well, thank you. The question on student teachers: yes, a very important part of the student teacher journey is to be involved in practicums. When we went to at-home learning last spring, it certainly was on the direction of the postsecondaries as to whether their teachers were able to participate in virtual practicums. We have since seen, since going back to in-school learning, that many of the practicum students are able to be part of the in-school experience, so those teachers are being active in the classroom. They are, I believe, benefiting from what has got to be one of the most unprecedented years ever, so they have been able to have both an in-school experience but also the ability to

provide students with at-home learning, to be able to go to that online programming.

There have been many, I would say, perhaps, challenges but also silver linings in this opportunity that student teachers have been able to experience which other student teachers would not have been able to experience in the past. When we look back in years to come, I'm sure that we will look back at this particular year as a learning year that is extraordinary for so, so many teachers. I'm hearing that from the teaching community themselves, that this is something – you know, many were not ready initially to go to an online learning type of scenario, but they have adjusted. I'm understanding that as the school year has progressed, those transitions have been easier and easier. Teachers are continuing to improve on their skill sets, and we look forward to ensuring that those new practicum teachers . . .

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

With that, we go over to Mr. Dang.

Mr. Dang: Thank you, Madam Chair, and thank you, Minister. Would you like to go back and forth, or would you prefer block time?

Member LaGrange: I'd prefer block time. Thank you.

Mr. Dang: In that case – thank you – I'd like to start in the fiscal plan. I've got a few things I want to get through, so I apologize. I'll go pretty quick here. Hopefully, you and your team will be able to catch it all and get some answers in for me. I'd like to start on page 139 of the fiscal plan, and I'm going to mostly refer to items in the fiscal plan under the renewing educational infrastructure area. Some of these questions are going to be follow-ups to things I've already asked the Infrastructure minister, just to hear your perspective as well, because it is Education monies, and some of them are going to be new questions as well.

The first thing I'd like to note is titled Playgrounds in the educational infrastructure. I note that in this year there's a projected \$6 million, and starting next year there are no funds at all allocated for playground construction. Now, when I talked to the Infrastructure minister about this in our estimates, he said that the \$250,000 grant per school for new playgrounds in new schools was going to be bundled into the project costs as part of a new education envelope there. Given that we've also seen things like CFEP funding, which, as you know, Minister, many parents and schools and communities access to fund playgrounds, and given that CFEP is also being cut starting next year, could you and your department assure me that there are going to be no changes to the playground grants? Could you assure us that playgrounds will continue to be fully funded, the grant will continue to be fully funded, and that new schools will get new playgrounds? I think it's something that is very important to many constituents across the entire province and particularly those in suburban Edmonton and Calgary as well.

I have a few other questions as well on things like modulars. I want to look at, in the same area, modulars being built. This year, of course, we can see a significant investment in modulars, right? I believe it's \$89 million, but in fact we can also see that those numbers would drop significantly, down to only \$25 million, in the next two years. Could you break down for me, because Infrastructure was unable to, actually, where these will go and how many you intend to build? Which districts will get how many of each modular? I think that's a very important question because we know, as my colleague from Edmonton-Glenora has said previously, that enrolment is growing significantly across the province. We're expecting 20,000 new students. We know that because we need more classroom space, these modulars are

essential. There are only a limited number of modulars you can build, of course, with this amount of money. Who will receive them? How many will there be? I'd like that breakdown, and, if you can, in writing would be ideal.

I want to move on again; because we talked a little bit there about modulars, it relates to new school builds as well. As you know, of course, you've announced that you're going to be building 14 new schools, but this year you've only budgeted \$33 million for a new school, and over three years for new schools there's only projected, I believe, \$228 million total. An average project cost of a K to 9 school is around \$20 million. The average project cost of a high school is between \$70 million to \$80 million or even more than that. It appears that that would require almost 300 million or more dollars, so basically it looks like these new school projects are underfunded. It looks like there isn't enough money for these new school projects.

The Infrastructure minister was unable to tell me whether there would be a predetermined delivery model such as a public-private partnership, or P3, versus a design/build process. I know that here in Edmonton the Edmonton public school board as well as Edmonton Catholic school district have both publicly said that they don't want any more P3s. They've had really bad experiences, for example, at Bessie Nichols in the west end or at Monsignor Fee Otterson in the south end. Basically, these P3 schools across the entire city here have been failures, and they've had significantly worse outcomes. Could you assure me that (a) these schools will be funded and built on time and (b) that you won't use P3s against school boards' wishes when they've publicly said that they don't want these systems?

