

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

Title: **Wednesday, October 20, 1993**

8:00 p.m.

Date: 93/10/20

head: **Committee of Supply**

[Mr. Tannas in the Chair]

MR. CHAIRMAN: I'd ask the committee to come to order, please.

head: **Main Estimates 1993-94**

Education

MR. CHAIRMAN: I'd ask the minister for a few comments prior to entertaining the question.

MR. JONSON: Mr. Chairman, I would like to just comment on two things. First of all, I would like to file with the committee four copies of answers that have been compiled to specific questions which were not answered by myself during our previous consideration of the estimates.

Further, Mr. Chairman, I understand . . .

MR. CHAIRMAN: I wonder if the committee could come to order. The minister is speaking. Thank you.

Minister.

MR. JONSON: Mr. Chairman, I'd also like to respond to a question that the Leader of the Opposition raised on October 14. This was with respect to the teachers' retirement fund. I just wanted to indicate that, first of all, the teachers' retirement fund is funded from general revenue. Because it is an educational function, the same as the school buildings program, it is traditionally listed under Alberta Education, but the provision of teachers . . .

Point of Order Decorum

MR. HENRY: A point of order, Mr. Chairman. I understand the informality, but on this side we're really having a problem hearing the minister. With respect, I really want to hear what he has to say.

Thank you.

MR. CHAIRMAN: That's an admonition, then, to the committee. If you wish to carry on lively discussions, with the Whip's indulgence we'd invite you to retire to the Confederation Room and conduct them there with vigour and leave those who wish to hear the minister's responses to hear same.

Hon. minister.

Debate Continued

MR. JONSON: Mr. Chairman, the expenditure regarding teachers' pensions is, if I can use the comparison again, somewhat parallel to that of school buildings. Certainly adequate pensions for the teachers of the province is an important part of the education system in the broad sense as is expenditure on school buildings. The expenditures that are reflected in the estimates are the result of the ongoing costs of teachers' pensions but also the result of implementing the memorandum of understanding which was reached with respect to funding the unfunded liability of the teachers' plan some months ago.

The other thing that I think has to be indicated here – and I expect that this question may have had some connection with the workbook that was distributed – is that the expenditure on school buildings, the expenditure on teachers' pensions are expenditures that in the global picture of government have to be dealt with. They have to be covered. There are obligations there certainly with respect to the teachers' pensions. Therefore, in the workbook we reported the financial obligations that government will ultimately have to deal with that are related to education. That I think concludes my answer, Mr. Chairman.

MR. CHAIRMAN: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

MR. HENRY: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I appreciate the minister's comments about the TRF and the questions that we did raise. I have a few issues that I would like to raise with the minister. I certainly appreciate the written responses to the questions that were raised in estimates last time. It continues to be my experience with the minister in terms of willingness to provide information. We chatted briefly earlier. It would have been, I guess, ideal to have this before we were in estimates tonight, but the world being what it is and the pressures, I understand and I certainly accept that.

I'd like to raise a few issues that come from some of the discussions we've had as well as some of the things that were raised at the roundtable this weekend. I don't want to pre-empt the discussions that are going to happen this weekend and beyond that, but these are not news to the minister. He was at the roundtables this weekend, and he certainly heard what I heard.

The first issue paramount beyond everything is what priority education has with the government. I recognize the fact that there was a 3.6 percent increase in the overall budget, which is unusual for departments in the current fiscal year. The question that's raised is: if that indicates that this is a higher priority than some other expenditures, is that going to continue over the next three to five years with the deficit reduction plan?

[Mr. Sohal in the Chair]

If we need to reduce expenditures by 20 percent over the next three or four years, the point was made in the roundtable and the point I would like to reiterate is that if we're going to have education as a priority, if we do really believe that, then we must not cut across the board but instead pick and choose. Perhaps Education has less than a 20 percent or a zero percent reduction in expenditure and other departments may need to have more. Rather than cutting across the board, let's set some priorities and let's watch over time. I know there has been a limitation on the grants to school divisions. The grants were frozen in the current year, and I would hope that would not indicate that we're going to start reducing them 20 percent over the next three years.

The other issue we need to look at is: if we're looking at trying to maintain a quality education system, how can we do it better? How can we find efficiencies in the system? There is no question that one of the major issues among people involved in education – board members, et cetera – is the number of school boards that we have in our province and the administration. A question I have for the minister – and again I don't expect him to have these figures at his fingertips. I'd like the minister to provide some examples. If we're talking about amalgamating school boards, of what sorts of efficiencies? Certainly if we're talking about this as an option to save money, what kinds of moneys are we going to be able to save? Perhaps if the minister could provide us with any studies his department has done or some examples, even if there

was school board A, school board B so we don't get into the political field of implying that the minister is trying to force a particular board to amalgamate.

