



Legislative Assembly of Alberta

The 31st Legislature
First Session

Standing Committee
on
Families and Communities

Ministry of Education
Consideration of Main Estimates

Tuesday, March 12, 2024
3:30 p.m.

Transcript No. 31-1-4

**Legislative Assembly of Alberta
The 31st Legislature
First Session**

Standing Committee on Families and Communities

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Goehring, Nicole, Edmonton-Castle Downs (NDP), Deputy Chair
Eggen, David, Edmonton-North West (NDP),* Acting Deputy Chair

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Boitchenko, Andrew, Drayton Valley-Devon (UC)
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Johnson, Jennifer, Lacombe-Ponoka (Ind)
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Standing Committee on Families and Communities

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Ministry of Education

Demetrios Nicolaides, Minister

Kindy Joseph, Assistant Deputy Minister, Program and System Support

Jeff Willan, Assistant Deputy Minister and Senior Financial Officer, Financial Services and Capital Planning

3:30 p.m.

Tuesday, March 12, 2024

[Ms Lovely in the chair]

**Ministry of Education
Consideration of Main Estimates**

The Chair: All right, everyone. I'd like to call the meeting to order and welcome everyone in attendance. The committee has under consideration the estimates of the Ministry of Education for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2025.

I'd ask that we go around the table and have members introduce themselves for the record. Minister, when it comes your turn, if you would introduce your colleagues, that would be appreciated. My name is Jackie Lovely, and I'm the MLA for Camrose and the chair of this committee. We'll start to my right, please.

Mr. Boitchenko: My name is Andrew Boitchenko, and I'm the MLA for Drayton Valley-Devon.

Mr. Lundy: Good afternoon, everyone. I'm Brandon Lundy, MLA for Leduc-Beaumont.

Mrs. Petrovic: Chelsae Petrovic, MLA for Livingstone-Macleod.

Mr. Singh: Good afternoon, everyone. Peter Singh, MLA, Calgary-East.

Mr. Long: Martin Long, the MLA for West Yellowhead.

Mrs. Johnson: Jennifer Johnson, MLA for Lacombe-Ponoka.

Mr. Nicolaides: Demetrios Nicolaides, Minister of Education. To my far left I have Kindy Joseph, assistant deputy minister of program and system support; to my immediate left Lora Pillipow, deputy minister; to my immediate right Jeff Willan, assistant deputy minister of financial services and capital planning; and to my far right Emily Ma, executive director of K to 12 fiscal oversight.

Ms Wright: Peggy Wright, MLA, Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview and Official Opposition critic for labour.

Ms Chapman: Amanda Chapman, MLA, Calgary-Beddington.

Member Batten: Diana Batten, MLA, Calgary-Acadia.

Mr. Eggen: Good afternoon. My name is David Eggen. I'm the MLA for Edmonton-North West.

The Chair: All right. Thank you, everyone.

A few housekeeping items here. I'd like to note that hon. David Eggen is substituting for Ms Goehring. Note that the microphones are operated by *Hansard* staff, so no need to turn them on and off. Committee proceedings are 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. If you haven't already, please set your cellphones to silent.

We will begin shortly, but for the record I will read this in. Hon. members, the main estimates for the Ministry of Education shall be considered for a total of six hours. I would note that the Standing Committee on Families and Communities has already completed three hours of debate in this respect. As we enter our fourth hour of debate, I will remind everyone that the speaking rotation for these meetings is provided for under Standing Order 59.01(6). We're now at the point in the rotation where speaking times are limited to a maximum of five minutes for both the member and the minister.

These speaking times may be combined for a maximum of 10 minutes. Please remember to advise the chair at the beginning of your rotation if you wish to combine your time with the minister's.

With the concurrence of the committee I will call a five-minute break near the midpoint of the meeting. However, the three hour-clock will continue to run. Does anyone object to having a break today? Okay. Good. We'll have one, maybe around 5-ish.

When we adjourned this morning, we were over four minutes into an exchange between Mr. Boitchenko and the minister. I'll now invite the member to complete the remaining time in his rotation. You have five and a half minutes remaining.

Mr. Boitchenko: Thank you very much, Madam Chair. I apologize that I didn't finish my questions the first time around, but I'm thankful that we have another three hours, that we can get to all the questions here. As I was speaking before the break, I was, you know, very thankful to the minister and his team for the amazing work they do not only in my constituency but across the province. The number of schools that are being built right now is unprecedented. Once again thank you, Minister, and I thank your team for the amazing work you guys do.

Coming back to my original question that I had regarding red tape reduction, to the minister, through the chair. Budget 2024 announced the largest Education budget in Alberta's history, at \$9.25 billion. Can we be sure the greatest portion of that funding is being directly invested into Alberta students and not administrative bloat and red tape? I note and applaud that on page 69 of the government statements, governance and administration expenses are frozen from Budget 2023. A question and then a follow-up on it as well. How does Alberta Education ensure effective control of administrative spending by school divisions? The second question is: what determines the amount of governance and administrative spending allowed by each school division?

Mr. Nicolaides: Sure. Thank you, Member and through you to the chair. Obviously, it's of incredible urgency and priority that we ensure that the maximum amount of dollars are going where they're needed the most, which is to the classroom, which is to hire teachers, hire educational assistants, and provide specialized learning supports for students that require them. That's a commitment and desire of the ministry. We want to make sure that our dollars are going directly to the classroom to support learning for our kids.

One of the ways in which we do that is by providing a range – well, sorry. Let me take a step back. One of the ways in which we do that is by providing a specific stream of administration funding. There are different envelopes or, as per Member Chapman's analogy, different buckets of funding – I use the analogy all the time as well – that we provide to our school boards. One of those buckets is specifically for administrative expenses and administrative spending. A school jurisdiction, depending on their size, can receive funding for administrative expenses, which ranges from 3.2 per cent to 5 per cent of their total operating budget. Of course, the larger a school division, the larger an operating budget, sometimes the larger the requirements you have around administrative oversight to manage more complex programs and other dynamics. So there is a range, and they receive a clear amount between the range of 3.2 per cent to 5 per cent of total operating expenditures.

What that looks like in real dollar terms: Budget '24 would provide \$276 million in the '24-25 fiscal year in the targeted system administration grant. We do want to ensure that the maximum amount of dollars are going to the classroom, as we mentioned, and of course there's always the practice of reviewing their audited

financial statements to explore and make sure that those dollars are going where they were intended to.

Mr. Boitchenko: Thank you very much.

I hope that within one minute here I can ask one more question regarding the shortage of school bus drivers. I noted as well that on page 81 of the fiscal plan it indicates that student transportation operating expenses will grow \$64 million from Budget 2023-24 into Budget 2024-25. I'm very pleased to see, you know, that the shortage of bus drivers and the buses themselves is being handled in your ministry as well. If we can please touch on how many students are transported from school daily and how many kilometres are driven daily over how many bus routes in our province.

Mr. Nicolaides: Well, thank you. A very important question. I don't think I'll be able to give you all of those specifics in the 10 seconds that I have left, but with respect to the number of students, we do transport 335,000 students across the province through transportation services. If we have time, I'd be happy to tell you more about the kilometres.

Mr. Boitchenko: Thank you very much.

The Chair: Okay. Thank you. That wraps up our time. Over to the Official Opposition, please.

Ms Chapman: Thank you so much, Chair. Lovely to see you again.

I'm just going to move us over to the business plan for a little bit here. Outcome 4: "Alberta's K-12 education system and workforce are well managed." Now, I see that attracting and retaining teachers is listed as performance metric 4(a). I have heard from a few teachers, well, quite a few teachers, some concerns about the new teacher complaint process, that came into effect last year. I know that teachers felt that the management of that process had been working effectively, and I know that there were also outside experts who felt that the complaint process had been working well.

At the time of the change Richard Rand had said:

I can comfortably say that the current, ATA-led, practices and procedures overseeing teacher discipline in Alberta represent as good, or better, a system governing professional discipline as any I have encountered in any profession.

Mr. Rand, of course, is a lawyer with specific expertise in professional discipline cases.

3:40

The process used to be that complaints were made to the ATA, an investigation would occur, and the complaint would then move to a dispute resolution process or a professional conduct committee hearing. From that hearing, if found guilty, a teacher would face penalties, anywhere from fines to a recommendation to the ministry that a teaching certificate be suspended or cancelled. In the process now, as I understand it, it's a single registrar who receives complaints, and the Alberta teaching profession commissioner is responsible for the investigation. I'm just looking for a little clarification. Is it correct that the office of the commissioner is arm's length? Is it an arm's-length group that's investigating complaints against teachers, or is it ministry staff that are responsible for the process? Has any of the work on investigating teacher complaints been contracted out to private companies?

The Chair: Thank you so much, Member.

We'll move over to the ministry for the answer.

Mr. Nicolaides: Yeah. Thank you. Short answer: it is arm's length, and the commission has its own complement of staff. I believe the

current complement is around 20 FTEs so that they can conduct their work. Here it is right in front of me; I should look at my notes. Yeah, 20 FTEs are allocated. It's important that it's set up as an independent organization, as we mentioned. As you mentioned as well, it did begin operation on January 1, 2023, so a new process, and I know that teachers and families and other partners are still working to get a little bit more familiar with the new process.

We believe it's essential that there is independent oversight, especially around concerns regarding potential misconduct or other actions that may require disciplinary action. Of course, oftentimes many of these can involve concerns over student safety or inappropriate behaviour, and we believe that it's important that that's addressed objectively and independently and that any subsequent reprimand or decisions be recommended through an independent process.

Ms Chapman: I know I asked a few questions there, so I'll just check in again. Has any of the work on investigating teacher complaints been contracted out to private companies, contracted out of the department?

Mr. Nicolaides: Let me double-check that with my team. I believe there may be opportunities where some of the work is contracted out. I see Jeff is nodding his head. Okay. Yeah, some of the investigators that the commission will use, of course, to investigate some of the complaints are contracted out through RFP.

Ms Chapman: So that's 20 FTEs plus some private outside investigators.

Mr. Nicolaides: Correct. Contractors, yeah.

Ms Chapman: Okay. I tried to look up some data on complaint rates. There's not a lot publicly available, but I did find some numbers from 2021. Just to be clear to everyone, this is . . .

Mr. Singh: Point of order.

The Chair: A point of order has been called.

Mr. Singh: Thank you, Madam Chair. The point of order is under Standing Order 23(b), that the member speaks to matters other than

(i) the question under discussion.

The committee has convened for the purpose of considering the ministry's 2024 budget, including the estimates, the fiscal plan, the business plan, and the matter that has been raised by the member is not within the boundaries of the said topic.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Member.

We'll go over to the opposition.

Mr. Eggen: Yes. Well, I think that as the member finishes her argument, she is making a reference from then to now and into the future, which is a very common thing when we talk about budgets in the current fiscal year. It's by way of context.

The Chair: Well, thank you so much, members. For this moment I don't consider this to be a point of order, but if you would kindly make reference to the budget as you move on, that would be great.

Ms Chapman: You bet. Yeah.

I'm sorry. I'm still just on this business plan outcome right now. I'm allowed to be on the business plan, yes? Perfect. Great.

Yeah. Now I've lost track of my business plan. Performance metric 4(a). Complaint numbers: I did just want to clarify for the so

many people watching at home that we're talking about a very small percentage of teachers here who have complaints against them, less than a per cent. The data I found for 2021 was .32 per cent. That was a report of 163 requests for investigations, from which 132 investigations actually moved forward. I'm just looking for a comparison now. In 2023 how many complaints did the registrar receive, how many investigations were completed, and how many investigations may still be pending?

Mr. Nicolaides: Sure. I guess just in short I would say that it's not an apples-to-apples comparison because, of course, the new model has only begun operation since January 1, 2023. Previous complaints would have been through the old process. There could be an argument to make that a new process might increase or decrease total complaints, so it may not be a direct apples-to-apples comparison.

The commission will be releasing very shortly – actually, it will be tabled to the Legislature – their annual report, and that will cover the period of operations from January 1, 2023, to March 31, 2023. That information, of course, will be tabled to the Legislature and will be publicly available for all members of the Assembly and the general public as well to be able to look at that information.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Minister.
Member.

Ms Chapman: Thank you.

Through the chair, again, I believe that in the original announcement about this process shift the budget to bring this teacher complaint process in-house was \$4 million per year. Two questions. I don't know if you're able to tell me which of the estimate budget lines this is under. Does this fall under the ministry amount, or is it a different budget line it falls under and if the minister is able to confirm if that cost has stayed the same, if we're looking at \$4 million per year or if we've seen a change?

The Chair: Thank you, Member.

Mr. Nicolaides: I'm just getting the answer for you. I don't have the main estimates in front of me, but if you do, it's line item 2.0. I couldn't tell you the title to reference it.

Ms Chapman: Education System Support.

Mr. Nicolaides: Yeah. That's the one. Education System Support.

Ms Chapman: Got you.

Mr. Nicolaides: Apologies, I think you had another question as part of that.

Ms Chapman: The question was: is that still an accurate figure, the \$4 million per year? Did that end up being the cost to bring this complaint process in-house as it were?

Mr. Nicolaides: Let me check on the total cost of the commission and get back to you. I believe it was around the \$4 million mark, but let me just clarify and get back to you.