I'm hoping to fit my last questions in here on CMR. I know you spoke a little bit about CMR with Mr. Smith's questions previously. I know that, basically, CMR has been cut \$6 million this year even though you say that there was an acceleration through COVID grants. As we move into future years, it gets cut even significantly more than that, right? It's down to a third of current year numbers. Could you explain why you think that school districts don't need that sustainable and long-term maintenance? On top of that, could you explain a little bit about your rationale for changing from IMR, or infrastructure maintenance and renewal, to CMR? CMR, of course, has less flexibility and less agency for school boards to manage their own maintenance requirements, so I'm wondering what the justification for this added red tape in your department is while reducing the autonomy and independence of our locally elected school districts.

I think that's my time, but I'd like to see some answers to all these things. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Dang. Right within the buzzer.

Minister, you now have five minutes to respond.

Member LaGrange: Thank you so much. Great questions. Something that I am very attuned to is playgrounds, and that was something that I wanted to really address early on in my term as Minister of Education. It just never made sense to me as a trustee for all those years that playgrounds, which are such an important, essential element of a student's ability to play and to also support their mental health and wellness, were never included in the capital budgets of schools.

That is something that has changed. All new school builds that have a K to 6 component will have a playground budgeted directly into the overall cost of the build of the school. It will be built. School councils will no longer have to fund raise for those dollars. They're significant dollars. It's approximately \$250,000 to get just an average, you know, good-quality playground built. Of course, if

they want to enhance the playgrounds, they can absolutely fund raise and develop even better quality playgrounds, but that being said, we are providing a very top-line playground in the build.

I just want to highlight that in Budget 2021 we are providing \$6.3 million for the construction of school playgrounds, which is an increase of \$0.5 million from Budget 2020. We know that playgrounds not only benefit the students that get to use them, but they serve the community as a whole. They are hubs where parents and children meet and gather and play together.

Since its inception in 2017 Education has funded 113 playground projects around the province; of this, 61 are complete, 20 playgrounds are under construction, and 32 previously approved playgrounds will begin construction some time in '21-22. School communities that wish to exceed the \$250,000, as I said earlier, can fund raise to supplement the projects. School divisions still have access to various sources of revenue such as the CFEP, that you were mentioning earlier. Again, we are protecting our investment and planning for the future by maintaining and enhancing our existing infrastructure and building new schools, and part of those new school builds will be playground infrastructure, as I said earlier.

11:15

When we go to your next question on modulars, again, a very good question, I can share with you that for modulars in this year in particular, we are actually funding it to a historic level, \$90 million. Previously allocated was \$25 million a year. This year we are at \$90 million because every year we receive an average of 400 requests for modular units from school jurisdictions right across the province, and we do have a number of aging units that need to be addressed. I felt very strongly that we needed to increase the number in that particular envelope so that we can address those aging units but also look to enhance school divisions that require just that extra little bit of space. Typically they might not need a whole new school, but perhaps they just need one or two classrooms to be added to deal with the enrolment growth.

The great thing about modular classrooms is that not only when we build a core school to address the needs of a community – as that community grows, modulars are added on so that they can grow with the community – but also when that community in time begins to shrink and student numbers start to drop, we can take those modulars and move them to another school, where they can address an enrolment growth in another area. So modulars have been something that we've been utilizing to, again, add those extra needed classroom spaces as we need them but also to decrease those spaces when they're no longer needed.

It's been a very effective tool that Education has been using, and I'm so proud to say that we are increasing that to historic levels so that we can address many more of the needs that, in fact, school divisions have been asking for.

In terms of your next question, on P3s and schools, as you know, I was a former school board trustee, so I do have examples and understanding of P3s, but as you would also know, it is . . .

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

With that, we move on to the government caucus, and I believe we're going to be possibly hearing about transportation from Mr. Neudorf.

Mr. Neudorf: Thank you, Madam Chair. Yes, that is exactly what I do hope to talk to. Minister, I do understand completely that you'll be releasing this full report in due course, and I don't want to provide any spoilers, but I do want to just talk about some of the things that are already publicly known out there.

This was a great honour and privilege of mine, to be the chairman of this task force. It was just really well set up by yourself and your ministry in terms of who all was on that task force. I'd just mention a few of those associations and groups: the Alberta School Boards Association, the College of Alberta School Superintendents, the Fédération nationale des conseils scolaires francophones – if I did that right, I hope I didn't butcher it too badly; the chair is giving me the wavy hand, so I apologize – the Association of School Business Officials of Alberta, the Association of Alberta Public Charter Schools, the Student Transportation Association of Alberta, the Alberta School Councils' Association, RMA, and AUMA, just to mention some of those individuals that took part in that, just a terrific group of people that spent a lot of time on this task force.