There are two different kinds of amalgamations that have been talked about. One, individuals are questioning the need for a public and a separate system of education in our province. I want to be on record categorically as saying that I believe there is room for two systems in our province. The separate system in our province has provided a good option for parents both in terms of places where Roman Catholic is a majority and we have a Protestant school board and as well where we have a Catholic school board. However, in some rural parts of Alberta outside, I guess, the two cities there may be room to look at amalgamating some school boards and trying to provide some savings. This isn't easy politically, and I recognize that, but we need to look at what can be done.

I was talking with the chairperson – I believe she's still chairperson – of the Lacombe board this weekend. I think I've mentioned in this House before that I was a resident of that community for a long time. There can be a case made that says that perhaps there could be a regional board with Red Deer, Innisfail, Lacombe, et cetera. That was one example that was presented to me. I believe strongly that the individuals in those communities need to make those decisions. We don't want to create big superboards where boards are totally out of touch with what's happening in the local area. Could the minister provide any studies or examples that his department has examined to see if there are savings?

The reason I raise that is because while I believe the move the minister has made with regard to amalgamating nonoperating school boards is a good move, I wonder whether this is sometimes being perceived as a panacea that really isn't there. Certainly if you've got two school jurisdictions with 2,000 students each and you amalgamate those, then you're going to need one superintendent and one superintendent's secretary, but by virtue of doing that, you're not going to be able to automatically reduce the number of teachers. That's a separate issue. You still have the same number of schools operating. You still have the same busing costs, especially if we're talking in rural Alberta. I know that's a significant cost. So I would like to get a handle on exactly what kind of dollars we can save, and I'd ask the minister to use the resources in his department to see if he can find some examples. If we went from the number of boards we have now to half, how much in fact would we save?

8:10

Another major issue that is in the budget that I would like to address is the fiscal equity issue. That's a major issue. I know the government caucus has been discussing it. It's an issue that has been around for awhile and got more acute in '85-86. It's become worse and worse in terms of urgency, and you need to do something about it. I know the minister is on record as saying that he wants to do something and he intends to do something about that issue. I would ask him when he's thinking about that to ensure that when we're bringing equity, we're not taking away local autonomy from school boards, because I think being in touch with the local school board is important.

I also would like the minister to provide us with some more information about the \$30 million that was taken out of lotteries and as well the equity grant in the budget this year. I'd like to have a breakdown for this current fiscal year and the previous fiscal year of the distribution of the equity grant. The last numbers that I've come across and been able to see have been '90-91. So I'm asking for '92-93, '93-94 figures in terms of the

equity grant and a top up from the lottery fund. How was that distributed? Is there a schedule as to where that went?

We're dealing with the current year estimates, but if I can refer to Meeting the Challenge, a couple of issues, one being the increase in the government's contribution to the teachers' retirement fund. I've been able to look at some figures in terms of percentage increases with regard to the employee/employer share. I know that the agreement the government reached with the teachers required that that share would increase, that there would be a three-year phase-in period, et cetera. I'm wondering if the minister could provide us with a schedule – and I recognize there are going to be some estimates there – of exactly how much more next year and how much more the year after and I believe the year after until we top up, so that we know the extra contribution over and above the ongoing. I'd like to be able to have that figure as well.

Another issue that I raised in earlier estimates and I had reinforced this weekend is the issue of testing. I'm more and more convinced, Mr. Minister, that the issue of measurement within the department has to be rationalized. I question whether we are measuring some things as an academic exercise rather than a way to collect information to improve our system and improve services to students. One suggestion was why we are testing in grade 9, getting the results back to the school in the fall of that year, and those students have actually gone on to high school. How can that particular school use the individual results to address if students are falling behind or if students are not meeting expectations? I know the minister has these suggestions, and I'd ask him to really look at them with regard to the next school year. Can we rationalize that system more? I would ask the minister again to look at that.

The minister knows well that there has been lots of coverage in the media on ECS and on special needs. I want to focus and just ask the minister to really re-examine the issue of the PUG grants, the per unit grants. These are the grants to school divisions for providing services to those students I believe two and a half to five and a half years old with special needs. They range up to the amount of \$20,000. The weakness in the system as I understand it is that if we stop providing services to children who are two and a half, which is an early intervention, a Head Start style program, the question for the school division is: if the provincial funding ends at five and a half years, can the school division maintain that? I met with a couple of school divisions a couple of nights ago, and one of the challenges I put to them is that I know that there are some school divisions who deliberately choose not to access the full grant but simply design the program for the two-and-a-half- to five-and-a-half-year-old child with special needs and try to limit the resources to what is sustainable over the long period. So if a child is going to need ongoing support right through the system, they're looking for other resources as well as the PUG grants. I applaud the school boards that have done that. Certainly there are times where I'm sure we need to spend the full \$20,000 in early intervention and maybe don't need to spend it in the long term, but let's not throw the baby out with the bathwater, to use an old adage.