Ms Chapman: I feel like I need a short question. Okay. I'll just have to come back to this in my next one. I'm going to keep going on some business plan metrics, performance metric 1(b), high school to postsecondary transition rate. In 2021-22 59.7 per cent of Alberta high school students made the transition to postsecondary within six years of entering grade 10. Now, that's a decline from the 2020-2021 rate of 60.3 per cent. The business plan as it stands

only hopes to get back to that 2020-2021 level two years from now, so by '25-'26. I know these seem like small percentage differences. Through the chair, is the minister able to quantify how many fewer Alberta students pursued postsecondary training this year?

The Chair: Thank you, Member.
Minister.

Mr. Nicolaides: Sure. Thank you.

I was able to get a clearer answer for you, just coming back to the teaching profession commission. Yes, the \$4 million, as you mentioned, was allocated to support that. We're still waiting, of course, until the fiscal year comes to a complete end at the end of March to see their complete actuals. However, it appears as though they're tracking under budget to some extent. I couldn't tell you though at this stage whether it's significantly under budget or modestly. Once the fiscal year completes, then we'll have a closer picture as to how that \$4 million was allocated.

The Chair: Thank you so much.

We are going to go over now to the independent member.
Please proceed.

Mrs. Johnson: Thank you, Madam Chair, and through you to the minister. On page 39 of the ministerial business plan it states that \$44 million is going "to improve access to educational assistants." Can you explain what is meant by "improve access" and how we can ensure that this \$44 million will get to the front line and is not lost somewhere in the middle?

3:50

Mr. Nicolaides: Yeah. Thank you. An important question. I think the language that you used was "expanding" educational assistants. I don't want to misrepresent if that was the case, Madam Chair. Maybe the member can just provide clarity again.

Mrs. Johnson: Improve access.

Mr. Nicolaides: Improve access. Thank you, through you, Madam Chair. What does that mean? Well, effectively that means increasing the capacity, increasing the number of educational assistants that our school divisions can hire. The \$44 million that is being provided this year is part of \$126 million that was committed in Budget '23 to support classroom complexity. This is the first time that funding is being specifically provided to address classroom complexity, which was a new grant made available through Budget '23. This year's allocation of that would be approximately \$44 million. Indeed, that will go towards hiring more educational assistants and as well providing additional hours to existing educational assistants so, again, creating more access to educational assistants.

The dollars can also be used to hire other professionals and experts that may be needed to support classroom complexity dynamics, including speech-language pathologists, psychologists, interpreters, and other professionals. I hope, Madam Chair, through you, that I was able to address all of the questions.

Mrs. Johnson: Yes. Thank you. Madam Chair, through you, to the minister if we can go on to education property tax. I'm curious how this rate is determined. It is collected municipally, but is it the province that sets this rate, in this case for an increase? Is this simply an increase from an increase in population, or is this a planned overall tax increase?

Mr. Nicolaides: Yeah. Thank you. The increase is attributed to increase in population. Jeff can correct me if I'm wrong, but rates

remain frozen. He's nodding his head and not kicking me under the table, so that's always a good sign. As I mentioned, of course, that indicates that the increase is due to a population increase and not due to a rate increase, which remains frozen. It remained frozen for a few years now and continues to remain frozen.

Mrs. Johnson: Okay. Thank you. Debt-servicing costs have risen substantially, and they are forecast to increase another 27 per cent for '24-25. Can you explain the increase in the debt servicing, which is now more than the cost of a new school? Additionally, overall ministry deficit is now over \$6 billion and growing. Is this sustainable, and what are your plans to manage it?

Mr. Nicolaides: Sure. I'd be happy to address that. Debt-servicing costs are primarily related to P3 partnerships for schools and for them to be built under the Alberta schools alternative procurement projects. Of course, a P3, as the member may know, is defined as an infrastructure project with a private contractor. As each school bundle is completed and each school process moves forward, the payments to interest and principal commence, and those interest payments, of course, will be part of the overall debt-servicing costs that are required for school builds.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.
Member.

Mrs. Johnson: Okay. I hope we have time for this one. It appears there are no plans for funding for pods or microschools. Are pods and microschools, which are already practising in the province, going to be acknowledged and incorporated into the education system? If so, what are the plans for this to happen, and how would this affect the overall budget?

Mr. Nicolaides: Yeah. Thank you very much. This is something that – apologies if I get the acronym wrong – the Homeschooling Association has talked with me about. I wasn't too aware of it prior to becoming minister, but they've been very helpful at bringing me up to speed on some of the dynamics and talking about learning pods and microschools. I think there are some interesting aspects to explore there. I think it's important to have some more conversations with home education partners and their association and others to explore what that might look like. It's hard to say at this stage whether we would be in a position to be able to move forward or make any changes to regulation and/or legislation to accommodate that. I think we need to conduct a little bit more analysis and have some more conversations with partners to see what that might look like if we do indeed decide to move forward with some additional regulation or legislation in this area.

I think it would be imprudent of me to make any kind of, you know, commitment at this stage. I'd want to understand a little bit more about the benefits, potential challenges, regulatory and/or legislative environment because I know there are always concerns in any area, whether it's in home education or in any area. Whenever there's a new regulation or new legislation being introduced, that can sometimes create more red tape, reporting requirements, other considerations. If something is indeed desired by home education partners and the relevant associations, then, you know, we can take a very close look at that and take their advice and direction as to how best to proceed. I don't think it would be best for us to take any action in isolation, but we are actively chatting with them on this question and at some point in the future may have some more to say.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.
Member.

Mrs. Johnson: Thank you. To you through the chair, the town of Blackfalds has been one of Canada's fastest growing communities, which has brought both successes and prosperity and also great challenges. One of these challenges has been school capacity. For a town of over 12,000 and growing, Blackfalds will see their first high school open this coming fall, and this is a great success, one being highly anticipated not only by Blackfalds but also its neighbouring communities, where the extra load on their high schools will be eased.

Another school in Blackfalds, St. Gregory's, for pre-K to grade 9 was near capacity the day it opened in 2017 and today is at about 134 per cent capacity. Budget '24 just announced a new school that was approved for design funding in April. It has now been approved for a build, and this is being celebrated with great anticipation. Can the minister speak to any other capital projects currently being looked at in the constituency of Lacombe-Ponoka?

Mr. Nicolaides: Yeah. I'd be very happy to. If memory serves me correct, I think there are two projects. You'll forgive me if offhand I can't recall the boundaries of the incredible constituency of Lacombe-Ponoka. I believe there's the Red Deer Catholic project that we mentioned. Of course, that has received full construction funding, an important project that requires full funding to be able to move forward.

Also with Wolf Creek school division, they are also requesting an additional school – oh. I'm sorry. Yes. This one is already moving ahead and slated to open. I can pull up the capital plan of Wolf Creek and Red Deer Catholic to look at additional projects that they have in the pipeline. There is the Iron Ridge secondary campus with Wolf Creek school division that we've noted that is slated to begin occupancy in May of this year and move forward and then the new K to 5 school in Blackfalds as we've discussed as part of the Red Deer Catholic separate school division.

I'd be happy to take a closer look at any other capital priority projects that Wolf Creek and Red Deer Catholic have on their planning list that fall within the Lacombe-Ponoka constituency.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.
Member, please proceed.

Mrs. Johnson: You know, there are 30 seconds left. Did you want to speak more to Iron Ridge, through the chair?

Mr. Nicolaides: I was going to say that if you have 30 seconds left, it's a good opportunity to throw in a joke.

Mrs. Johnson: To throw in a joke? I'm not one for jokes. I always draw a blank. You're more than welcome to, Minister, through the chair.

Mr. Nicolaides: No. No worries.

I don't think I have anything additional to add there. I guess I would say that, you know, we do look very carefully at projects in all corners of our province and evaluate them based on . . .

4:00

The Chair: Thank you so much, Minister.

We'll move back over to the government side.

Mrs. Petrovic: Thank you, Madam Chair. Through you to the minister. I was hoping we could expand a little bit more on how many kilometres driven daily over how many bus routes in this province for student transportation. I'm hoping we can go back to that as Livingstone-Macleod is a rural riding, and we have about 50

schools within that riding. So to me, I'm very interested, if you don't mind going back to that question and answering it for me.

Thank you.

Mr. Nicolaides: Yeah. I'd be happy to. I had the additional information. Oh, here we go. I had it in front of me and then moved it away. But thank you, Lora. Yeah. I think we mentioned that there's 335,000 students that receive transportation services. In terms of kilometres: that's approximately 440,000 kilometres that are driven each and every day. There are approximately 5,800 school bus routes across the province. The average urban ride time is 22 minutes across our school divisions, and the average rural ride time is 38 minutes. Happy to provide any additional information that you'd like on that piece.

Perhaps I'll just note that in Budget '24 our total transportation funding envelope is just shy of \$493 million. That's how much we're providing in Budget '24 for transportation for the '24-25 fiscal year. This is an increase of about \$80 million or 19 per cent from the previous year. We do want to increase funding for transportation services so that we can, of course, expand routes and hire more drivers and bring these drive times down a little bit more.

Mrs. Petrovic: Thank you, Chair and through you to the minister. I was just hoping – Minister, I see on page 68 of the estimates that line item 3.4, which obviously is transportation and takes a large but vital, important expense from the ministry. In 2020 the government completed work under the Student Transportation Task Force, looking into elements like cost, eligibility, and safety. I understand that the transportation funding model was implemented in past budgets. Are you able to touch on the following: is the funding model from the working group still in place for this year's budget, and what impact has the funding model had on transportation costs for your ministry?

Two, key to this task force was student safety. Are you able to determine what portion of your transportation budget is for student safety? Additionally, what safety measures are in place to protect students using school transportation?

And three: does the student transportation budget only include vehicle and fuel costs, or does this also include the relevant support staff as well?

Mr. Nicolaides: A lot to unpack there. I'll do my best to, hopefully, provide you with all of the answers that you're looking for.

Specifically to your question around the working group: indeed, our government convened the Student Transportation Task Force in 2020 to look at ways in which student transportation could be improved and strengthened. Those recommendations were provided and are being implemented by the ministry. The student transportation funding model was updated for the '23-24 school year based on feedback that we gathered from the task force report and recommendations and from school authorities and parents who participated in the engagements. The updated model supports education choice and ensures funding follows students who are transported to a school of choice, including alternative programs, because, of course, this wasn't always the case.

Budget '24 provides, as I mentioned, just shy of \$493 million in transportation funding for the upcoming fiscal year, which represents an increase of approximately \$80 million from last year. Over the last two years transportation funding has increased by \$154 million or 45.6 per cent. So there's been some significant investments in student transportation over the past couple of years. The increase will support the implementation of an updated model announced under Budget '23 – so, distance eligibility criteria changes and to help support enrolment growth.

A student transportation system will be safer for students. I know you talked a little bit about safety and the impacts of safety. The funding is now targeted to help ensure that funding is used to support the provision of transportation services and can't be transferred to other areas. Again, to use Member Chapman's vernacular: has to stay in the transportation bucket, so it can't be used for other programs or services. This will help decrease ride times for rural students and address increased demand for specialized transportation services and for students in metro regions.

Effective September 1, 2025, eligible distance criteria for student transportation will change from 2.4 kilometres to one kilometre for all students. That, of course, is the walk distance, as it's known a little bit more colloquially. The methodology used to calculate the distance will use the shortest driving route. School divisions are working towards that. I don't have the exact number, but a number of school divisions are already there, are already at the one-kilometre distance. Other school divisions are continuing to work towards it.

I may have missed a part of your question, but I see we still have a few minutes, so perhaps I'll just pause there and see if I left anything out.

Mrs. Petrovic: Thank you, Chair and through you to the minister. Yes, thank you for touching on the student safety and the distance for the busing. I know that this has affected my family in a positive way, so thank you for that.

One of the questions, and I think you did touch on it briefly: does the student transportation budget only include the vehicle and fuel cost, or does it also include the relevant support staff as well?

Mr. Nicolaides: Yeah, it does include staff. It does include all of those pieces. It includes, just broadly, funding that's required to be able to deliver those services and, of course, particularly transportation services. So it does include those pieces.

There's also, which I think is important to note here within that bucket, the school bus driver grant, and this was a new grant that was introduced in Budget '23 to help respond to concerns that we had heard from school authorities. We had heard some concerns over inability to recruit and retain drivers largely on the recruiting side, so the driver grant helps to address concerns over some of those shortages and helps to provide incentive and helps to cover some of the costs associated with driver education and training. As well, I believe it was last year, if memory serves me correct, changes were made to the MELT program specifically around school transportation to ease and help support greater recruitment of drivers. Of course, the MELT requirements presented some onerous challenges specifically for school authorities, so making that adjustment has made things a little bit easier.

As I mentioned in my opening remarks, the vast majority of our routes have permanent drivers, which is great to see. I know that the increased funding that we're providing student transportation will help ensure that more kids are able to be transported safely to school and in a shorter time as well.

Mrs. Petrovic: Thank you, Chair and through you to the minister. Minister, I wanted to congratulate you again. Alberta continues its tradition of having world-class education here. The 2022 PISA scores globally ranked Alberta second in reading, second in science, and seventh in math within the statistical deviation. In Canada we are ranked first in reading, first in science, and second only behind Quebec in math.

Key objective 1.1 on page 37 of the business plan explains that your ministry's goal is to "continue to offer curriculum that

provides students with literacy, numeracy, citizenship and practical skills.” My question is: to ensure that we are preparing students for success in the classroom, what does Budget 2024 provide for an updated curriculum implementation?