During the course of the consultation I do know, just off the top of my head, that members Hoffman, Loyola, Ceci, and Phillips also took part. I may have missed a couple of others that did as well, but that opportunity was definitely taken by them. Particularly, Member Hoffman had some excellent questions to draw out those conversations, and her experience and insight were really a part of the whole conversation. I felt it was, in large degree, bipartisan in some of those aspects.

A couple of the other comments on that. I know that for 21 hours of meetings around the province from far south to far north, I spent 27 hours driving and got to see a lot of beautiful country and appreciate a lot of incredible people. I have learned that Albertans are truly amazing. They are strong, they are proud, and they are free. The school board volunteers around the entire province that give their time, that care about Albertan kids: honestly, it brings tears to my eyes to remember some of those experiences that I was able to share with them where I would meet people in a gymnasium in a school in northeastern Alberta, and I would literally get hugs before and after the meeting for going to their town, seeing their school, and having these conversations.

It is said, highlighted at the very beginning of our report, that bus drivers are truly everyday heroes in Alberta. These people should be heralded from the rooftops at every opportunity because of what they do and serve and how they take care of our children. Really, they are everybody's mom and dad, aunt and uncle, grandpa and grandma. Whatever the case may be, they are amazing, caring individuals. I am so, so proud to have worked with them in this small capacity.

At the end of that time we took that information that we had gathered, literally binders full of information, of notes. I took copious notes at every meeting. I have a two-inch binder full of handwritten notes that nobody besides myself can read, so that's a bit of a challenge. But with those notes we sat down as a task force over two weekends and spent 20 hours crafting that report. Again, I'm extremely proud to have been part of that. My colleagues that joined me in that endeavour also spent considerable effort to make sure that their thoughts were made known. Every individual on that task force should be commended. I'm very proud of that work.

I'm hoping that you are able to share a little bit more about this. Obviously, we know transportation is a major concern in both rural and metro areas for similar yet different reasons. There is no one-size-fits-all solution. Many students, especially in rural Alberta, spend hours every day on a bus. We've also heard concerns from school boards about increased insurance costs. Could you speak to the task force findings and how any changes will fit into the \$310 million budget, the line found on 3.4 in your estimates? I know this is an issue that you take seriously. I appreciate the numerous meetings you and I have had as well, talking about this issue. As well, your staff were a constant source of help.

Thank you, Minister.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Neudorf. It was actually very entertaining and interesting listening about your experience on the transportation task force. I know I was very pleased to welcome you to my hometown of Fort McMurray, where you got to hear about how some of the challenges of students were bears and wolves. That was kind of fun.

To that, Minister, I'll give you five minutes for a response.

Member LaGrange: Thank you so much, and I just want to thank MLA Neudorf for agreeing to be the chair. I know it was a very demanding task, and he's certainly excelled at it. I have heard nothing but positives from across the province on how those sessions went, on those engagement sessions, on how the whole task force was really committed to hearing the concerns. There had been other attempts to do something similar in the past that did not yield the results that I have seen, that have come forward from this task force, from this transportation task force. I really appreciated MLA Neudorf's passion as well as the rest of the panel. They were just so engaged. I know that we will be able to share very, very shortly the fruits that it has borne, and I look forward to that point in time, when I can share that more fully with everyone.

11:25

I agree a hundred per cent. Bus drivers: they are essential. Oftentimes our children are on the bus and, you know, really relating with the bus drivers. They are seeing the kids first thing in the morning and last thing at the end of the day. Often I remember, having my own children and being that we are on a farm just on the outskirts of Red Deer, they were able to travel back and forth on the school bus and that the bus driver, you know, had such a good knowledge of who they were. He would often tell me: oh, so-and-so is not feeling so good. They are just so passionate and care so much about our children. That's why I was so pleased that they were able to benefit from the critical worker benefit program that was recently announced by the minister of labour. I'm glad that they were recognized in that way.

As you alluded to, we have nearly 300,000 students ride a bus to school each and every day. They travel more than 100 million kilometres per year. Under the Education Act and the school transportation regulation boards are required to provide transportation services for their resident students who live 2.4 kilometres or more from their designated school. Boards receive transportation funding to provide this level of service. We encourage jurisdictions to continue to look for efficiencies with their transportation operations, including exploring possible opportunities to enter into collaborative agreements with neighbouring jurisdictions. We're always encouraging them to find better ways to provide the service, always maintaining safety as the top lens to look through when they're making decisions.