It is a good program. The PUG grants are needed. As an educator the minister would know better than anybody in this House that if we can get in there early, we can make a difference in terms of enhancing that child's development. Then we have a better chance of integrating that child into the regular school system. So in re-examining the PUG grants and all the controversy around the PUG grants and the issue of the ECS, please don't throw the baby out with the bathwater. That program's needed. We need to do intervention.

With regard to early intervention – and I'm moving on to another subject. One of the things that happens in government – and I guess I'm more aware of it now, after having spent some time in the Legislature, than I was – is that issues aren't always clear-cut defined between departments. An issue affecting a child may have a health component, may have an education component, and we've heard from several members even a justice component and a social services, child welfare component. I believe that early intervention programs for children are falling through the cracks in this province. Whether we start talking about Head Start style programs or hot lunch programs in the inner city, everybody seems to say, "We need to do something," and nobody seems to say, "It's my responsibility." I suggest to the minister that it's everybody's responsibility. We need to be creative in here. I'd ask the minister if somebody needs to provide some leadership.

This was mentioned several times at the roundtable: whether we had one minister who was responsible for services for children or whether we had some other informal model. I would ask the minister to take the initiative and to sit down with his colleagues and not just his colleagues on the front bench, because as we've seen recently in the city of Edmonton, the municipal government has voted money for hot lunch programs. We need to somehow rationalize that and make sure that we aren't having communities of children falling through the cracks. The evidence is clear – and I hope the minister agrees with this – that if we can have an effective early intervention strategy with children and be able to give them a fighting chance, an equal opportunity when they get into the education system, then that's money well spent in the long term. Again, somebody needs to stand up and be able to call upon the ministries of Health and social services and the cities of Edmonton and Calgary and other municipalities and local school jurisdictions and say, "Let's find a way to avoid the turf wars as to who owns it, number one" – and in this particular issue who doesn't own it? – "so that we can find a way to be more creative." Some communities have done that.

That brings me to my next issue. I've heard increasingly – and I've had several conversations with a group in St. Albert about more community involvement at the school level. I know that the community schools initiative has been, I believe, downgraded over the last number of years. I believe that when we look at places like the G.H. Dawe centre in Red Deer-North, not only do we see a physical sharing – this addresses the economies issue – but we have a public library that's part of a facility that's also the separate school and the public school all together.

MR. DAY: Wonderful.

MR. HENRY: Yeah. I hear the hon. Minister of Labour saying that it's wonderful. It was named after a wonderful person, whom I know the minister knows well. It's a good program. We need some more of that happening. We need more initiatives and more leadership in terms of going to communities and saying, "We're not just going to build you a school," when you can sit down with the health department and with the city or the MD or the county and say, "Now, how can we build a facility or how can we transform an existing facility?"

8:20

Also, a community school, as Brian Staples has said for years and years and years, is much more than just buildings; it's a concept. I would ask the minister to re-examine the government's level of support for community schools, because I believe the concept of community schools and pushing that concept – and it was a very cost-effective and innovative program – leads to kinds

of efficiencies. It leads to groups working together, and it leads to more interaction and more co-operation. That's where we're going to get the kinds of community initiatives where in Slave Lake the community will stand up and say: we not only need a hospital, but we also need this, and how can we find ways to make this work under one roof or to have some efficiencies? The community schools concept does encourage that. I know that there are some good community schools. I think there needs to be more. That's one way to encourage parent involvement there.

I will look over the answers that the minister has given to me at this point. I'll take my seat, and again if the minister would like to respond now or later or later in writing, that would be fine.

Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

MR. ACTING DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: The hon. Member for Little Bow.

MR. McFARLAND: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I don't have too many questions, more in the line of comments, Mr. Minister, and they have to do with school buildings. I guess the comment I would have to make is about doing more with what we have rather than building new edifices. I know that in many of the rural areas regeneration is a viable alternative to new construction, and I think one of the suggestions you might want to work on with your counterparts is to relax some of the regulations that are making renovation costs prohibitive. Far too often we come back with the excuse that it's cheaper to rebuild than it is to renovate, and we're imposing codes on school jurisdictions that are in my mind really quite unreasonable. They have the best of intentions with safety, but the cost of doing the same is awfully prohibitive for the smaller school jurisdictions.

I think the Member for Edmonton-Centre had a good point on board amalgamation, but I would like to see it encouraged through your department on a voluntary basis. I think there's a misconception that boards are costing a lot of money. I know from past experience that many of the boards that represent school jurisdictions in fact end up costing less than half of 1 percent of the total school budget. It's the administration of the schools and the systems themselves which are costing us quite dearly. So with your assistance, Mr. Minister, I'm sure they could be encouraged to look at eliminating some of the duplication in that area.