Mr. Nicolaides: Yeah. Thank you. I’ll try to address that. I think I’ve got about 45 seconds. The short answer to your immediate question: there’s approximately \$34 million in Budget ’24 to support curriculum implementation for the ’24-25 year.

Indeed, as you mentioned, our 2022 PISA rankings: we have reached exceptional levels in Canada. We’re first in reading, first in science, and second in math, which are some exceptional results. Hats off to all staff, teachers, school authorities, and parents for their amazing work in helping to deliver these strong results. We are continuing to move forward with updating and modernizing our curriculum. I’ll have more to say on that probably later this week with respect to the social studies curriculum as well.

4:10

The Chair: Perfect timing, Minister.

We’ll move over to the Official Opposition for more questions.

Ms Chapman: Thank you so much, Chair. I’m just going to go back to that one that we didn’t have time to finish off, performance metric 1(b), our high school to postsecondary transition rate. As I mentioned, we’ve seen a drop here from our 2020-2021 levels. The plan as it stands is only to get back to that by ’25-26. The question I had for the minister is: that is a small percentage difference, but, through the chair, is the minister able to quantify how many fewer Alberta students pursued postsecondary training this year?

Mr. Nicolaides: Sure. I don’t have the exact amount, but indeed there has been a slight decrease, as you’ve noted. The decrease is quite small, so it’s not considered to be of statistical significance and represent some significant change. The six-year transition rate does remain quite stable over the period of those six years. Something to keep an eye on but no cause for significant concern. I think, as you mentioned, in the ’21-22 year just under 60 per cent of high school students made the transition to postsecondary within six years of entering grade 10.

It is something that we’re quite interested in. We do want to look at new, innovative ways or even just expanding current ways to help students transition into postsecondary. We talked a little bit this morning about collegiate schools and collegiate programs and additional funding that we’re providing to that.

We’re also providing additional funding as per the recommendations of the Career Education Task Force to strengthen and support dual credit opportunities. Dual credit opportunities, of course, help students gain credit for postsecondary programs and courses while they’re in high school, and I just think they’re incredibly amazing opportunities. The more that we can do to expand those options and to give students an opportunity to earn postsecondary credits while they’re completing high school is exceptional. We’re also looking at additional measures of helping students gain early admission to postsecondary and continue to complete their Alberta diploma requirements as well.

It is an important point, and thank you for highlighting it. I think it’s quite clear that the more that we can do to help create stronger transitions between the K to 12 system and the postsecondary world is critically important and, I believe, is a key driver in helping students that may not have contemplated postsecondary or weren’t planning to. If their pathways are expanded and available and easier for students to access, it can help increase that transition to postsecondary. Definitely something that is of top concern to the ministry.

Mrs. Chapman: Thank you, Minister. That was a very fulsome answer. Through the chair, is the minister able to provide information about how Alberta students compare to other provinces in postsecondary participation rates? I know how important it is for this government to be keeping pace with comparative provinces. Are we keeping up?

The Chair: Thank you, Member.
Minister.

Mr. Nicolaides: I don’t know if I have that exact information at the moment. I’ll take a look at it. This might actually be occurring at the same time, so I hate to suggest it, but the Ministry of Advanced Education may have some more of those more comparable numbers. I think they’re meeting at the same time, or maybe they met this morning. They did meet this morning.

But just a quick comment on that. Obviously, I spent four years there as Minister of Advanced Ed, so I have a little bit of inside knowledge. I can’t speak to that; again, I may be off, but just from my four years of experience and understanding, Alberta traditionally lags behind other provinces in terms of postsecondary participation rates. There have been a lot of questions or speculation about why that’s the case. Oftentimes it’s been speculated, at least from what I remember, that very strong economic opportunities in the oil sands and in other areas caused a lot of individuals to not look to go to postsecondary and just go directly into the workforce. Of course, we have seen in previous years some downturn with economic activity in the oil sands. It’s starting to kind of tick back up now, but some folks were suggesting or predicting that when there would be a decrease in some of that economic activity related to our oil sands, we would see postsecondary participation rates start to increase. It didn’t really happen, so there may be broader underlying factors here that maybe the Ministry of Advanced Ed might have some broader insight into.

Ms Chapman: Thanks, Minister.

Okay. I’m just going to do another business plan performance metric. It’s metric 1(c), percentage of students who achieve the acceptable standard. This one had some areas of concern. If we go back a few years, 2018 to 2019, it was just about 80 per cent of students that achieved acceptable in language arts. Today we’re down to only 71.3 per cent of students achieving acceptable standards. So under five years of this government managing education in this province, we’ve seen this huge drop in the effectiveness of our education system to prepare students for high school.

Math is even more of a concern. We’ve dropped from 66.6 per cent in 2018-2019 to just 54.3 per cent now, and even more concerning is that the targets that have been set by this government actually don’t come anywhere close to getting us even back to that 2019 level. You have allowed outcomes in language arts to fall over 8 per cent in five years, but the plan now seems to be just to improve those scores by 1 per cent over three years. In math it’s a drop of 12 per cent in the five years of your government, and the plan is to improve that by just 2 per cent over the next three years. These numbers are a huge decline, and I find this really concerning. I mean, let’s just start with: what’s being done now to address this problem?

Mr. Nicolaides: Sure. Of course, there are some concerns in that regard. I think it’s important to note that it’s not unique to Alberta. If you look at the rest of the country, the rest of the world, scores have similarly taken a decline, and a significant component of that decline is attributed to COVID and learning disruption.

Just to come back to your immediate question of “What are we doing?” we’re doing a couple of things. Number one, we are providing additional funding in the learning loss bucket. Again, this is to provide additional support to students that are identified as not being at grade level, to provide them with some targeted intervention and support. These interventions are incredibly effective and are able to move the vast majority of students, well north of 80 per cent of participants in cases, up to grade level in just a matter of a few months. So there is the learning disruption.

We’ve also required, as recently as a couple of years ago, mandatory early literacy and numeracy screening in grades 1 to 3, so students are assessed at two times throughout the year to gauge their literacy and numeracy skills and abilities, and if students are identified to require additional support, intervention is provided, usually through an educational assistant or other support staff who come to the school and kind of collect all the students that are at a certain level, have them in a separate room or class, and provide them with targeted intervention to help get them up to grade level.

But I do just want to rehighlight again that jurisdictions nationally and around the world have seen decline broadly, and this is reflected in the 2022 PISA rankings. You see that a lot of results experienced a decline. That being said, Alberta is the highest in Canada in science and reading and the second highest in Canada in math.

Ms Chapman: Looking at the budget, base funding is decreasing. I’m just having trouble understanding how a cut can be justified at a time where Alberta students are simply not meeting the standards that we need to see in this province. I respect how hard our students and teachers work, but this metric should really be sounding alarm bells that the chronic underfunding by this government in education is having really negative impacts. Oh, that wasn’t a question. That was more of a statement. My apologies. I thought it was going somewhere, but then it just didn’t. But I can see you don’t have a ton of time to answer it. We have the lowest funding per student in Alberta in math scores, so why is it that we’re outright refusing to give education the funding it deserves?

Mr. Nicolaides: Sure. Very quickly, in 20 seconds, our school divisions are forecasting to see 33,000 additional students, and the funding that’s provided in Budget ’24 provides funding for 33,000 additional students. Of course, there is the supplemental enrolment growth grant, that we use to top up jurisdictions that see enrolment increase above and beyond their forecasts and their projections. We’ll continue to evaluate the numbers and support them.

4:20

The Chair: Thank you so much, Minister.

We’ll move over to the independent member. Go ahead.

Mrs. Johnson: Thank you, Madam Chair and through you to the minister. My colleague across began with page 37 in the ministerial business plan, the performance measure of grade 9 students, and I was curious how those numbers compared to the years before 2020. I thank the minister for addressing that. Then how does that percentage compare to the rest of Canada and internationally since we are sitting at number 2? I trust we’re going to get to number 1, I suspect, very quickly. Maybe that’s just my hopefulness, but I see that around the corner, and it is nice to see that steps are being taken to address this and to make sure that it’s dealt with properly.

[Mr. Eggen in the chair]

I’m curious if you know if this is happening in other grades. If this is grade 9 as of 2023, they would have been in grade 6-ish in 2020. Where our grade 1s were, they’re now a grade 3 or grade 6.

What are their marks looking like? Are we taking the same kind of steps below grade 9 to ensure that these students are going to be successful in postsecondary endeavours?

Mr. Nicolaides: Yeah. Thank you. An important question. I was able to pull a little bit more information about some of those stats as per Member Chapman’s questions, so maybe I’ll just provide a little bit more detail and context for the entire committee and, hopefully, address your questions as well.

The last actual for the percentage of students who have achieved the acceptable standard on provincial achievement tests only includes results for grade 9 students. The 2021-22 results include 73 and a half per cent in language arts and 60 per cent in math, including results for both grades 6 and 9. In 2022-23 the result of 71 per cent in language arts and 54 per cent in math included results for grade 9 students only. When looking at the trend for grade 9 students over time, to your point, we have observed a decline in results between 2018-19 and ’21-22. No surprise. Some things happened during that time period. Language arts results decreased from 75.1 to 69.4 per cent, and math results decreased from 60 to 53.1 per cent.

However, that being said, we are starting to see some improvements in grade 9 results. Language arts results have increased by 1.9 per cent, from 69.4 per cent in ’21-22 to 71.3 per cent in ’22-23, so starting to slowly tick back up. And we saw the same in math, which increased by 1.2 per cent: 53 per cent in ’21-22 to 54 per cent in ’22-23. Again, there are a number of challenges that Albertans have experienced and faced over the last few years, but we are starting to see those important measures trend back in the right direction.

I think you mentioned about some international comparisons as well. I just want to highlight again for the committee that we are second in Canada in math, first in Canada in reading, and first in Canada in science. Yeah, I’m totally with you: we’ll get to first in Canada in math and retain our top position through the hard work and diligence of all of our partners involved in our education system.

I think I’ll leave it there. You may have had additional questions that maybe I missed, but I’ll leave it there and just let you supplement any questions that I may have missed.

Mrs. Johnson: Thank you, Mr. Chair and through you to the minister. That answers the questions. I also thank my colleague down the table for when she referred to key objective 1.1 on page 37 of the business plan. The very first objective refers to literacy and numeracy, two of our three Rs that are so important – reading, ’riting, and ’rithmetic – but it didn’t leave it there. It went on to citizenship and practical skills. Citizenship: I would put that in social studies. And our practical skills: in my mind, I’m thinking these are high school students looking at the trades and maybe some of our dual credit programs and RAP programs. I love that this is number 1.1, a key objective.

[Ms Lovely in the chair]

To go into numeracy a little bit, we were with the Advanced Education minister this morning, and it came to light that, as you would know, there’s over a billion dollars’ worth of student loans out there for our postsecondary students. That’s a heavy burden. It was my comment that it’s too bad that they’re coming out with this burden that they’re going to now have to work and pay off when they could be saving for a house. I know there are special situations where loans can come in very handy for certain individuals. I also talk with a lot of college students who are even low income and are paying their way through on their own without a dime from anyone,

debt free, and even coming out with savings. It's possible. Are we looking perhaps to work with Advanced Education and bringing in numeracy, financial management classes at the high school level, and what would that look like?

Mr. Nicolaides: Yeah. Thank you. The short answer to the question is yes, and I'll expand a little bit more on that. I hate to make this an Advanced Education committee, but just coming back to the loan piece, during the time I was minister and working to deal with some of the affordability challenges that we were facing in '23 and continue to face, we had heard some recommendations from student leaders and other groups to provide some more flexible loan options. If memory serves me correctly, we had expanded loans to part-time students, that weren't previously eligible for loans, and had made some other changes. When the Ministry of Advanced Education presents a total kind of loan burden, part of the reason is because there's a larger catchment. There are more individuals that are able to access more loans than previously.

Coming back to your question, indeed we will be strengthening financial literacy in the curriculum. In the new K to 6 health and wellness component of the curriculum, financial literacy is a component that is taught there. As we develop the new 7 to 12 curriculum, we'll also continue to look at financial literacy, continuing through the physical education and wellness and other components of the curriculum.

In addition, there is, of course, career and life management, commonly known as and referred to as CALM in high school. We will be taking a look at that. One of the critical pieces of feedback that I received from my Minister's Youth Council was that there may need to be a little bit more rigour behind high school CALM classes, so we will be taking a close look at the structure of CALM and the instruction, the outcomes. We're taking a look at that to make that a little bit more robust to address student needs. I would imagine that we would want to strengthen financial literacy education as a part of that, help ensure that they understand interest, savings, mortgage rates, compound interest, those other pieces that they will need very shortly, moving into adulthood, potentially, as you mentioned, taking on loans for postsecondary education. It's important to have a good understanding of those dynamics: return on investment, looking at their educational opportunities, postsecondary options. That will indeed be a key feature of the revised curriculum as we continue to proceed.

In addition, as I mentioned a moment ago, in the coming days we will be making an announcement with respect to the social studies curriculum. Of course, a key component of social studies broadly is economics, and of course making sure that there are key learning outcomes and objectives in social studies with respect to economics can also help to strengthen general financial literacy for our kids.

Mrs. Johnson: Thank you, Madam Chair and through you to the minister. While we're on advanced education, let's continue. On page 38 of the ministerial business plan it states that "in 2021-22, 35.5 per cent of self-identified First Nations Métis, and Inuit high school students made the transition to post-secondary within six years of entering Grade 10." What are we doing to increase this number and to contribute to their chances of success?