Co-operative busing, just to give you an idea of what that looks like: currently we have 43 out of 61 boards, which is 70 per cent of our school boards, that have entered into co-operative transportation agreements to provide transportation services with their neighbouring jurisdictions, usually public boards working with their Catholic counterpart. This means that nearly 100,000 students are being transported on these co-operative transportation routes, which is excellent. But it also means that there's possibly another 30 per cent where there's an opportunity to develop a co-operative agreement, so we always encourage that type of co-operation between boards. Of the 18 boards that are not in a co-operative agreement, some are rural boards with no Catholic board in their area, and others are urban boards. In urban areas sometimes it just doesn't make sense because of the high volume of students

that are being transported. Full buses and attendance boundaries sometimes are not aligned, so sometimes that factors into it as well.

The rural average ride time is 35 minutes, with only 12 per cent of students being transported over an hour. Urban average ride times are 22 minutes. I know this is a lot of time that our students spend on the bus, so we are looking to see: how can we shorten those ride times for these students or make them more effective to meet the needs?

I just want to highlight that we are providing \$310 million in this '21-22 fiscal year, and last year we had increased it by \$15 million, which was a 5 per cent increase. I just really want to highlight that it is so important for us to get this part of the student experience correct. That's why we took the two years to put together the task force, to send them out, to get all of those . . .

The Chair: Minister, very, very quickly.

Member LaGrange: Just all their learning so that they could come back and share it with us. Again, thank you to the whole task force – they did an amazing job – and especially to the chair, MLA Neudorf, for his excellent, excellent work in this area.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

With that, we go back to the ND caucus and Ms Hoffman.

Ms Hoffman: Thanks. I'm going to ask just a couple of questions specifically as they relate – I appreciate that you are owning that there have been some significant concerns raised with local school authorities and your office around PUF and the implications of the changes that were made there. The minister has said that there is going to be an examination, I believe, in the coming weeks. I imagine that that will be completed before everyone receives the funding manual on March 31. What are the issues that the minister is planning on tackling with that review as it relates to PUF? How is PUF criteria going to be examined to create greater distribution of supports for students who are young learners in need of additional learning support?

The Chair: Thank you, Ms Hoffman.

To the minister.

Member LaGrange: Well, thank you for the question. As I indicated earlier, in Budget 2021 we are providing an additional \$40 million in that learning support funding envelope, which, as I had indicated, covers many of those grants. I could read them off again, but I think you know what they are. What I would say is that, you know, we engaged and continue to engage with the education system. We've heard concerns in the areas around PUF, but we've also heard that there are other funding envelopes within that learning support funding that could be enhanced, so we are going to take the next few weeks to really listen to the system on where we can improve the new model and ensure that it is working best for our students, particularly our students with special needs.

We are continuing to value that PUF funding and the SLS funding. We want school authorities to really focus on where those resources can be provided to students. The new funding model does provide school authorities with increased flexibility. As I said, that whole envelope is over \$1.35 billion now, and we really want to ensure that school authorities are able to allocate those dollars appropriately. They have maximum flexibility within those envelopes.

You know, again I want to remind you that Alberta is the only province in Canada that offers funding for education supports to children as young as two years, eight months, and this is not going to change. It is so valuable that students have that early start. We

know that. I shared it with you earlier, that as a former rehab practitioner, providing our students with that early intervention is critical and sets them up for success.

Having school authorities – and they told us very clearly that they want that flexibility to ensure that they are able to allocate those resources and supports where they're most needed. As you know, having been a former trustee yourself, you know best what those students need, and they are in the best position to ensure that those resources are provided. Again, three years of PUF funding for independent schools – again, they don't receive the SLS grant in kindergarten – and two years of PUF funding in addition to receiving SLS grant in kindergarten for school boards remains. The grants support school authorities in provision of a continuum of supports and services to meet the learning needs of students within an inclusive learning environment, and it is so critical that we continue to have that inclusive learning environment.

When I look at the fact that – I'm just going to give you a bit of a background on how the Education Act established specific obligations for school boards – public, separate, francophone, and charter – as they relate to students who may need specialized supports and services. School boards are required – they are required – to provide a continuum of supports and services for students that is consistent with the principles of inclusive education.

The program unit funding grant, for those that don't understand how it works: prior to the new funding model the existing PUF fund model was not operating as intended. Instead of going towards the students who need it the most, students with even mild to moderate language delays were being coded as PUF students on par with those with more serious issues. The result was that the average amount of PUF funds distributed per student was nearing the maximum amount available per student, an obvious sign that all students were being lumped together instead of given the specific attention that they required.