One of the most common questions I have is that in many parts of rural Alberta, where the populations are much more sparse than they are in the larger urban areas, we've got three different school systems. We have public, separate, and private. Again, I think Edmonton-Centre talked a little bit about it. It puts people against each other where you've got communities where you've got families who for one reason or another choose to support the private, the separate, or the public school, and really their numbers can't justify the existence of either one. I think if they could work together co-operatively to offer the same two or three types of education under a common roof so that we add the efficiency of the students in the schools themselves, they could be encouraged to do that.

Further to that, Mr. Minister, I think those same three types of school systems could be encouraged to utilize a common busing system. I know of areas that have duplicate and triplicate busing systems, which, of course, are receiving transportation grants from the Alberta government. In fairness to the local taxpayer I do believe that they could operate an efficient system that delivered children to two or three different systems off one busing system.

I would like to compliment you, Mr. Minister, on the recent announcement down at Milo, where they are going to try a compressed school week. They took the lead from the school in

Airdrie and went and worked with the folks up there, and they're going to implement a compressed school week the first part of 1994. I think it's a tribute to a local community who wants to preserve a small school that they've taken the initiative to take the advice and the guidance from another school jurisdiction. They've got the teachers onside. They've got the bus drivers onside. They've got the staff onside. They passed the last hurdle and got the local county board of education to agree with their project, and thanks to you, I believe it'll work.

A personal thing that I think comes up quite often, Mr. Minister, is physical education. This gets into the area of programs. I've had the comment passed on – and I'd like to pass it on to you – that you might consider incorporating phys ed 10 and 20 as a compulsory component of the core curriculum. It seems that a lot of young students today have the opportunity to run downtown; they've got lots of energy to do that. Maybe they could redirect their energies into phys ed and take care of themselves while they're doing it.

I'll wrap it up with two examples that I'm quite proud of in the area that I represent, being Little Bow. We have one very small rural school in a community that lost a community hall a number of years ago. Rather than rebuild, they asked the local board of education if they could lease a portion of the school after normal school hours, and they did that through the local recreation board. To the benefit of everyone they now have a facility that they didn't have to lay out capital dollars for. They're able to rent it at a very reasonable rate from the county. If it isn't a financial benefit, it's been a social benefit to the community because it's brought people into a school that normally don't set foot inside a school once their child's completed grade 12 or grade 6 or whatever the school handles. It makes them aware of the function the schools are serving in the community.

On the other hand, in one of the five major centres, the community in question again had demolished an old, old community hall and couldn't quite raise enough money to build a brand-new community centre. They went into a joint project with one of the local service clubs, the county board of education, and the town and put up a very fine gymnasium through a joint effort. This building, that they call the Cultural Recreational Centre, serves a very good purpose throughout the community because it's large enough that it can accommodate groups of up to 450 people. It has the potential to handle provincial sporting events and has a very well laid out facility itself for the school. It again has eliminated the need for government money for another capital project in a town that probably in 10 years' time couldn't have afforded the operating costs.

I guess I didn't have too many questions for you, Mr. Minister, just a couple of compliments and a few suggestions where people in the area of Little Bow like what they've seen and some of the areas they'd like to see you maybe give a little extra push on some of the local boards and various authorities.

Thank you.

MR. ACTING DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: The hon. Member for St. Albert.

MR. BRACKO: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I congratulate the minister on his appointment, and I look forward to working with him for the benefit of all Albertans. Our acquaintance goes back to 1968, when I campaigned for him for president of the ATA. He was greatly committed to education and very open to improving the system at that time, and I strongly believe he still has the same dedication.

I've visited most of the residents in St. Albert and listened to their concerns and frustrations. As the Education minister knows, education is very important to our constituents. Today I will share their concerns and questions and await answers to take back.

First of all, equity funding is a great concern to many school districts in Alberta. In St. Albert we lost close to \$20 million from this government since 1985. Ten years and the commitment of four ministers has not changed the situation, although each minister made a commitment to fairness and equity funding. During the election the Premier promised equity funding would be in place in three months. My first question, Mr. Minister: when will equity funding be in place? Can you give us a time line? I know the question's been asked before.

8:30

Secondly, will the minister release the figures for the millions of dollars lost by deprived school districts over the last 10 years, money that should have gone to these districts?

Again, my students that graduated from grade 12 last June will be paying off this government's pension debt until they're 84 years old. By adding the additional close to \$40 million we'll be in debt by 1997 before we balance our budget, it would take another hundred years to pay this off. This is one of the great legacies of debt we leave our children and our children's children and so forth. My students and constituents would like to know why you and your government allowed this to happen.

Next, I would like to know the financial status of our school building. Will the minister provide us with a list of schools that have mortgages on them, and will the minister provide the number of years of mortgage on each school? Will the minister provide the amount of interest paid on the mortgages of schools each year?