4:30

Mr. Nicolaides: Yeah. Happy to address that in the short minute that I have left. One of the things that we are working on – I talked a little bit about it this morning. We are working on a research partnership between Alberta Education and MacEwan University to collaborate together with and to strengthen First Nation, Métis, and

Inuit postsecondary pathways and opportunities. That's one of the specific components that we are working to.

We've also provided funding, \$3.5 million, into the bridging classrooms to communities grant pilot program – that'll help strengthen programming for Indigenous students in our K to 12 system – and additional funding to strengthen partnerships between our school authorities and Indigenous communities to help ensure that school authorities are able to provide tailored programs and/or services that First Nations, Métis, and Inuit students may require to help strengthen their success in postsecondary.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

We'll head now back over to the government side.

Mr. Singh: Thank you, Chair. Through you to the minister, my question is based on education and career opportunities. Alberta students will be tomorrow's workforce participating in the modern and competitive economy. Outcome 3 of the business plan explains that Alberta Education has access to a variety of learning opportunities to enhance competitiveness in the modern economy on page 38, business plan. What opportunities are being supported by Alberta Education to allow students to explore career options? And could the minister please tell us a little bit more about the careers task force and how it will positively impact students graduating high school?

Mr. Nicolaides: Sure. I'd be happy to. As you mentioned, the Career Education Task Force was put together to look at strengthening career education in our K to 12 system. There are a number of recommendations that were produced as a result of that report, and we are working diligently to implement the recommendations of that report. There are a number of pieces there. I encourage you to have a closer look at the report, of course, which is available publicly, and look at some of the recommendations. We are absolutely committed to implementing those recommendations and moving them forward.

It is critically important that we ensure our students have the opportunity to pursue their careers of interest and succeed in our dynamic market, and that's something that is of priority. It's important as well that we talk carefully and closely with our partners, our school authorities, postsecondary institutions, communities, and industry to look at how we do that.

I mentioned earlier this morning that I had the opportunity to explore in a little bit more detail some of the work that's under way in Lethbridge and surrounding communities with – I'm going to get the name wrong, so I'm just going to look at my pen – the southern Alberta collegiate institute. They have some exciting partnerships with postsecondary institutions, school authorities, and industry. It's really working well. We will be looking to expand those collegiate-style programs in schools, that help build greater connections between programming options and postsecondary pathways. We will also be looking to expand and strengthen dual credit opportunities. We spoke a little bit about that a couple of moments ago. They're incredibly effective at helping individual students earn credit for postsecondary options and pathways and increase the likelihood of that individual attending postsecondary versus someone who does not.

There are more collegiates. Just coming back to collegiates, there are approximately seven new collegiates that are slated to open as well. The mandate letter that I've received from the Premier talks in a lot of detail about career education and the need to expand career education broadly.

When we talk about career education, what that really means is – I would probably characterize that in two broad areas. The first area,

when we talk about career education, fundamentally, is about creating more awareness and exposure about career opportunities that exist. There are lots of areas where there's incredible demand in the labour market. Sometimes students may not know of those options or may not have contemplated them, so I think it's incredibly important that we provide more awareness. Career fairs are an example of one of the things that we're looking to expand on. Those help to provide students with greater awareness of some of the options that exist within our society. As an example, there's a shortage of pilots. There's a shortage of and a demand for aircraft mechanics and technicians. There is a demand for teachers. There's a demand for nurses and other health care practitioners. There's a demand for tradespeople. So helping them recognize and have a stronger awareness of some of those opportunities is critical.

Then the second piece of that is about exposure, so creating more off-campus opportunities, creating internship experiences, other types of opportunities where they can actually experience a little bit about what life looks like in those particular career areas. Those are some of the pieces that we're looking at with respect to strengthening career education in our schools.

Recently as well we had a delegation of ministers from Germany who came to learn about our success. They were mostly interested in a lot of our success around PISA rankings, as we've noted already, where Alberta performs quite strongly. Germany has been going through what they call PISA shock, which is a term that they use to broadly define the fact that their PISA results are quite low. As an OECD country their results are quite low, and they had sent a delegation here to Alberta to learn a little bit more from us about some of the amazing work we're doing.

Not to digress, but when they were here, I wanted to take the opportunity to find out as much information as I could from them about some of the work that they do in terms of strengthening career education. I think Germany is often regarded as a strong model whereby industry partners and others work together to have strong career pathways in their schools. I took the opportunity to try and divert the conversation a little bit and learn a little bit more from them about what they were doing in career education. I hope to stay in touch with them and learn a little bit more from their experiences.

Apologies for the long-winded answer, but I hope I was able to address all of your questions.

Mr. Singh: Thank you, Minister, for the great answer. The answer was really detailed.

Again, I will switch to dual credit opportunities. I know you touched a little bit on it there. Under Initiatives Supporting Key Objectives for outcome 3 on page 39 of the ministry business plan it discusses dual credit opportunities for students. Could you please explain what the dual credit program is and how it is implemented in Alberta's schools and what support is available for schools that choose to create a dual credit program? And the last one is: what specific funding from Alberta Education's budget will help support this good program?

Mr. Nicolaides: Sure. Perhaps I'll just work backwards through those questions. In terms of specific funding there's \$12 million that's available in Budget '24 for dual credit opportunities and to enhance CTS programming over the next three years. We do want to make sure that funding is available to support these opportunities and strengthen them.

More broadly, I think you asked a little bit about some of the operation of dual credit. For those listening as well, of course, dual credit opportunities enable students to earn credits for high school and work towards their diploma requirements and at the same time earn credits for postsecondary studies. This is really valuable, of

course, and exciting because if there are a variety of different dual credit opportunities available at an individual school, a student can explore those options, receive credit for postsecondary, look at career options, and maybe eliminate some or look at other opportunities where they want to do some additional studies and postsecondary options. They can be very effective. The data around dual credit is clear as day: students that participated in dual credit opportunities are far more likely to attend and finish postsecondary than their counterparts and students who do not.

4:40

I know that, apart from dual credit, there are CTS programs, as I mentioned, which – apologies for using the acronym; career and technology studies. There's as well the registered apprenticeship program, also known as RAP, whereby, through the through the RAP program, students can begin their apprenticeship education while in high school.

Oh, thanks Jeff. That's very helpful. Here are some more numbers. I think the committee loves some numbers, so we'll provide some more numbers. In the '22-23 school year there were 137,598 students in grades 10 to 12 participating in career and technology studies nonapprenticeship programming. There were 13,644 students in grades 10 to 12 participating in career and technology apprenticeship programming, 15,422 students in dual credit programming, 2,248 students in career education programming in partnership with postsecondary institutions, and 1,407 of the students participated in the green certificate program to gain experience and certification in Alberta's agriculture industry. So there's a diversity of options available there for students to explore their interests.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Minister.

We'll head back over to the Official Opposition, and once your time has concluded, then we'll take our break.

Ms Wright: Thank you, Chair, to you and through you to the minister. I'm going to focus my comments and questions pretty much all on page 39 of the ministry's business plan having to do with outcome 4, making sure that our educational system and workforce are well managed, key objectives 4.1 and 4.2, and I'll touch very briefly on the performance metrics that are also on page 39 and page 40.

So to begin, Chair, to you and through you, we do know that the short-term employment forecast from '23-25 states that right now educational assistants are sort of a medium-demand sort of a job. However, the long-term prospects are quite markedly different. Our Alberta Occupational Outlook, which has been updated, on page 5 notes that by 2030 they anticipate that elementary and secondary school teacher assistants will have a forecasted labour shortage of more than 3,000 workers.

I couple that with what we know is already a shortage in our educational system of educational assistants, those folks that are there, really, to help the kids that need the most help, kids who are the most vulnerable, kids who are experiencing the most challenges, the most complexities in terms of their own education, to say nothing of my personal experience in lack of paraprofessionals out there; speech-language pathologists, occupational therapists, just to name two.

I also note that there are concerns with educational leaders and stakeholders who have expressed real, grave concerns that the numbers attached to the expenses for the instruction for ECS to grade 12, as noted in the business plan on page 41 – what they're saying is that the fiscal plan doesn't match the expected and current population growth nor inflation. In fact, I also note that the Calgary

school division not too long ago noted that funding levels had returned to 2018-2019 levels. That's not exactly '23, '24, '25 levels.

In addition to that, there are some real and current financial pressures for educational assistants and educational support workers generally. Looking at the plans for public-sector compensation, which is noted on page 99 of the fiscal plan, and noting that those provide for a less than 4 per cent increase between the 2023 forecast and this year's estimate, what I'm wondering primarily is: how are we showing exactly that we're valuing these workers when we know that we're coming into a shortage of about 3,000 workers in 2030, not that long from now? What's being done now to show those workers that we value them in a really real sense and a very real way?

Bearing all of that in mind, kind of a more general question in terms of what the ministry is doing right now to plan for and create the conditions for recruitment and retention of all of those EAs over the next few years. My worry and my concern, of course, is that given all of the complexities that I've talked about, one might draw the conclusion that those conditions to retain, to recruit EAs have not been met.

The Chair: Thank you, Member.
Minister.

Mr. Nicolaides: Yeah. Thank you, Madam Chair. A lot to unpack there. I guess I would say a few things, first and foremost that we recognize that it is important that we work toward hiring additional education assistants and other educational staff, teachers, but I know your line of questioning was focused specifically on educational assistants. Of course, individual school boards determine hiring practices, determine salaries, determine those elements. But we do recognize the critical value that educational assistants provide in the classroom, especially when we're talking, as we have throughout the course of the day, about learning loss, learning disruption, students with behavioural issues, cognitive challenges, or other areas. Oftentimes it is through the support of educational assistants whereby additional support can be provided to those students and primarily delivered through IPPs and other mechanisms. They play an incredibly important and valuable role. So one of the things that we can do is work to ensure that we provide additional funding to our school boards to be able to hire additional educational assistants or expand their hours.

Budget '23 set the stage for that by providing \$126 million over the next three years through the classroom complexity grant. School boards, of course, have discretion that those dollars can be used to hire psychologists, speech-language pathologists, or other professionals but also be used to hire or expand hours of educational assistants. That funding is continuing. We've maintained that funding in this budget. Budget '24 includes \$44 million, this year's proportion of the \$126 million, for those purposes, and through the measures that our school boards are reporting, it appears as though the additional funding is being used effectively and is achieving its intended goals and outcomes.

From the '22 to '23 year we have seen an increase of approximately 640 educational assistants and over 1,000 teachers come into the system. More specifically, through the funding commitments that we have made in Budget '23 and in Budget '24, we do anticipate to see our total complement of noncertified educational staff, which includes bus drivers but also includes educational assistants, to increase by about 1,600, or 6 per cent, over the next three years. Additionally, we have put some dollars aside, about \$1 million, to support the number of educational assistant graduates in the province.

There's an interesting pilot under way through Edmonton public schools. This pilot looks to train educational assistants within other school authorities as well, and we have seen some strong success. Actually, a recent news article from the Bow Island *Commentator* featured a story about Prairie Rose public school's experience with the educational assistant training program. This is a really unique pilot program that Edmonton public schools is working on, and we've seen some success. That's why we are providing an additional million dollars to help expand that pilot and see some broader implementation around that program. So definitely something that the ministry has top of mind, and we are looking to address over the next few years.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.
Member?

Ms Wright: Thank you very much, Chair. I'd like to focus a little bit more on that issue of complexity inside our classrooms today, specifically the K to 12 classrooms.

I certainly note that we've got more children, more complexities, and, of course, it does depend upon where that particular school might lie, the number of kids they have, where those kids are coming from, that sort of thing. I also note that the Edmonton school division's class size survey indicated that schools in my area, Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview, have and are looking at year-over-year increases in student population, and that also includes year-over-year increases in the number of kids who are coded. Of course, that particular group of kids aren't the only kids who need our support.

Just to draw upon personal experience. The last school that I was at, we had a kindergarten class of about 20, 21 kids. A few of those kiddos were indeed coded, but there was as well another five or six children who were not coded. When we actually kind of weighed what all of those children were actually worth, that 20-person kindergarten class ended up ballooning to well over 40 children with two educational assistants and one teacher.

4:50

It's an incredibly complex issue to be dealing with, particularly if we're counting kids who are coded versus kids who are not coded. And all of those things and all of those complexities have led to things like: there are massive increases in injury rates to educational assistants. According to the workplace injury, illness, and fatality statistics we know that education has risen to be one of the top sectors where workers are becoming injured on the job, and I do believe that that's a function of simply not having enough educational assistants.

To kind of cap it all off, to talk about the aspect of complexity, I'm really wondering what it is that we as a government and that the government is planning on doing to make sure, again, that those conditions for recruitment and retention of all of those EAs are being met. Who is it that's being consulted with? Are we talking to educational assistants who are out there doing that job right now every day? Are we talking to the unions who represent them? Are we talking to parent advisory councils? Are we talking to the ATA, whose members, of course, work with educational assistants every day?

I know we don't have time. I totally talked you out of it.

The Chair: Thank you. Thank you so much, Member.
All right. Let's take our five-minute break, everyone.

[The committee adjourned from 4:51 p.m. to 4:59 p.m.]

The Chair: Okay, everyone, let's get back to session here. We'll start off with the independent member.

Please proceed.