The pre-K PUF grant is allocated using the weighted moving average enrolment of children between two years, eight months, to four years, eight months, who have been assessed and diagnosed with a severe disability or delay involving language. All PUF children in the independent private system, both pre-K and kindergarten, will be funded at the pre-K rates established for the public system. Children diagnosed with severe disability or delay who are of kindergarten age in the public system, as of September 1, would be funded under the new specialized learning support grant for K to 12. The pre-K PUF allocation would be based on special education coding criteria for all eligible pre-K aged children diagnosed with a severe disability or delay and hours of instruction provided. Education provides PUF funding to school authorities for children with severe disabilities or delays who may require additional support beyond what is offered in a regular early childhood services program. This is on top of the base funding that every school authority receives for children.

In 2021 the weighted moving average was introduced. That changed the manner in which PUF was calculated for school authorities. All school authorities that offered ECS programs were affected by these changes, but the rate of growth in PUF . . .

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Ms Hoffman, you have another four minutes and four seconds.

11:35

Ms Hoffman: Thanks. Yeah. What I was hoping we were going to get there was an answer to the question. The minister has highlighted that there were significant concerns with PUF and that she is examining making changes to that program. Instead, we got

a five-minute speech defending the program, but the minister herself at the beginning acknowledged that concerns were raised.

Let me highlight what some of those concerns were. One, that she just, you know, reiterated, is that students who are four years, eight months, in kindergarten in private schools are entitled to PUF funding, but students who are the same age in public, Catholic, francophone schools are not. That is a fact that she just restated, and it is a fact that PUF is a greater level of funding than the SLS funding that she talks about. She is absolutely creating inequities between students who can afford to go to a private school, getting additional public funding for those who have disabilities, and those who are in public, Catholic, and francophone schools who can't afford those additional fees that are tied to private schools.

She also talked about how students who are two years and seven months are eligible, and that is true, but she made changes in last year's budget so that those who weren't attending a high number of hours, a full complement of hours, weren't entitled to full funding, which meant that many schools were forced to close a significant number of sites and reduce the number of supports for students.

While she says that she's focused on equity, the way that she defines equity, it appears, through last year's budget and what she's continued to defend through this year's statements in the last five-minute speech, are budgets where students who are in need of support get none and some get all of the support. The fact that the number of sites and the number of students in these programs has declined significantly over the last year, I think, speaks to the fact that fewer students are getting support, disabled students, and the minister seems to be fine with that in her speech.

But at the beginning she did acknowledge there were concerns and that she was going to be looking into some of those in the coming weeks. Parents have been talking about this for over a year, I will state, and continuing to explain and to try to justify the cuts that happened to their children's programming – I think they're watching this. They know the realities, and I assume the minister does, too. The reality is that the supports for disabled children who were eligible for PUF went down significantly for kindergarten students in public, Catholic, and francophone schools, eliminated. They were moved on to a program that has far less support. For those who weren't in full-time programming, their programming was also cut significantly.

Essentially, what happened is that programs all throughout our province closed. I believe that the minister has spent some time with our partners at Edmonton Catholic. Their 100 voices programs had to be scaled back significantly, the number of sites and the number of students. I don't think that's something to be celebrated. I think the minister should roll up her sleeves and should fix these horrific changes that were made.

I appreciate her past experiences. She keeps using those as justification for why it is that she's moving these budget cuts and defending them, and I don't think that's fair or appropriate. Would the minister respond: what changes is she going to make to the PUF funding formula in this budget to reflect the needs of Alberta's students?

The Chair: Thank you.

Minister, there's 36 seconds left if you wish to respond.

Member LaGrange: Well, thank you. I do believe I have answered the question on PUF. We do have an additional \$40 million in the overall learning support funding envelope, which will then be redistributed amongst the different funding envelopes, subenvelopes, that are in there. But at this point in time I would like to highlight that what I believe Member Hoffman continues to forget, that that third year for PUF funding is in our . . .

The Chair: Thank you, Minister. The time has elapsed.

With that, we move back to the government caucus, and we have Ms Lovely.

Ms Lovely: Well, thank you, Madam Chair. Minister, it is always a pleasure to speak with you, and I just wanted to take a minute to highlight the fact that shortly after you were elected, we had the pleasure of you coming to Camrose and visiting one of our schools. That was a nice treat not only for the students but the staff as well. You took time to go through every classroom, and you acknowledged the good work that was being done in the classroom. As a rural community, you know, we sometimes have concerns, but in terms of education I just wanted to thank you for always being available and taking that time so the students could meet you face to face. That was important to them.