One must look to the future. How many new schools will be needed in the next five years? How many existing schools will not be needed, and what will happen to them? There was a seven-year-old school used to store grain in central Alberta because it wasn't needed for educational purposes. My question is: how much other waste like this exists in Alberta, and what is this minister doing to make sure a waste of tax dollars like this does not happen again?

At one extreme, schools have been built that are Taj Mahals, very expensive. Mr. Minister, in central Alberta there's a private school made up of portables at a fraction of the cost. My question is: what criteria are used to determine the price of a school, and what innovative and creative ideas will your department implement to cut costs in the construction of new schools? Further, in St. Albert we have a joint-use agreement between the city school districts and the community to fully utilize the schools and community facilities. We believe these facilities should be used 24 hours a day where possible. Our agreement was the model used across Canada. My question is: how many school districts have such agreements, and what is your department doing to ensure that there will be more such agreements to avoid duplication and the waste of tax dollars?

School grants. At one time the government provided 92 percent of educational money, with the municipalities providing 8 percent. Now the breakdown is close to 60-40 in grant funding. This government has used the policy of divide and rule. They pit urban against rural and do it very successfully for political expediency. This government tried the same process with trustees and educators, which worked for a short time, but they soon saw through this and started to work together. By decreasing grants, this government continues this policy of causing conflicts between trustees and educators, as has occurred in the province. This has been the cause of strikes in Alberta. If proper funding had been

in place, the conflicts would have been avoided. This government has served to divide Albertans neighbour against neighbour. What is the minister going to do to improve this shameful situation?

About a month ago former Premier Lougheed was on television saying Albertans should be learning Japanese. I wonder where he has been for the last 22 years. As of this year, there are 12,000 Australians studying in Japan. They learn their culture and way of thinking, way of doing business. Then they go home and take a business degree, join up with companies, and go back to do business with Japan. Alberta and Canadians have lost out in this process. We have 300 Canadians studying in Japan, and that's mainly on the cultural aspect. We've lost valuable contracts in Japan because of this. My question is: why is this government not in tune with the realities of the marketplace? The former Premier finally caught up with the rest of the world. Now we need to have students studying the languages of the industrially developing nations of Hong Kong, Singapore, Malaysia, Taiwan, South Korea, China, India, Mexico, and our South American countries. Question: how does this minister plan to stay in tune with the demands of the marketplace and provide programs which will allow Albertans to compete in the world market instead of being 10 years behind?

Again, I believe politicians should be role models for our students and for our children. I enjoy bringing students to the Assembly here, and of course I always give them an assignment to do when they're here. One question I ask in the assignment is to listen to the question period and see how many questions are answered. In one question period there was one question answered. I asked the students for their impressions on the question period, and they said it was very negative. They said, "They avoid questions; they don't answer." They were not impressed, and they really came away with a negative experience. So, Mr. Minister, I believe it's important that we look in the mirror, because everything our government does is looked upon by our students and our children.

We look at the 57 patronage positions after the Premier committed to clean up his act. This, of course, has a direct implication for our students. They follow the role models set by politicians. Politicians can look after their friends, and it's important to look after yourself and your friends first. I guess my question is, and this is to the total government: what is the government going to do to clean up its act and bring honesty and integrity back to government?

Lastly, the religious studies program in the schools is very important. I'll use the aboriginal medicine wheel to explain. The wheel says that the spiritual and physical should be in proportion, as well as the intellectual and emotional. When you take out the spiritual or religious education in schools, this means we're teaching to 75 percent of the students. Many Albertans value religious education in the schools and want this protected, Mr. Minister. What is your commitment to religious education in the Catholic school districts in our province?

Thank you.

MR. JONSON: Mr. Chairman, I'd like to take this opportunity to reply to some of the questions that have been put forward. I thank the hon. members for their representations. I will get back to these later or respond to the hon. Member for St. Albert in writing.

There are two or three things I would like to start off with and comment upon. First of all, we often hear that there was a time in Alberta's history when things were good and ideal and the province paid 92 percent or 85 percent, depending on which year you're quoting, out of general revenue. That, Mr. Chairman, was simply not true, at least not in terms of the history I can check

back on. What did occur – let us take 1971. At that particular point in time the province contributed, as I recall, about 55 percent of the cost of education out of general revenue. In addition, there was the school foundation program which levied a mill rate against farm, residential, and noncommercial property, but it was local taxation that made up the difference between 55 percent and, let's say, 85 percent. A decision was made about 1974, a time when revenue was rolling into the province – refer to the workbook, by the way; there's a good graph that explains that – to take the school foundation program levy off residential and farm property. Consequently, that was vacated in terms of local taxation room. So just keep that in mind: it was brought into the school foundation program and redistributed. But as I said, never in recent history has the province provided that proportion out of general revenue. In fact, the proportion being provided today out of general revenue for education costs is very close to what it was in 1971.