Mrs. Johnson: Thank you, Madam Chair. Through you to the minister, we've heard a little bit of talk today about population growth, with Blackfalds for so many years being the top growing community in Canada. Today we were hearing earlier about Airdrie now being the top growing city in Canada. Population growth is at the top of many of our conversations.

On page 35 of the ministry business plan the ministry fact sheet mentions keeping pace with Alberta's growing student population. How does Alberta's growing student population compare to other similarly sized provinces? Is our student population increasing at the same rate as the general population, and what does this mean for the number of classroom spots that are currently available?

Mr. Nicolaidis: Sure. I don't think we have interprovincial comparators directly in front of us at the moment, but I'll talk slowly for a few minutes, let my team have some time to look through the information. I do have a little bit of information here just broadly on population growth. So maybe I'll go through that and just give you a little bit of information on where we're at generally on population growth. In 2023 Alberta welcomed more than 184,000 people to the province, which is just absolutely incredible for a single year. Our annual population growth has been increasing for the last two years, and in 2023 we saw our highest growth rate since 1981. It's very significant and, of course, occurring just very recently.

A little bit more broadly, as of October 1 of '23 our population in Alberta was 4.7 million. We mentioned the 184,000 new residents that we've added. Our growth in terms of percentage: it was half a per cent in '21, population increase, just to give you some perspective; 1.8 per cent in 2022; and then 4 per cent in 2023. It is quite significant, quite sudden. We've been talking about this in the committee throughout the morning as well, that we are seeing quite a sudden pressure.

That does correspond a little bit to the overall enrolment rates at our schools. I know we had a sheet with some of the enrolment increase percentages for some of our metro school divisions. Some of those were, you know, 5, 6, maybe even 7 per cent. I think that was just in our metros, like Calgary board of education. They're seeing some of the pressure. A lot of the growth is just occurring in Calgary and Edmonton in terms of enrolment. When you balance it out, though, over the entire province, we are looking at about a 4 per cent overall enrolment increase for our students. That is broadly in alignment with our general population increase level. As I mentioned, our population increased by about 4.1 per cent in the province, and we're seeing across the province about a 4 per cent increase in enrolment.

Again, if you zone in on Calgary and Edmonton, the enrolment percentages are quite a bit higher. I have it here. Thank you, Lora. It was 5 per cent in '22-23 and 4.7 per cent for '23-24 and projecting 7 per cent in '24-25. That's just for Calgary, and it's just for the Calgary board of education, so a little more lopsided in terms of enrolment pressures in our metro areas.

Additionally, I have a little bit more information about enrolment levels. Our school authorities are projecting to see an increase of more than 33,000 students collectively. When we talk about percentages, 4 per cent, we're talking about 33,000 students. That's what it means in real numbers. Where are those increases? Where are we seeing those students? The estimate for '24-25 is that approximately 93 per cent of our students would be enrolled in public, charters, Catholic, and other public education providers.

The 93 per cent, that's 747,000 students. And approximately 7 per cent of our total student levels, student population numbers, would be enrolled in independent providers, which represents about 55,000 students.

5:05

So collectively we expect to top out over 800,000 students this year, with the vast majority of them, 93 per cent, being in public school operators. In terms of increase between public operators and independent operators, the rate of increase that we're seeing in public is 4 per cent, as I mentioned, in line with our population levels. We are seeing a larger increase in independent providers. We're seeing that increase at about 7.7 per cent, so we're seeing a little bit more demand in those independent operators.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.
Member?

Mrs. Johnson: Sure. Thank you, Madam Chair and, through you, to the minister. On page 41 as well in the ministerial business plan there is a reduction in budget '24-25 for school facilities. It went from \$549 million to \$515 million. The difference is essentially the cost of another school. Can you explain this reduction?

Mr. Nicolaidis: That was for school facilities?

Mrs. Johnson: Yes. Correct.

Mr. Nicolaidis: Yeah. A little technical, but most of the change is a result of liability payments for the 2019 public-private partnership, P3, bundle that was built under the Alberta schools alternative procurement. The \$555 million is a consolidated number. That number includes a few things. It includes amortization costs reported by school boards, which represents \$483 million. It also includes Lloydminster capital maintenance and renewal funding at \$800,000. It also includes \$25 million for funding for the development of the new charter hub, and it includes \$4.5 million in insurance indemnity. There's also \$700,000 for remaining liability of the 2019 P3 bundle, which has almost been completed. That is what that \$515 million represents. That's why there's a reduction, because it's liability from those previous P3 projects that are coming to a close.

Mrs. Johnson: Okay. There's not a lot of time left here, so I'll keep this one short. As far as where students are enrolled today, the minister mentioned that 93 per cent are public, charter, or Catholic, with 7 per cent independent. In that independent can you break that down a little bit more as far as private or home-school pods, whatever those are?

Mr. Nicolaidis: Sure. I know we have a minute and a half. I know my team is looking to pull that information now. We'll continue to look if we have the home-school breakout, but I can look at the variance between independent schools and ECS, early childhood services, operators and just provide that to you. For '24-25 we're projecting an 8.1 per cent increase in the number of students registered at independent schools. That's 3,469 students, for a projected total enrolment of 46,344 students. For ECS, early childhood services operators, the projection is to see a 5.5 per cent increase. That's a raw increase of 453 students, for a total enrolment level of 8,749. I do have the home education and shared responsibility – in three seconds – increasing by 7.3 per cent.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Minister.
We'll head over to the government side.

Mr. Long: Thank you, Chair, and, through you, thank you to the minister for keeping up with us today. It's already four and a half hours, I believe, by the clock, and I'm hopefully just going to get through some of these very quickly. I'm anxious actually to get back to the Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview because I appreciated the questions that she was asking and look forward to some of those answers as well, based on my own interactions with teachers, as I shared this morning, you know, with my wife being a teacher, and also my mom and my sister. Those classroom complexities are a huge component of the struggle that teachers face. Again, I'll just get through some of these questions and then look forward to returning to that discussion, I hope, if the minister so chooses.

Nevertheless, Minister, I've heard you speak previously about the early years assessment as a useful tool to advance numeracy and literacy in Alberta students. You know, for myself, I sometimes refer to myself as a young dad, but the reality is that I'm an old dad of young kids. This is very important for myself as well, to be able to gauge where our children are at from a young age and then get the plans in place to address areas of struggle or to continue to support the areas where they're doing well. In the 2024 business plan it mentions these assessments explicitly in key objective 1.3 on page 3. I'll have a few questions all rolled into this one, Chair. I was hoping that the minister could explain to our committee what these tests are, also how they will be used to affect students' future learning. Also, I'm curious if Alberta is following other provinces in the use of these tests, or is this an Alberta innovation?

The Chair: Thank you, Member.
Minister?

Mr. Nicolaides: Yeah. Thank you very much. Well, I guess, just to your final point, I think your question was whether Alberta is following other jurisdictions in the early literacy and numeracy screening and assessment. It's the opposite. In fact, Alberta is really seen as a leader in this area, and Alberta is really seen as the vanguard, as setting the stage for what strong intervention and screening and support look like for early literacy and numeracy. We're among the first, if not the first, to require these early years assessments, and many other provinces are taking a very close look at what's happening in Alberta. I've recently joined the Canadian School Boards Association. They were in town for some meetings, and I joined the head of the school board associations from most of our other provinces, and we had a little bit of a discussion about this. If I remember correctly, the Ontario school board association representatives said, "Yeah, we're basically copying this, and we're doing almost precisely what Alberta is doing," and other provinces are really looking at doing the same. So this is an area of strength. These assessments are so great. These are something that we all should be quite proud of.

The way it works. I know you asked a little bit about what these tests are, how they work, so maybe I'll just talk a little bit about that. These literacy and numeracy assessments – I also probably refer to them as early years assessments – became mandatory for grades 1 to 3 in the '22-23 year, and they occur twice a year. Of course, the first test is done to get a baseline and determine which students require support and create some space and time for interventions to occur, and then a second assessment is done towards the end of the year to see how students have responded to the interventions. This is to ensure that students are receiving essential foundational learning in the critical early years of their education. The science, the analysis is crystal clear on this piece. Any student that struggles with literacy, with reading, writing, and numeracy, and are not at grade level in those formative years, will

have long-term struggles not just in those areas but in other subjects as well, so it's essential that we get it right.

These tests are provided and approved by Alberta Education to ensure that there's consistency across the entire province, and it does provide us as well with essential information about potential student learning issues and needs and ensures that students who are at risk are identified early and get the help that they need so that they can be successful throughout their educational journey. Student assessments also provide assurance to all Albertans, I would argue, that our education system is achieving desired outcomes.

5:15

There are some additional pieces. Talking about this screening in grades 1 to 3 is just one part of a broader bucket, again, if I can use that, of early assessment. When we say "early assessment," we're broadly talking about kindergarten to grade 6. We have the literacy and numeracy screening that occurs in grades 1 to 3, we have provincial achievement tests in grade 6, and then we also have student learning assessments in grade 3. We are talking a lot with our partners right now about this framework generally. How are those grades 1 to 3 literacy and numeracy screenings working? What about kindergarten? What about the grade 3 student learning assessments? How do those work in complement to our grades 1 to 3 literacy and numeracy screening?

We are having some very broad conversations right now about the entire framework of early years assessment and looking to find opportunities to strengthen it as best we possibly can, because I think everybody, the entire committee, would agree that the strongest assessment that we could have in those formative years will help ensure that our kids are set up for success. So we are undertaking some engagement right now, and we will take careful consideration of the feedback that is provided by our partners through this consultation phase to help inform and determine next steps.

I'm not sure exactly, you know, what the consultation will produce and what some of the recommendations might be, but I've been asking a lot of questions about kindergarten, of course, and then seeing if it's appropriate to look at assessment in kindergarten or not, something that we're talking a lot more with, again, folks on the ground – our teachers, our educational assistants, our school authorities – to understand what that might look like and if that's even possible or whether it may present other challenges.

I'll leave it there. I could go on for a while about this area, as I'm sure you probably noticed. It's just that it's some incredible work, and I think not enough people understand the significant work that occurs here and the strength of our . . .

The Chair: I'm so sorry, Minister. You're only allowed to have a maximum of five minutes for response, and you've exceeded that.

Mr. Long: Thank you, Chair. I'll jump into another question. Thank you for that. Again, I just appreciate how vital that is, you know, seeing some of the issues that kids carry through into their high school years based on not having those proper tools put in place at younger years.

That said, I'd just sort of like to change it up. I'll try to get through this quickly. Page 35 of your business plan highlights how Alberta Ed supports choice with the education system. This includes home education as well as independent and public charter schools. I believe that this is crucial in providing a variety of education program options for students and parents and supports key objective 4.3 of the ministry business plan, which shows that the ministry is committed to "promote choice in education to enhance student

learning.” Would the minister be able to inform the committee how many children and youth in Alberta receive education from options outside of the public school system, and for options that are not fully funded by government, could you please explain the funding allocation and how it benefits all Alberta students and families?

Mr. Nicolaides: Sure. I don’t think I’ll be able to do all of that in 30 seconds, but I can give you the percentages, our estimates, for ’24-25. We’re estimating to see about a 5.5 per cent increase in enrolment for early childhood service operators. We’re expecting to see an 8 per cent increase for independent schools, and we are anticipating to see a 4.1 per cent increase in public school authorities enrolment. That’s the general enrolment forecast that we’ve received.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Minister.

We’ll head over now to . . . [An electronic device sounded] Just disregard that; we’re just having a technical issue. We’ll head over to the Official Opposition. Please feel free to just talk over this.

Member Batten: Okay. Apologies. It’s me; sorry.

Through the chair to the minister, there’s been a lot of talk about the increasing complexity of the students and their needs. Early childhood services, following current evidence and protocols, can make a huge difference in how students progress through schooling and eventually how they contribute to society. Of course, we’ve just heard a lot of that, so this is this is actually quite timely.

I would like to discuss the home education kindergarten pilot, which started this past fall. The pilot is not yet complete, of course, but it does run until the end of the school year. I’m just wondering if at this point, through the chair, the minister can tell us how many children are enrolled for the pilot, what outcomes are being tracked to ensure the quality of these home education packages and instruction, and what ongoing assessment is planned to assess how these children from the pilot compare to their peers who maybe attended formal kindergarten or potentially none at all?

Thank you.

Mr. Nicolaides: Sure. Our team might need a couple of moments just to pull up those numbers for you. Just give us a second.

We’re still looking for the numbers for participation, but indeed, as you mentioned, starting in the ’23-24 school year, we did introduce the home education kindergarten pilot; \$2 million was provided in ’23-24 and just over \$3 million is being marked for future years as well. Now, of course, we know that children are not mandated or required to attend kindergarten in Alberta, but we have provided some of that funding to eliminate some of the gaps specifically within home education, where kindergarten children currently are not provided with any provincial support. We believe it’s essential that funding is provided to alternative educational opportunities and programs, including home education, so funding has been set aside for that program.

I’m not sure that we’re able to find the exact number of students that are enrolled. Maybe we are. Oh, we are, just in the nick of time for you. For the ’23-24 school year, the government of Alberta spent approximately \$1.65 million in funding to support the pilot, and there were 1,829 children who were registered in the program.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Member Batten: Thank you so much, Minister, through the chair. I appreciate that these numbers are tough to maybe find sometimes, but I’m wondering, just to reiterate the question, about how we ensure quality of these educational packages. How are we possibly assessing for how these particular children in this pilot compare to

formal kindergarten or those who don’t attend at all? Further, I’d like to know which budget line we’d find the program funding in. If you could answer, that would be great.