We do have a lot of community support in the Camrose constituency, and the school that you visited was one of the schools that requested some playground funding money. That came through for them, so they were, of course, very, very happy. We do have more schools who need some funding, and through various initiatives, whether it be a community initiative or even a corporation that steps up to provide some funding, there's been a lot of camaraderie in terms of raising those funds, but we still have a little bit of work ahead of us, I can say.

That leads me to my question. Minister LaGrange, there are several schools in my constituency who do not have playgrounds. The task of raising money falls to parent groups, as I mentioned, who then have an opportunity to apply for matching funds once a certain threshold of money is raised. As already stated on page 139 of the fiscal plan, you have allocated \$6 million towards building playgrounds. Minister, would you be able to outline the criteria your ministry will be using allocating that \$6 million? Will there be money available in this budget for those schools who are currently working on raising money to access these funds? As I mentioned, there are a few schools in my Camrose constituency that this applies to.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms Lovely.

Now to the minister.

Member LaGrange: Thank you, MLA Lovely, and I do remember being out in your neck of the woods and being able to make snow angels with you. That was quite a treat. It was a little tricky, too, in a dress.

As you indicated, there is \$6 million in funding to support playground projects previously approved, so I'm very pleased with that. As I said earlier, I really do believe, particularly in a COVID year, that students need that ability, children need that ability to get onto the playground and, you know, expend their energy. It improves your mental health. I love getting back on the swings. I'm sure many of you do as well and just enjoying that fresh air that's outside.

As part of the new school project funding a playground will be provided if it is, one – this is the criteria that we've set – a new school project with a kindergarten to grade 6 component or, two, a replacement school project with a kindergarten to grade 6 component and the project is being built on an undeveloped greenfield. Schools that are choosing to raise funds for a playground continue to be eligible to apply for a matching grant through the community facility enhancement program that you were talking about earlier. It is very, very important, as I said earlier, that we include that construction build of playgrounds within the new build of a school.

I really feel very passionate about this. It should not have to be something that parents have to fund raise for. I do realize that some schools prefer to fund raise, and that's perfectly fine, but for those that want to take advantage of the program that we offer, any new build will have a playground built, and they can certainly fund raise to enhance that playground. Some have actually fund raised so that they can provide additional supports for special students, specialized students, like wheelchair ramps and et cetera, things that typically aren't in a playground. What I see is that schools really do try to provide the very best for their students. They want their children to be outside playing and enjoying playground projects, so that's why it's critically important that we continue this great work.

Again, to give you a little bit of background – I believe I said it earlier, but it bears repeating – since its inception in 2017 Education has funded 113 playground projects around the province. Of this, 61 are complete, 20 playgrounds are under construction, and 32 previously approved playgrounds will begin construction sometime in 2021-22. School communities that wish to exceed the 250, as I said, certainly can supplement that by fund raising, which has been really difficult in the COVID year. I've heard that from school councils across this province, that given COVID, it has been really difficult to have the fundraisers that they typically have in a given year. You know, being a parent myself, I remember many of the bake sales and the numerous things that were done to fund raise for school divisions.

11:45

School jurisdictions still have access to various other sources of revenue to plan and build a playground. The government of Alberta provides funding through the Ministry of Culture, Multiculturalism and Status of Women's community facility enhancement fund. If a jurisdiction receives the CFEP grant, they aren't eligible for Education's playground grant, but again this is something where, because we are now providing playgrounds as part of the build, fewer schools will need to have access to that particular grant. The program has been very successful and very well received thus far. We continue to protect our investment, we continue to plan for the future by maintaining and enhancing our existing school infrastructures and buildings by building new schools.

As has been indicated, we're going to be building 14 new schools or having major modernizations of 14 new projects this year. So that's exciting. I'm so excited to bring that forward and be able to name those projects. I know that school jurisdictions across the province are eagerly awaiting that news. Education's investment in playground infrastructure is a grant program that is designed to further enhance school builds. Everyone wants to attend a school that has a playground. It's critical. You look at how the community gathers around the playground. Oftentimes you will see parents and grandparents out with their children and their grandchildren on the swings, on the slides. It is such a great . . .

The Chair: Minister, I will let you very quickly finish up that.

Member LaGrange: Just a great way to get outside and enjoy that sunshine that we're seeing more and more of in Alberta each and every day.

The Chair: Fantastic. Thank you, Minister.