8:40

The second point I want to make, Mr. Chairman, is that if you trace the rate of increase in provincial funding of education over the past number of years, it has been slightly – I'll agree slightly – ahead of inflation. I think that should be kept in mind too, just another figure so we don't always get the perspective on this matter that there have been, quote, cuts in education funding. There have not been cuts in education funding to this point in time; that's for certain. If we went back to 1988-89 and traced the increase in education funding from the province up to the present, we would be looking at an increase of about one half billion dollars, so it certainly hasn't been declining during that period of time.

The Member for St. Albert, Mr. Chairman, I think did raise a very good question or observation, though, and that was in terms of our participation in international education and partnerships. First of all, I think one of the important initiatives we have going in Alberta Education is to encourage involvement between the business community and the school system, be it K to 12 or concentrating on high school or postsecondary. I do think and would respectfully say in this Assembly that in terms of our partnerships, there needs to be more effort on the side of the educational community but also on the side of business and industry in terms of joining together to have these overseas opportunities the member was alluding to. We have perhaps for too long not really talked with each other and worked on that particular kind of initiative between the educational system and business and industry. In countries where they are expanding very rapidly their participation in students overseas and so forth, I am sure there's that joint arrangement between business and industry in the educational system.

I'll just leave that particular list for now. I'd like to go back to the questions and observations made by the Member for Edmonton-Centre. Mr. Chairman, certainly I as Minister of Education, and given my background, quite frankly place a very high priority on education, and I will continue to do so. I will continue to represent the education system and to get all the money possible for education budgets of the future. But as I think everybody in this Assembly appreciates, there is a major challenge facing the government in terms of balancing the budget, and decisions made are decisions ultimately of the overall government.

When we're looking at education and the debate, we really need to have the will, Mr. Chairman, to look at the education system. We cannot always add on to it. I'd just like to make three or four observations. First of all, we have in the province right now some 659 junior and senior high school courses. We have 350 courses

that are currently being offered to less than 15,000 students. If we were to sit down and look at our senior high school provincial offering of courses of about 250, I think we probably would find that about 70 out of those 250 are enrolled in by the vast, vast majority of students and are sort of core courses. I'm not just talking here about academic courses; I'm talking about those that serve the general student as well. Those are some things I think we have to look at very carefully in terms of the discussions we're holding currently on the future of education in the province.

Another item I'd like to refer to is an example of - I'm not picking on the skiing industry here, but I would just like to pick on a way we've got to start looking at this whole area of education funding. I've received letters from a wide variety of people about the priorities that they think there should be in education funding, and I have received a communication from people who operate a ski lodge. Of course, quite rightly, they've offered downhill skiing lessons to students, and they have tours and so forth. That is certainly ideal if you can access that kind of a program. On the other hand, just within the realm of skiing, cross-country skiing is much, much cheaper. It can be done in the school yard or on the adjoining golf course or whatever. It's certainly equal to downhill skiing in terms of fitness and preparation for adult life. So just within that particular realm of an extension of the physical education program, we could set some priorities. I just offer those kinds of observations, Mr. Chairman.

One final one, though, in the area of overall priorities and the need to really have a close and candid look at where we're going in education. I can't help but observe, Mr. Chairman, that we do have in the province an education system which operates at about \$4,400 per student per year. That is about 20 percent below the average in the province. The system carries on its busing. It provides core or, if I could use the term because I like to use it, basic and optional courses. It achieves well in terms of those instruments of evaluation that we have in place in the province. Therefore, you can't help but raise the question that maybe we should be looking at the way other jurisdictions do things, just what scope of programs is really necessary and approach this whole task of future education funding from that type of perspective.

The Member for Edmonton-Centre talked about amalgamating school boards, and I think, Mr. Chairman, I appreciate his remarks. It's difficult to give him the specific kind of dollar information, because we have to decide on is it going to be school boards below 2,000 that we amalgamate; is it going to be those below 10,000? I don't think there's merit in going that high, quite frankly, but I think what we have to look at here is, first of all . . .

Point of Order Decorum

MRS. ABDURAHMAN: Mr. Chairman, on a point of order. I certainly would appreciate being able to hear the minister speak.

MR. TRYNCHY: Well, listen.

MRS. ABDURAHMAN: I'm trying to listen.

MR. ACTING DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: Quiet please, in that corner there.

The Minister of Education, please.

Debate Continued

MR. JONSON: First of all, Mr. Chairman, I think we can find some educational improvements through amalgamation and through co-operation. Certainly programs can be combined and

made more financially viable. Certainly transportation systems could be looked at, but certainly the educational improvement, the possibility of that, should have first priority. Yes, there are some very real financial savings involved. I don't have a quantity or an amount to report to you this evening, because we'd have to agree across the way as to what levels we were going to take to come up with the exact figures. It's not a savings which will solve our overall fiscal problem, but it will certainly contribute to it.