Mr. Nicolaides: Sure. I’ll find the specific budget item. Of course, as you see in the main estimates, they’re all categorized in large buckets. Sometimes it’s a lot easier and better just to see, you know, home education and all of these other pieces in a smaller way. The main estimates, of course, provide a very high-level snapshot. We’ll tell you where exactly that’s encapsulated. I think it might be best if I can ask Kindy to chime in on some of the kind of program assurance that you’re talking about with respect to home education and the pilot in particular if that’s all right.

Kindy.

Ms Joseph: For sure. Thank you. You know, in terms of some of the assurance measures in place for the home education kindergarten pilot, they are supervised by a school authority. We do have check-ins with certificated teachers that review the educational plan. They ensure that the educational outcomes are being met, and that’s done twice a year. Department staff: through our own assurance measures we do some samples with some of those educational plans that we see for home education students, and we will go through and review them and ensure that some of those educational plans are kind of meeting our criteria as well as the actual educational plans that the parents have set out, just to make sure that those objectives are being met.

I’m not sure about the line item. Minister.

5:25

Mr. Nicolaides: Yeah. Thank you.

I can get back to you on the specific line item.

Of course, with home education there does need to be a supervising school authority. Funding that is provided to home education programs that have a public supervising school authority would be captured in 3.1, page 69 of the estimates, and funding that is provided through independent and private school operators would be under 4.1.

The Chair: Go ahead, Member.

Member Batten: Okay. Thank you so much, Minister and team, through the chair. Of course, kindergarten is an ideal time for children to learn listening, communication skills, early literacy, basic math concepts, and it sets the foundation for the child’s future learning. Is there going to be a longitudinal study where we follow these children for a number of years? What metrics are being used to determine whether the pilot goes forward? Is there a plan to compare, for instance, in addition to the comparisons I’ve mentioned before but also comparing it to, like, the COVID cohort that had moved through – and, of course, this is all just to ensure that we’re not losing the quality of the education that our children deserve and that they’re all ready to enter into grade school.

Mr. Nicolaides: Yeah. Always happy to look at additional research initiatives and projects. Kindy or the team can correct me if I’m wrong, but we don’t have any immediate plans to look at the kind of longitudinal studies for kindergarten students in the home education pilot program. That being said, of course, as we mentioned earlier, we do have the literacy and numeracy screening that’s mandatory in grades 1 to 3. I would assume that you could draw some connections, you know, if you’re seeing students coming out of the kindergarten pilot, the home education pilot and then going through the screening, kind of how they’re lining up, and additional assessments: the grade 3 SLA assessments and PATs.

Those probably could kind of take the place of or help track some of the progress. It's not a specific longitudinal study to those individual students in that cohort, but I think that through those assessments you would still be able to have some line of sight as to how they're progressing and the quality of programming as well.

Member Batten: Thank you so much, Minister, through the chair.

I would like to move on to the business plan, page 37. The first initiative supporting key objectives: "a total of \$9.25 billion in operating expense in 2024-25 to support instruction and early childhood services programming in school authorities." Through the chair, can the ministry please share the proportion that's dedicated to early childhood services versus instructional support, and, I guess, again, how does this relate to the budget lines?

Thanks.

Mr. Nicolaidis: Sure. I'll grab that chart for you. You were looking for how much of the funding is allocated to public school authorities versus others?

Member Batten: It's bucketed together as support for instructional and early childhood services programs. I'm just looking for what's the delegation between the two.

Mr. Nicolaidis: Sure. Yeah. We don't have that specifically split out just at this stage, but I can give you some higher level numbers. In terms of the total operating budget – \$9.25 billion, as we said – approximately \$8.7 billion, or 94.6 per cent of that entire bucket, goes to public jurisdictions; \$153 million of that will go to early childhood service operators; and \$255 million to independent schools.

Member Batten: Thanks. Thanks so much.

In this last little bit I just want to confirm quickly that when we're looking at the budget lines 3.1 and 3.2 versus 4.1 and 4.2, am I understanding correctly that the 3.1 and 3.2 is for public whereas the 4.1 and 4.2 is private?

Mr. Nicolaidis: That's correct. Yes.

Member Batten: Excellent.

The Chair: With that, we will move over to our independent member.

Mrs. Johnson: Yes. Thank you, Madam Chair and to the minister. Graduating from high school is not a guarantee for success but a very strong indicator, as we know. On page 37 of the ministerial business plan it outlines the percentage of how many of our students are actually graduating. I was surprised at how low it was. It was 88.8 per cent that will graduate high school this year. That's leaving more than 11 per cent of our students not completing high school. I have a couple of comments, perhaps, and then a question out of this. The first question would be: does this 88 per cent of graduating include our First Nations, Métis, and Inuit?

Mr. Nicolaidis: Yes. The graduation rate that we show is cumulative. Yes.

Mrs. Johnson: Okay. The graduation rate for this group is significantly lower. Do you have a rate for the general students without the First Nations, Métis, and Inuit?

Mr. Nicolaidis: Yes. We had talked about this a little bit this morning, so I'll try and remember from that while the team is looking at the precise percentages. I believe that on graduation rate

it was 17 per cent lower for self-identified First Nations, Métis, and Inuit students, and if I'm remembering correctly as well from this morning, the dropout rate is approximately 50 per cent – just under 50 per cent; maybe about 47 per cent – higher for self-identified First Nation, Métis, and Inuit students.

Mrs. Johnson: Okay. Thank you, Madam Chair, through you to the minister.

I am aware of one school south of Calgary from a conversation with the principal, who said that their rate of graduation five years from students entering grade 10 was 99 per cent higher, actually, potentially the highest in the province. This school also offered the dual-credit program, which one of my sons was able to benefit from many years ago and so graduated high school with a certificate in business management from Bow Valley College. That's a real gift to be given for several reasons in that it is a higher indicator for graduation, you know, it inspires children to keep going, and it's also a financial incentive. They get a year of university, essentially, paid for before they ever arrive. I'm not going to guess what that could mean; maybe \$15,000 potentially higher of a savings for these students. That's significant.

So it's a delight to hear about the dual-credit system that is back. Am I correct that it had been out for a little while?

Mr. Nicolaidis: I'm not sure if it had been out for a while. I don't believe so, but it is . . .

Mrs. Johnson: When my third son came through, it was not available to him.

Mr. Nicolaidis: Oh, I see. Yeah. Funding has been available, but of course individual school authorities make, you know, programming decisions and partnerships, so it's not universal. There can be different programs available at different times. So there is variance between individual schools and sometimes even at the same school from one year to the next.

Mrs. Johnson: I guess my question, to wrap that all together, coming back to the 99 per cent success rate with this one school: are these schools being studied, and are they entering into the talks to say, "What are you doing right?" so that we can apply this across the board and see a greater success rate for all of our students?

Mr. Nicolaidis: Yeah. Certainly. We do have regular conversations. We're having some conversations right now with our partners around dual credit to try and get a better understanding of what's working, what's not working, and see how we can further expand dual-credit programs. So we do continually talk with our partners and look for opportunities to make improvements.

5:35

There is very objective information and analysis around dual credit that shows very clearly that students that have an opportunity to participate in dual-credit options have higher pathways and transitions into postsecondary and greater success in graduation. We talked a little bit about high school completion rates; this is an important component of that. If there's more that we can do, which is certainly something that we are interested in doing further by providing additional funding or strengthening dual-credit opportunities, we can hope to improve high school completion rates and create stronger connections and pathways to postsecondary. Definitely something that is of top concern. More generally, of course, because one of the objectives of the ministry is, as we mentioned earlier, to strengthen career education, dual credit plays

an important role in that, so certainly something that we have a lot of interest in.

There is also – well, maybe I'll leave it there and see and let you take direction from your supplemental questions.

Mrs. Johnson: Okay. Sure. I'm going to come back to my colleague's question from across the table with kindergarten, home-school kindergarten. I am curious about the future for this. Are there plans to continue this going on? Also, was AHEIA consulted about the kindergarten pilot program?

Mr. Nicolaides: Yes. I'm getting nods from the team on that piece. I believe we did have consultation with AHEIA on the development of the pilot. It's hard to say about a future implementation because, of course, it's a pilot, so just like with any pilot, you want to have some opportunity to evaluate success and challenges and use the results of the pilot to help inform next steps and see where it goes. You know, that being said, of course the government is firmly committed to making sure that there is strength in choice for parents. Of course, there has been that gap with kindergarten, and the pilot is looking to address that. There are always bumps along the way. There are always some challenges or aspects that weren't contemplated or other challenges.

Yeah. As Jeff notes very correctly here, we're just about halfway through the pilot. Once we're done, once the first year has been completed, then we'll be able to have a much clearer picture of how successful the program is, what challenges occurred, any gaps that may exist and then use that to help inform next steps. But, again, it is a priority to ensure that there is choice in education and that parents have the opportunity and the option to choose educational options that they believe are best for their kids, be it home education, be it through an independent operator, a charter operator, a francophone operator, a Catholic school jurisdiction, or another public school jurisdiction. It is absolutely essential that those options are available.

Mrs. Johnson: All right. Thank you, Madam Chair and through you to the minister. In the final seconds I'll take this one step further, going back to the metrics and the quality of this pilot program. Yes, the families are visited twice a year by a certified teacher in the home, and certain outcomes have to be met. As a home-school mom I can attest to that, and it was very nerve-racking when that teacher showed up; you hope you didn't wreck your kids when they show up. For kindergarten it's a little bit different. What are the outcomes that are expected for kindergarten age?

Mr. Nicolaides: Yeah. I might defer to Kindy on that unless there's any other information that we have.

Kindy, do you want to take a stab at that one?

Ms Joseph: Sure. Thank you. With respect to outcomes for kindergarten we do look at something that we refer to as a kindergarten program statement. That's available publicly. We look to those, but as I'm sure you're aware, kindergarten is – you know, the outcomes wouldn't be similar to, for example, a student in grade 10 or grade 11. They're a little bit more centred around socialization and some of those basic skills that a student might need to begin grade 1 successfully. We would look back to that kindergarten program statement in terms of outcomes, but we do also expect that the parent is taking responsibility for that. So it's also balanced against what the parent would like to have as outcomes for their child.

Mrs. Johnson: Thank you very much, Madam Chair, through you to the minister.

The Chair: All right. Well done.

Let's head over to the government side.

Mr. Boitchenko: Thank you, Madam Chair. As a rural Alberta MLA representing Drayton Valley-Devon, I have questions on rural teaching staffing. I understand, you know, ensuring Alberta's education system is staffed properly is of key importance to maintaining our world-class education system. Rural areas particularly suffer from teacher vacancies due to their smaller population.

Key objective 4.1 on page 39 of the 2024 budget calls on Alberta Education to work with school authorities on recruitment and retention strategies for teachers and other school staff in underserved areas. My question is: what does Budget 2024 provide to support the hiring of teachers in our education system specifically in rural, and could you speak to other initiatives the government is taking to fulfill the teacher vacancies and fast-track teachers who meet satisfactory standards?

Mr. Nicolaides: Thank you. A very important question. Just equally as critical, of course, as we work to ensure that we have highly qualified and accredited teachers in our urban communities; even more important to make sure that we have strong available staff in our rural communities. As you probably know better than I, it can often be a challenge to recruit individuals to some of our smaller communities. I think the same goes for teachers and other educational staff.

Perhaps just quickly, you talked a little bit about some of the initiatives that we're taking to fill teacher shortages and fast-track teachers who meet standards. Maybe just on the vacancies and the recruitment piece. There is, as I'm sure you may know, the northern student teacher bursary program. That program works to attract skilled educators to teach in northern schools. There's also the rural practicum bursary, and the rural practicum bursary provides support to student teachers who are interested in working with rural, northern, and/or francophone school authorities and helps to give them some more opportunity and exposure to teaching in those environments.

You talked a little bit about fast-tracking teachers. Additionally, there is the CTS bridge to teacher certification program that you may be familiar with. This program helps school authorities sponsor and hire journey-certificated tradespeople to teach career and technology studies programs. This was created in co-operation between the government of Alberta, the Alberta Teachers' Association, and postsecondary institutions.

Generally on the question of fast-tracking teachers who meet satisfactory standards, this is something that is also reflected in my mandate letter and is also an area of policy broadly that we are exploring to see if there are additional steps that we can take and other bridging options that we can implement to help fast-track individuals who maybe have a specific expertise in specific areas, be that in the trades or in other areas. So we are looking at possible options or opportunities to create some additional fast-track pathways.

You also talked a little bit just I think in general about hiring teachers. I think it's important to reiterate that over the next three years Budget '24 allocates \$1.2 billion to help address enrolment growth specifically, and this funding will go to help hire staff primarily, will go to help hire bus drivers, educational assistants, other school support staff, and potentially hire up to 3,000 teachers and educational assistants collectively. We are seeing, of course, with the enrolment pressures that our school divisions are facing, that we'll need to hire additional staff, and that's why we've

provided that \$1.2 billion, to help address some of those staffing needs.

5:45

We are seeing success already from previous funding commitments and previous funding that we've provided. According to reports from our school divisions over 1,000 teachers have been hired for this current school year, and approximately 640 educational assistants have been hired as well. We will be starting very shortly some engagement on some of those expedited pathways or fast-track opportunities that you mentioned – in fact, actually, some of it started this week, so that's already under way – as we talk a little bit more with our partners, school authorities, the Alberta Teachers' Association, and other groups about what additional fast-track opportunities could look like. And I think it's important just to highlight, when we talk about fast-track opportunities, that they continue to receive very robust academic training and in-class exposure to ensure that any fast-track teacher continues to be of the highest possible calibre.