With that, we will go back to the government caucus. Ms Lovely, you've got two minutes and 42 seconds.

Ms Lovely: Well, thank you, Madam Chair, and thank you, Minister. You know, I completely agree with you. Getting out on the playground with families, with multi generations: I think it's great for people to be able to spend that time together.

Real solid friendships are built on the playground as well, getting that break from the day-to-day classroom studies. It just, really, is a nice opportunity for our young people to develop lifelong friendships that start on the playground. I find that even as an adult, if I take a break and do some physical activity, I am able to focus better. I think that a playground really helps our kids get back to learning again, which is, of course, the primary objective of sending them to school.

I'm glad to hear that there's an investment by our government, and the parents in future schools are going to be very happy. I know that I've expressed the challenges that many families, many parents have expressed. Raising funds during COVID has been very difficult for some of them and not always an even playing field. Some of the various corporations who normally would be very generous and happy to support a playground build just don't have the financial means to be able to do it right now because of COVID. Their businesses have suffered a bit. But I'm very fortunate to have some very strong community support and am really grateful for all those dollars that have been raised.

That concludes my questions for now. I would like to cede the remainder of my time to Member Rutherford.

The Chair: Well, there's one minute, Mr. Rutherford.

Mr. Rutherford: Thank you, Chair. That was the next question I was going to ask you.

Minister, I just want to start off by saying thank you for being with us today and for your leadership during these difficult times and for all of your staff as well. This is not an easy situation to be in; you touched on that earlier as well. But also a thank you to all of the school boards, the teachers, the parents, and, of course, the students, who have persevered over this last year and adapted quickly to an evolving situation that seems, hopefully, to be calming down as we start to see those vaccination rates increase. We can start to see the light at the end of the tunnel, which I think everybody is looking forward to.

As I get into my broader comments, understanding that I only probably have a few seconds left and that I'll pick this up on the other side . . .

The Chair: Mr. Rutherford, I'll let you very quickly finish up if it's less than a few seconds.

Mr. Rutherford: Sorry, Madam Chair. I'll pick up on these comments in the next block. Thank you.

The Chair: Wonderful. Thank you.

Ms Pancholi.

Ms Pancholi: Thank you, Madam Chair. Minister, I'd like to pick up a little bit with respect to specialized learning support funding. Again, we've asked multiple times as to how that additional \$40 million is going to be spent, and I have to say, for any parents who are listening, that it seems pretty clear that you don't have an answer for that.

I want to highlight that one thing that jumped out to me about the specialized learning supports funding is that at least a portion of the formula is linked to a jurisdiction's number of children who are eligible for – who receive, I should say; not eligible for but actually receive – family supports for children with disabilities, which means that there is an element of how many of those cases are approved in the FSCD process. That actually bears weight on how much support is provided for funding for that child when they're in the school system. I have a concern about that because myself and

my colleague the Member for St. Albert have been engaged in many discussions about some of the concerns around FSCD funding, and now to learn that it is tied to a jurisdiction's funding for specialized learning supports is a concern.

I actually want to highlight a message I just received, which talked about a parent who, I know, has two young children who are receiving specialized learning supports and are on FSCD. FSCD just took away their seven-year-old's speech support, and we're told that they're just going to have to seek that speech-language support in the school system. In the school system that child has only received one session in the entire year because of lack of funding supports at the school board level.

I understand the minister highlighted that the school boards have obligations to provide inclusive education. That's absolutely a legal obligation. It's also the obligation of this government to fund it properly, and school boards can only do so much with the funding that they're given. So when we hear that the approach that's being taken right now is to just do no more harm after the year that we have experienced, I want to know how this budget actually reflects an investment in children, staff, families who have experienced extreme and difficult hardship in the school system over the last year. We've heard about this minister caring about mental health supports, but by holding the budget flat, where is the support for mental health going forward?

We hear the minister talking about reviewing specialized learning supports funding, but I question how we are going to make up for the lost year for many children with disabilities. I heard from parents telling me that they have a child with disabilities, and they've basically written off the past year of education for their child, which should be appalling to all of us, to hear that any child's education has been completely written off over the last year. We have a lot of work to do not just to invest in these children going forward – they deserve adequate support funding going forward, and that is not reflected in this budget – but we also need to make up now for the fact that many children have lost a significant amount of supports that they need over this past year. I'd like to hear a concrete answer as to how this budget, which is, as you've maintained, pretty much flat . . .

The Chair: Ms Pancholi, I would just remind you to direct your questions through the chair.

Ms Pancholi: Thank you.