Still under the topic of amalgamation. With respect to the two systems, quite frankly, and I think only correctly, Mr. Chairman, we are not contemplating amalgamating the public and separate school systems, certainly not at the provincial level. I think there are many opportunities there for sharing between the two systems, and that is going on in some parts of the province, and there is the possibility of a voluntary, more formal arrangement among separate and public school systems.

I'd like to also, under this topic of amalgamation, emphasize that from my perspective at least, I think there is a great deal that can be done there for the benefit of the education system, but I'm not a subscriber to extra-large being better. I think there is an optimum level, depending upon the geography, the distances, the part of the province that we're talking about. We've got to take those things into consideration, but I do not, from my own point of view at least, Mr. Chairman, contemplate massive regional school jurisdictions at all. I think somewhere in there, depending upon, as I said, the part of the province that we're talking about, there's a lot of progress that can be made.

8:50

With respect to fiscal equity, one question was when, and I have to say that I hope soon. I think everyone in this Assembly knows that the best possible time for that decision to be made would be ideally in this calendar year but certainly before the 1994-95 fiscal year begins.

With respect to the equity grant, the formula used for the payout of the equity grant is based upon assessment per student, distance, and sparsity. We certainly would look into some additional statistics if they can be provided in that particular area.

With respect to evaluation and testing, I appreciate the remarks of the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre, but I would like to add to the comments that he makes, which I take as very, very constructive. While there were reservations and suggestions for improvement at the Calgary roundtable about how we might improve what we're doing in that area, I think we should also emphasize that there was, as I read it, very great support for the education system being accountable and that the education system have adequate information provided to it and that there be a type of auditing of our overall education operation to make sure that we're getting results and that money is applied most effectively.

The comments with respect to ECS and the program unit grants. I'd just like to make one general comment there, and that is that while there is always, I guess, more that can be done, our program unit grant program compares quite favourably in Canada with respect to trying to provide for the very special needs of some of our potential students from ages two and a half to five and a half. In his remarks the member also initiates what I think is an important philosophical debate, and that is the degree to which the education system should be responsible for developing social skills, providing life experiences, and so on, at an early age. That is something we could talk about for some time.

I certainly agree with the hon. member with respect to the need for co-ordination among departments, because after all we've taken the initiative in that regard with our pilot projects. More needs to be done. The observations that were made there are well received.

With respect to community involvement, one thing that I'm certainly looking to the roundtables for advice on is the whole area of school councils. We currently have in the School Act provision for school councils. Should we be doing something more definitive in terms of listing duties or responsibilities that could be delegated to a school council? That's a matter that I think we need to give serious consideration to.

Also, I agree that community involvement in schools is a very, very positive thing. Usually there's a relationship between the involvement of the community and the increase in the regard they have for their school and for the overall education system. Specifically, though, with respect to community schools, I think we can learn from the community school model, but today, Mr. Chairman, there are many schools which are community schools without that additional funding. The concept has been a contribution to education in the province. I think we've learned from it, but when we have to set priorities down the road with respect to funding, I think we have to know what the relative priority is of that particular program.

I thank the Member for Little Bow for his observations. Let's see here; I've lost you, Member for Little Bow.

MRS. ABDURAHMAN: He's not here.

MR. JONSON: He's not here? In any case, I take under advisement certainly the points that he made with respect to overregulation and too detailed requirements in terms of building codes. We have to, of course, provide for the health and safety of students, but if there's something there that is overly detailed and onerous, it's something I would ask for examples of, and I would take it up with the hon. Minister of Labour.

The references to busing to phys ed 20 and 30 I take note of. I would however, with respect to physical education 20 and 30, just make this comment. That is that I, too, Mr. Chairman, think physical education is a very important component of our education system from the point of view of giving students the knowledge and some experience in the way to stay fit and the way to stay healthy and the way to plan for adult life and for taking part in recreation. In terms of being able to have enough phys ed to keep a person fit every day, I think that's an individual responsibility, quite frankly, both when they're in school and after they graduate from school. If they do or don't, they have to take responsibility for that. I think we can only provide the background and initial skills in the school program, and then there has to be much more taking of individual responsibility beyond that.

Getting back now to the Member for St. Albert. Again, the point was made about equity. I note that. I don't accept at all the statements made about school jurisdictions having lost money. They haven't had the level of funding that they would like to have, certainly, and should be able to have under a more equity-based funding system. But these types of statements, you know, that X millions of dollars or X billions of dollars have been lost because they were deprived of it – we've operated our funding system in the province. Everybody knows about it. The money has been allocated accordingly. Certainly we have a challenge, too, in this whole area of equity for the future.

I know there are some specific questions – I recognize that – from the Member for St. Albert, but rather than take up more time, I would like to talk just briefly about the pension situation. In terms of the formulas and the nature of the memorandum of understanding, this was discussed in the Assembly, and I think *Hansard* could be checked, or we could certainly provide information on the nature of that agreement that took place with the Alberta Teachers' Association.