Just coming back to the rural practicum, because you talked a little bit about that, Jeff was able to find some numbers and some information. I think everybody loves numbers. Since 2010 the rural practicum component, which, again, provides support for students who are interested in doing their practicum in a rural community, has helped about 485 students, and we'll continue to look at the success of that program and other programs.

Apologies for the long answer, but there's a variety of pieces that we're working on to not just help recruit teachers broadly but also to ensure that there are recruitment and retention opportunities in diverse communities across the province.

Mr. Boitchenko: No need to apologize. You have amazing answers. Specifically, \$1.2 billion allocated for rural is just amazing. Thank you for that. The timeliness as well, that some of the program starts right away: you know, the rural community would really appreciate that.

Another question would be that many families are facing a cost-of-living crisis due to increased inflation, rising interest rates, and other factors. This crisis has caused some students in our vulnerable neighbourhoods to have to skip meals and come to classes hungry sometimes, hampering their ability to focus and learn. I note that key objective 1.2 on page 37 of the business plan directs the ministry to collaborate with other ministries to expand mental health and well-being supports for students, which is nice to see on page 37 there. But the question is: will Budget 2024 renew the school nutrition program? The other question I have is: how is the grant calculated to ensure it is allocated where it's needed the most? How many schools receive this grant funding, and how many students are potentially fed from these grants?

Mr. Nicolaidis: Sure. Thank you, Madam Chair. Thank you to the member. Indeed, you're absolutely right. There's, of course, a cost-of-living crisis that all Albertans and Canadians are experiencing. Increased inflation, rising interest rates, and other increased costs are putting a lot of strain on families, and we see that in our schools as well. I think everybody can understand that good nutrition and strong nutrition has a direct correlation to students' learning ability. Good nutrition has positive impacts on student learning broadly, so we do provide funding through the school nutrition program, and we are continuing to support that.

For the upcoming school year, for the '24-25 school year that starts in September, school authorities will receive collectively \$20 million in funding for school nutrition. In terms of numbers the program provides daily meals to more than 58,000 students across

the province. Funding is allocated through a formula that combines a school division's weighted moving average, their full-time equivalent allocation, with socioeconomic status allocation as well to help ensure, precisely to your point, that funding is going where it's needed the most.

Mr. Boitchenko: It's amazing work. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you so much.

We'll move over to the Official Opposition.

Member Batten: All right. Thank you so much. Through the chair, I'd like to discuss school transportation a little bit more. In the past, of course, this cost was downloaded to parents. Now, we do see a budget line for student transportation that's increased around \$70 million although I want to say I heard \$80 million a minute ago. Anyway, in all we have – let's see – \$540 million that's being allocated for student transportation. Of course, this does pull half a billion dollars out of our Education budget that could be used for classroom funding that's now going to be used, you know, to transport. But, again, kids have to get to the classes.

This concern is raised by every single school I visited in my riding of Calgary-Acadia. The Member for Calgary-Foothills mentioned Calgary-Acadia this morning simply because we have 48 schools in our riding. When I say "all these schools I visited," these different school boards I've discussed, we're talking about, you know, CBE, Catholic, Franco sud, charter schools, including Foundations for the Future and STEM Innovation Academy, and of course some private schools.

Of course, we've discussed already that significant shift in policy to reduce the walk zone for schools to one kilometre. This change has brought many a parent to my constituency office, and none were in favour. These families that live across the park from their school can see their school or their child walk safely across to school entrances. For parents such as these my first question is: is there an option for an opt-out? Then the second part would be – of course, this choice, this changing of the 2.4 to the one kilometre, comes with a significant increase in the cost of busing, so how many more transportation routes are being added?

Thank you.

Mr. Nicolaidis: Sure. To your question: is there is there an opt-out? Not currently. The transportation regulation stipulates that by September 1, 2025, a school division must provide busing for all students outside of that one-kilometre drive route. Of course, we are having conversations with our school authorities with respect to implementation of that. A good number of school authorities are already there. If memory serves me correct, about 39 school authorities are already at the one-kilometre drive, so there's some significant progress being made by our school divisions. I know that in Calgary CBE and Calgary Catholic are having some challenges with getting to the one kilometre. We're talking with them; we're working with them. We're having some additional engagement and consultation around the regulation to see if there's additional flexibility that can be provided.

We, of course, want to ensure that we can bus the maximum number of students possible and decrease those walk times because, as we all know, winters can be quite cold. I mean, I don't know how many of us go for a 2.4-kilometre walk in subzero and freezing temperatures, let alone an elementary school child. The more that we can do to reduce those walk zones and provide greater access to transportation funding, I think, is a tremendous service to families in Calgary and Edmonton and across the entire province. I think it's something that we must endeavour to work on and improve on. If

memory serves me correct, I think both Calgary Catholic and CBE are at about 1.5 kilometres, so some significant progress from the original 2.4 kilometres. We'll work with them and see how they can continue to move forward.

You're right that there is increased cost. There's additional fuel that's required. There are additional contracts with providers that are required, so there are those additional costs. That's part of the reason why we have increased funding in the transportation envelope as well. We continue to keep the fuel price contingency program in effect. That helps off-set costs when diesel prices exceed \$1.25 per litre. So that still is there.

5:55

And there's still funding available for the school bus driver grant program. That's to help train and hire bus drivers. We mentioned earlier about some of the changes to the MELT program to make some of the entry requirements for bus drivers. There are, of course, multiple different pieces that we need to put into play to help us achieve those goals.

I think you talked a little bit about fees. All jurisdictions have reduced or maintained transportation fees in the '23-24 year. I know some, if they weren't able to get to the one kilometre, may have used some of that additional funding to keep fees for parents and families at the same level or even reduce them.

Member Batten: Thank you, Minister, through the chair. Page 87 of the fiscal budget from 2023 indicated that an additional \$414 million was being allocated over three years for school bus transportation funding. Can the minister, through the chair, confirm that the investment required for this change is \$414 million over the three years? Like, does that stay the same? What proportion of it was actually spent in this last fiscal year? And is that \$70 million, \$80 million the correct figure for increasing for this school year?

Mr. Nicolaides: Sure. I'll provide some answers to those, and then Jeff might supplement something if I miss anything. I think it's broadly correct. Through Budget '23 a \$414 million increase was provided to student transportation funding, with \$93.5 million being provided in the '23-24 year and \$160 million ongoing for future years. Budget '24 will provide school authorities with a total of \$492 million in this year for the '24-25 fiscal year alone, which is an increase of \$79.8 million. I know you mentioned the \$80 million. So on top of what Budget '23 had already laid out, we are increasing that by \$79.8 million. That's about a 19 per cent increase for this school year.

I don't know if Jeff wanted to supplement with any additional pieces there that I missed.

Mr. Willan: Yeah. Just going back to Budget '23, which is where the question originated. Through Budget '23, yes, a \$414 million increase to student transportation was announced to accommodate transportation improvements over the next three years, with 93 and a half million dollars in the '23-24 year and \$160.2 million ongoing. So as we move in through this year and we get the increased enrolment and everything else, we will true up the actual cost. And, yes, at the end of the day, those dollars will be spent on transportation. That's how it flows over the two years.

Member Batten: Thank you so much, through the chair to the ministry.

Okay. So transportation funding is now provided for both public and private school systems. Are you able to provide a breakdown of the student transport numbers for both public and private? I believe you gave us a number earlier. Sorry, Chair. Actually, by

school board would be even better. I'm also curious on how many additional students have been provided busing in the '23-24 year. Yeah.

Mr. Nicolaides: Yeah. I may not have those numbers broken down in those categories. I'll let the team take a quick peek and see if they can find that, any additional numbers, at least a breakdown between students that are transported between public versus independent operators. We'll see if we have some high-level numbers.

Just generally 335,000 students are transported to and from school daily. It's quite remarkable. It's approximately 440,000 kilometres that are transported daily. And just in terms of routes there are 5,800 school bus routes across the entire province. Average urban ride time is about 22 minutes, and average rural ride time is 38 minutes.

Member Batten: I appreciate it. Apologies to interrupt, through the Chair, just because we're getting down on here. There are a number of questions I'd like to ask. If I can get the answers in writing, that would be amazing.

There has been a chronic shortage of bus drivers post the peak of COVID. So how many additional bus drivers were recruited in this last '23-24 year? I'm also very curious about the MELT or the mandatory entry-level training. We've talked about it a little bit already. As I understand it, that was discontinued; however, it's still listed as mandatory on our Alberta web pages. So if you could confirm that, that would be great. And if we've discontinued it, how are we assuring adequate driver training? How are we possibly preserving the quality of that threshold that was made through MELT; i.e., experience and training required for the high-quality and appropriately skilled drivers for our children? If I can get that in writing, that'd be amazing.

Mr. Nicolaides: Yeah. With three seconds I may not be able to get to all of it.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Minister.

We'll go over to the government side. The independent member has no more questions. Go ahead, Member.

Mr. Lundy: Thank you, Madam Chair. Well, like the member opposite, this is my first time through this process, and six hours sure goes fast when you're having fun.

Seeing how this is my last block, I would like to take this time to ask some questions on an issue that is near and dear to my heart, and that's intergovernmental relations with our ministry. I was fortunate enough to spend a little bit of time within the ministry and in an intergovernmental relations role before I was elected, so certainly happy and interested to get an update, through the chair, from the minister. This is prefaced on page 35 of the of the business plan. "Alberta Education collaborates with Canadian and international jurisdictions and organizations to share research and best practices that keep Alberta students competitive on the global stage." Through the chair my question to the minister is: how does your collaboration process work with the other provinces and with the federal government?

Mr. Nicolaides: Sure. Thank you. Indeed, there are many opportunities in which we collaborate with other counterparts provincially and internationally. I think that I talked a little bit a moment ago about some of the co-operation that we are developing and growing with our counterparts in Germany, which is quite exciting. We're looking to see next stages. I think they had a really good visit when they came a few months back, so hoping to get an

invite in the mail to maybe go to Germany or something. That might be quite interesting. We'll have to see. We do build on those connections.

There are, of course, other organizations and established entities and bodies that we do work very closely with. As an example, nationally there's CMEC, that's the acronym for the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada. The council has regular meetings, and of course we participate in those meetings and oftentimes share best practices and learn about challenges that are occurring in other provinces and look at what solutions they're putting together.

There's also work done with OECD, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement or IEA, which works to administer studies assessing student performance and abilities.

Furthermore, we also participate in a significant amount of international assessments. We've talked a little bit about PISA as well. That's the program for international student assessment. I believe 81 jurisdictions around the world participate in PISA assessments. So it's a pretty decent snapshot about how you stack up against other countries. We mentioned our most recent PISA results; 2022 results show that we're number 1 in reading and number 1 in science in Canada and number 2 in math. When you break Alberta out and stack us up internationally against top-performing jurisdictions, we also do exceptionally well against some of the top-performing international jurisdictions.

We do also participate in international assessments with the pan-Canadian assessment program; trends in international mathematics and science study, or TIMSS; and the progress in international literacy study. We, of course, administer standardized assessments in grades 6, 9, and 12, as well. These are Alberta specific and are designed to measure a student's progress and comprehension and understanding of the Alberta curriculum. There's no international comparison for these, but it's a good benchmark for us to be able to see how our students are contending with the current curriculum. I could provide more detail if it's of interest.

6:05

As well, there have been conversations with, you know, other counterparts, and I do have meetings with my counterparts quite regularly, be it ministers of Education in other provinces to learn about what they're doing and some of the challenges that they're seeing, and that work continues. I hope I was able to answer all of your questions, but I'm sure, Madam Chair, if I missed anything, the member will provide some follow-up.

Mr. Lundy: Thank you, through the chair, for that information, Minister. Certainly, our PISA results are a success story here in Alberta, and I appreciated when you were able to share some of your meeting with the counterparts from Germany.

Certainly, I'm sure all members of this House share in the excitement of our results and take pride in our students and our school system. As we all know, education is, of course, a provincial responsibility, but, through the chair again, I would like to ask quickly about: what supports do you receive from the federal government as a result of some of the working relationships and collaboration?

Mr. Nicolaides: Yeah. Sure. Thank you. I'll provide some time for my team to dig up a little bit more of the information with respect to how we work collaboratively with the federal government in certain areas. Of course, education broadly is an area of exclusive provincial jurisdiction, but there are areas where the federal government does provide some supports, primarily around francophone education, minority rights, and support for Indigenous

– First Nation, Métis, and Inuit – students as well, and other partnerships. We do work as well with some First Nation educational authorities, and we have been talking with them collaboratively on school projects and education opportunities, as an example, just very recently with the Fort Chipewyan First Nation as well. There are some collaborative engagements, of course, but there are some other, more challenging engagements.

We've been talking with the federal government, as have many of our school boards including the entirety of the Alberta School Boards Association, to work with and lobby the federal government to make some changes with respect to the carbon tax. Many of our school boards have written letters to the federal government, and the umbrella organization that represents all school boards in Alberta has also had engagements with the federal government because the carbon tax equates to millions and millions and millions of dollars of cost for our school boards. They are ineligible for refunds, so the federal government's failed environmental policies are simply resulting in funds being siphoned out of our classrooms.