Through the chair to you, Minister, I'd like to hear how your budget reflects the investment that's required to make up for the experience that children with disabilities and all children have experienced over the past year, because I do not hear that, Minister, and I would like to hear some concrete answers on that.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms Pancholi.

Now to the minister for your response.

Member LaGrange: Well, thank you for the questions. As I've responded to these questions over and over again, I will continue to respond that we've added an additional \$40 million into the learning support envelope for special-needs supports, and I take you back to the fact that we are \$1.356 billion. I still want to go back to the initial comments that I made to MLA Hoffman that while we are funding 730,000 students, we know that only 705,000 students are currently in school, so we are funding an additional 25,000 students. We know that in the projection there are 725,000 students, and we are still going to fund 730,000 students, which includes our special-needs students. I am so proud of the fact that we've added that additional \$40 million in that funding.

Just to elaborate on the specialized learning supports and what that provides, in the specialized learning support grant, as recommended by school divisions throughout the consultation process, we're combining funding sources within a specialized learning support grant, which will enable school boards the flexibility to provide a range of supports to students with learning disabilities in an inclusive learning environment. That was something we heard very, very strongly from our school divisions and our school authorities.

11:55

School authorities are responsible for ensuring their SLS funding is disbursed based on a student-needs basis related to supports required for their learning. This grant incorporates funding previously distributed as inclusive education, regional collaborative service delivery, and program unit funding for kindergarten students, which will enable school boards the flexibility to provide a range of supports for students with learning disabilities in an inclusive learning environment. We know how important that inclusive learning environment is.

School jurisdictions are eligible for funding under all three components. Accredited funded private schools and private ECS operators are not eligible to receive SLS funding, so charter schools are given an option to be funded under the SLS grant for charter schools or to continue under the severe disabilities funding model. The funding option will be in effect to the end of the '22-23 school year. Again, I want to highlight that we've added \$40 million to this funding envelope that we will then be disbursing out to school authorities so that they can then, as I said earlier, provide the resources that are required and needed by students within this area.

I know there was a previous question about a particular school division, a public school division in Edmonton, and I just want to highlight that that public school division, Edmonton public, in 2019-2020 had 103,926 students, the actual head count. They projected 106,723 students in the 2020-21 school year. They actually had 101,986 students attend, so there were approximately 4,000 students, if I can do the rough math, that were funded that didn't actually attend that school division. They had the additional resources of those 4,000 students that they could apply to wherever they needed to apply those resources. Certainly, when they were making staffing decisions, whether it is on EAs or teacher decisions, those should be factored into their decision-making.

Again, in this area of specialized learning supports it is so critical that school divisions allocate their resources, that they have maximum flexibility on, to the proper needs. Do they require additional educational aides? Do they need technology, et cetera? Those dollars are there to support those students, and it is very, very important that those schools use those dollars and support the students.

I just want to remind everyone again that even in a pandemic year school authorities were able to increase their reserves. They went from \$363 million in 2019 to \$383.6 million as of August 31, 2020. That's a substantial increase of \$21 million when, in fact, they had projected to go in and utilize those reserves.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Now to Ms Pancholi.

Ms Pancholi: How much time do I have?

The Chair: You have a minute and seven seconds left in this and then another 30 seconds that will carry over.

Ms Pancholi: Okay. Thank you.

Minister, I just wanted to reiterate one question that I asked you earlier, which I have not yet heard a response to, which is regarding the drop in the number of prekindergarten and kindergarten children who were enrolled in the 2020 year. Based on the enrolment information that's available, this age group saw almost a 20 per cent drop in enrolment compared to the previous year. That has long-term implications for school readiness going down the road. Once again I will ask you – it's related to the previous questions . . .

The Chair: Through the chair.

Ms Pancholi: . . . through the chair, how your budget reflects how you're going to catch up on the lost early learning of almost 20 per cent of these kids in this age group from the previous year. I'd like to hear a concrete example.

Member LaGrange: Thank you for the question. As the member opposite would know, parents make the choice as to sending their children to school, whether it's preschool or whether they send them to kindergarten, even. Kindergarten is optional in Alberta, yet we did fund our school divisions to have those . . .

The Chair: Minister, I'm sorry. I apologize for the interruption, but I must advise the committee that the time allotted for the consideration of the ministry's estimates has concluded.

I would like to remind all committee members that we're scheduled to meet on March 10, 2021, at 3:30 to continue our consideration of the estimates of the Ministry of Health.

Thank you, everybody. The meeting is now adjourned.

[The committee adjourned at 12 p.m.]