The costs are incredibly significant. We're not talking about \$1 million or \$2 million. Some of our school boards that have hundreds of thousands – you know, I think some of our largest school divisions have around 120,000 to 150,000 students, multiple schools and facilities. Their cumulative carbon tax that they pay is quite astronomical, and, of course, that's set to increase on April 1. So there's some significant concern there, and we do work with the federal government there.

We have as well just signed a new \$21 million bilateral agreement with the federal government for support of some of those initiatives that I mentioned. More specifically, that agreement provides funding for French immersion, French as a second language, and for other francophone minority projects. I wish I had the letter in front of me whereby – I think it was Edmonton public had broken out the total cost that they are forecasting strictly due to carbon taxes, and the figure is quite high.

There's always a bit of that back and forth whereby we do have opportunities to collaborate and secure funding and sign bilateral agreements to secure support for French language, francophone providers or First Nation, Métis, and Inuit educational authorities and other partners. Of course, there's also some head-butting with policies or initiatives that we might disagree with.

I know there are about 10 seconds left. I'm not sure if you'll be able to get another question in, so maybe I'll just use the rest of the time just to thank you for your important question. If I missed any other pieces, perhaps you can remind me of those pieces in the future.

The Chair: Thank you so much.

We'll head over to the Official Opposition.

Ms Chapman: Thank you so much through the chair. This did go by faster. It went by a lot faster than I thought it would.

I did want to go back to the excellent question that our Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview had, but I've got one more topic that we just wanted to go into. We know that Alberta schools are over capacity. We know that teachers are stretched thin and students are still in many cases, as we discussed, recovering from those pandemic-related learning losses. This is a complex time to be a student, staff, or a teacher in Alberta schools.

On top of that the government has undergone the process of developing and implementing a new curriculum. For effective curriculum implementation to happen, teachers need adequate supports to make the changes in their classrooms. And to ensure that students are not disadvantaged during these changes, curriculum changes require funding support. It's critical.

Base funding, line item 3.1 on page 69 of the estimates, includes curriculum development. However, base funding is going down by \$3 million this year compared to last year's spend. Firstly, what is the reason for this decrease? Secondly, what amount of the base funding dollars goes to curriculum implementation?

The Chair: Thank you, Member.

Over to the minister and his team.

Mr. Nicolaides: Yeah. I'll let Jeff chime in on the decrease of the \$3 million on that one line item. There's some detailed technical explanation there, so I'll let Jeff jump in on that one.

Mr. Willan: Sure. Thank you, Minister, through the chair. So 3.1, base instruction, is funded by two sources, which include general provincial revenues through the general revenue fund and education property taxes through the Alberta school foundation fund. The \$2.054 billion is a voted spending that is funded by the general revenue fund. We are not decreasing base instruction spending, as we expect to collect higher property tax revenue totalling \$2.733 billion in '24-25, which is an increase of \$229 million from the prior year. The increase of \$229 million will be directly used to fund base instruction in public and separate school divisions. Education property taxes are used for instruction including teacher salaries, textbooks, and other classroom resources. It will not be used to fund government operations, capital costs like school construction or renovation, or teacher pensions.

Ms Chapman: Thank you.

Then the second question was: what amount of those dollars goes to curriculum implementation?

Mr. Nicolaides: Yeah. I can provide some more details on the curriculum. In the fiscal year '23-24 \$47.2 million was invested to support curriculum implementation across the province. I can break that out a little bit further: \$14.9 million was distributed to school authorities to support professional learning opportunities for teachers to implement the new curriculum; \$17.1 million was distributed to school authorities to purchase learning and teaching resources that are aligned with the new curriculum. That breaks down to about \$45 per student for more than 381,000 students. Education retained the remaining \$15.2 million that was allocated to purchase, license, develop, and authorize learning and teaching resources, enhance the digital platform to house the curriculum. That's at new.learnalberta.ca. If you haven't had an opportunity to poke around there, it's great. There are amazing resources to help you supplement your kids' educational journey and help support that learning at home. That was \$47.2 million in '23-24.

6:15

In Budget '24 there is a decrease there. We're allocating \$34 million this year to support the renewal of the curriculum. The primary reason why there is that decrease is simply because the heavy lifting of the piloting has been completed in previous years. The new K to 6 math, science, English, physical education, and wellness were all being rolled out, so a higher need. We anticipate less piloting in the upcoming years. We are still working on the development of the K to 6 social studies curriculum, and we anticipate and hope piloting to begin in September of '24 for the social studies curriculum and other subjects potentially as well at future stages. So that's why you see that decrease there.

Ms Chapman: Thank you.

How is the government measuring curriculum implementation funding? What measures might you be looking at to see if the

implementation is successful? What contingency plans are in place if it is not successful?

Mr. Nicolaides: Sure. Well, of course, we do work closely with our school authorities and our partners there to see how the funding is being used and whether additional supports and resources are required. Of course, with respect to curriculum and kind of content acquisition and development, we do look at that through the lens of provincial achievement tests and other assessment instruments to ensure that students are understanding the content and moving forward with the content. That, of course, is the primary purpose of our provincial achievement tests, to be able to gauge how students are progressing against the provincially mandated curriculum.

I think it's also just important to note, just coming back to the social studies curriculum as well, that we have been having some really in-depth and extensive feedback and consultation with our partners starting in September or potentially even late August, when that process got under way. We ran an online survey for about a month in the fall, and 12,000 Albertans participated in that and provided their input, which was amazing. The majority of respondents wanted to see a stronger focus on history and strengthening critical thinking skills.

From September of '23 to January we've met with education partners, teachers, multicultural organizations, Indigenous and francophone communities, and other specialists, including curriculum development specialists from our universities, including teachers that were nominated by school authorities that have expertise in politics, civics, geography, economics, history, all of the pieces that you'll usually address in a social studies curriculum, and we will be inviting Albertans very shortly to have a look at the draft curriculum and provide some additional feedback before it is finalized and before piloting begins in September of '24.

Ms Chapman: That answered my next question without having to ask it, so thank you.

I think we can squish in one more question here. I'm still on curriculum. The K to 6 curriculum rollout maybe hasn't gone totally smoothly, so I'm just wanting to check in on what the plan is for the refresh on the grades 7 to 12 curriculum. Do we have timelines? Is that reflected in this budget here, or is that something coming in future years?

Mr. Nicolaides: Yeah. The vast majority of our attention around curriculum development right now is on social studies. It's the only grade in which a new K to 6 curriculum hasn't been developed or implemented yet. Of course, there is the new K to 6 curriculum that has been developed and is being piloted and implemented in science, math, English, physical education, wellness. Our priority right now is working on getting the social studies.

However, work does continue in the background on the 7 to 12. We will be taking a closer look at timelines and implementation windows for the 7 to 12 for other subjects very shortly, and we should be in a position in the coming months to be able to provide Albertans with a little bit more clarity about what the 7 to 12 implementation timeline will look like. Of course, it was a wide range of topics. Again, that 7 to 12 development needs to occur for all grades: physical education, science, math, English, social studies as well, fine arts as well.

We mentioned a little bit earlier that we'll be taking a look at career and life management. As well, of course, it's just high school, a 10 to 12 level of programming, but there has been some commentary that there could be opportunities to further strengthen that. So the short answer is that more will be coming, and some

more timelines and updates will be communicated and made available shortly.

Ms Chapman: It's tough to squish a question into 40 seconds.

Mr. Nicolaides: Sorry.

Ms Chapman: No. It's okay. I was going to say that you can go back to the member, but you're not going to be able to formulate an answer in 30 seconds.

Mr. Nicolaides: I can't remember what the question was.

Ms Chapman: I can't remember the question either.

Ms Wright: I can barely remember.

Ms Chapman: It's been six hours. You know what? It's good. I would like to thank everyone, actually. I'll just take this moment to thank everyone so much for being here today. This is a lot of day. I really appreciate all the work that this whole team puts in here. I really appreciate the opportunity to ask questions in a format like this and just to dig in a little bit on what exactly goes into this budget.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Member.

Over to the government side, please.

Mrs. Petrovic: Thank you, Chair, and through you to the minister. Page 108 of the government's fiscal plan states that "Budget 2024 investments will create 35,000 new and modernized student spaces, with 82 per cent... of these spaces being built in Calgary, Edmonton and their surrounding communities." Chair, if you don't mind, I would just like to thank the minister for giving one of my communities a new school through that project. They've been advocating for this new build, and through the ministry we were able to shed lots of tears seeing this come to fruition for the children of Nanton. I just wanted to take that time and thank your ministry for that.

My question is: what data do you have on the capacity of student spaces in rural areas of the province, and how many rural-based schools are at capacity or on the verge of being at capacity?

Mr. Nicolaides: Sure. Happy to address that. Broadly, with respect to Budget '24 and the 35,000 spaces that we're looking to create, as you mentioned, the vast majority of those will be in the Edmonton and Calgary regions. Again, as we've heard throughout the course of the day, these are some of the communities with the highest demand. We heard in the Assembly earlier today that Airdrie is the fastest growing city in Canada. We're taking a very close look at where those pressure points are, and there's no surprise that those large pressure points are around Calgary and Edmonton.

Specific to rural schools and capacity and being on the verge of capacity, as you mentioned, perhaps I'll just provide a high-level overview. Rural school boards have 481 school facilities cumulatively, and overall there is a total utilization rate of 64 per cent. Of these 481 school facilities, 98 per cent, or 470 school facilities, are under 100 per cent utilization. Rural school boards have 185 facilities that offer high school programming, with an overall utilization of 63 per cent. Of those 185 schools, 98 per cent, or 181, are under 100 per cent utilization. There are 296 schools that offer K to 9 programming, with an overall utilization rate of 65 per cent. Of those 296 schools, 98 per cent of them, or 289 schools, are under 100 per cent utilization.

You mentioned at capacity as well, and you mentioned, I think, on the verge of capacity. Schools that are defined as being at capacity: that is when, of course, their utilization rate exceeds 100 per cent. When we broadly use the term "on the verge of being at capacity," it refers to an environment where the utilization rate is at 95 per cent or higher. Out of the 481 schools that exist in our rural communities, there are 11 schools that have 100 per cent or higher. These would be ones that we would deem to be at capacity, so 11 out of the 481, and 22 out of the 481 are on the verge, are at 95 per cent or higher.

6:25

Mrs. Petrovic: Thank you to the minister, through the chair.

Turning to page 2 of the 2024-2027 capital plan, I see a forecasted investment of nearly \$103 million over three years for the modular classroom program. Can you explain how the modular expansions to schools address the expansion over a more formal renovation or modernization of a school facility?

Mr. Nicolaides: Yeah. I'd be happy to. I think, as we all know and understand, modular schools and the modular program can be very effective in terms of short-term solutions to address significant pressures at schools. I'm sure we're all familiar with modulars, have seen them and understand a little bit about how they operate. I always call it a plug-and-play, you know, type of model, and they can work incredibly effectively.

Yes, you're right. As you've noted, Budget '24 will provide, if approved, \$103 million over the next three years for the modular classroom program. That program will be oriented, as I mentioned, to address the most urgent needs for additional space across the province. In the '24-25 fiscal year approximately \$50 million will be provided to procure up to 70 modular classrooms and support the relocation of up to 12 modular classrooms. I think that this, as we all can understand, is one of the real benefits of modular classrooms, that if demand dips after some time, those modular classrooms can be redeployed and reallocated to other areas. There's, of course, cost associated with that – there's a cost associated with everything – so we have to budget appropriately to be able to accommodate reallocations as well.

The way it works: each year school jurisdictions are asked to submit their requests for modular classroom units, and they provide us with their numbers. They'll usually do this to help ease and address enrolment pressures or also to address programming needs if there's individual or custom programming that's required and they need to make some more space or create some more classroom space so that they can retrofit another space for some other option or program. As well, health and safety: this can occur with some of our more aging infrastructure. If there are health and safety considerations, modulars can be deployed to provide temporary school support and a school environment while those health and safety issues are sorted out and addressed.

Once approved, school jurisdictions appoint a consultant and a design team to get the site ready and make sure that the modulars can be moved into place. Of course, site readiness is another critical component here and oftentimes a significant limiting factor. If there are great issues or just limited physical space requirements, there may be modulars available, but they might not be actually able to put them on the ground.

The annual modular classroom program provides a way to obtain additional spaces more quickly for schools, as we've noted, and can help to address some of those acute and urgent needs. The program generally includes the procurement, installation, replacement, relocation, and even demolition of modular classrooms. It's a very comprehensive program, and we, of course, recognize the significant enrolment pressures and challenges that we're seeing.

Yes, building new schools is a priority, and that's why we are moving ahead with the construction of 19 new school projects across the province. It's the largest number of full construction projects in seven years, but of course those can take a couple of years to three years to be completed, depending on whether it's an elementary school or a high school. Modulars, of course, offer a much more short-term and immediate solution to help address some of those real challenging pressure points.

I realize there are about three seconds left. I'll just thank the committee for indulging me for six hours.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Minister.

I apologize for the interruption, but I must advise the committee that the time allotted for consideration of the ministry's estimates has concluded. I'd like to remind committee members that we're scheduled to meet at 8 a.m. tomorrow to consider the estimates of the Ministry of Service Alberta and Red Tape Reduction.

Thank you, everyone. Have a good night.

[The committee adjourned at 6:30 p.m.]