Philadelphia 12, Toronto 9 at the bottom of the sixth: a brief sports report.

Certainly the government had some responsibility with respect to that, as we acknowledged in the changes that have been made, and that was also with respect to a number of other pension plans as well. As I recall, over the years, there are two sides to that particular question. Neither government nor the Alberta Teachers' Association for many years really recognized the implications of our aging population and our aging school population. At the meetings that I was part of during those years, there was more a focus on improvements to the pension plan rather than on dealing with the unfunded liability. So I maintain that there was a shared responsibility there, and I think that is reflected in the agreement that was arrived at with respect to addressing the unfunded liability.

Finally, just a personal comment, Mr. Chairman. I appreciate that the Member for St. Albert knew me many years ago and was part of my ATA experience there. But it must have been one of the longest campaigns in history, because I was elected in 1976, and if the campaign started in '68, it was a tough job.

Thank you.

MR. ACTING DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: The hon. Member for Clover Bar-Fort Saskatchewan.

MRS. ABDURAHMAN: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. To the hon. minister. I would like to address my comments specifically to the Financial Assistance to Schools, 2.1. We have heard discussion this evening about corporate pooling. In the constituency I represent, there is much concern in relationship to timing of changes within our whole taxation system. We know that we have to ensure that we have a tax-competitive regime in place in the province of Alberta to ensure that we have ongoing growth and future investment. We acknowledge that, but how we're going to address it is the key, and it has to be done in a positive way with the least negative impact. I would welcome hearing from the minister: if indeed we are looking at corporate pooling and equity funding, how is that going to relate in time line to the Tax Reform Commission that is now in place looking at our competitiveness from a global marketplace?

9:00

Acknowledging that one of the areas that is being seriously looked at is the machine and equipment assessment and acknowledging that if something does replace it or if indeed the M and E is removed, we're looking at over \$160 million. Of that portion, we're looking at \$98 million that finds its way into education funding. So the concern has to be – and it's not just for Clover Bar-Fort Saskatchewan. It actually affects every Albertan with regard to education. So I have to put to the minister: has this government seriously addressed, if indeed machinery and equipment assessment is removed without knowing how it's going to be replaced, how we are going to find the \$98 million for education funding? I would also suggest that it may not be timely to look at equity funding prior to the Tax Reform Commission handing down their recommendations unless the minister knows something that I don't know, that there's already been a decision made on machinery and equipment. If there has been a decision made on machinery and equipment already, I certainly would welcome hearing how we're going to achieve equity funding and find the \$98 million that presently is within education funding.

Also with regard to funding of education, I think the key has to be partnerships, and it has to be partnerships, as you acknowledged, Mr. Minister, not only with the community but also with

industry and business. I know from past experience in my municipal days that industry, particularly heavy industry, made overtures directly to our educational institutions to work in partnership to ensure that our educational system indeed produced the work force requirements. I think we've a long way still to go in that area. I haven't seen significant development in those partnerships, so I'm reassured when I hear the minister acknowledging here this evening that that has to happen. The key to our future definitely is the education of our future generations and our present generations. I'm sure it's been said by many that our debt to a future generation is the best educational system we can possibly give them, and hopefully that that will be passed on from generation to generation.

The other key to education is for living, but not only for living. It is necessary in today's environment that they're educated to make a living and also to ensure we keep that entrepreneurial spirit that served Alberta so well in the past. We've got to revitalize that, because I fear that over the past decade we've seen that entrepreneurial spirit being stifled by government intervention in the marketplace, where it never belonged in the first place. I would find that it would be refreshing to see us stimulate the entrepreneurial spirit back in our educational system through those partnerships.

I'd also like to follow up on a couple of points that my colleague from Edmonton-Centre touched on. I'm going back to my school days, and one of the things that has puzzled me to this day since I've come to live in Canada and Alberta is the fact that we don't have a hot meal program in a province like Alberta. I was brought up on a farm in Scotland, and I certainly didn't have to travel in minus 40 degree weather. It didn't take me an hour or an hour and a half to get to my school. Certainly when I lived in Breton, Alberta, and even in Fort Saskatchewan when I look at the busing areas, or if you go to High Level or any other rural area and look at the time that those young children and junior and senior high school students are away from their home - and they're carrying a lunch box. I don't think we're serving our young Albertans in a positive way, and I say that from two perspectives. I think to believe that a child should go from breakfast to supertime on a cold meal or on a bowl of soup from a thermos is not serving them well.

The other aspect is from a public health standard. I still can't accept that this is going on, that they go to school with their lunch boxes and their sandwich sits in the lunch box, not refrigerated, for three to four hours. I find that not acceptable, and I would encourage us to seriously look at a lunch program for our children. You may find it amusing, but I can assure you that in other parts of the world it has certainly served children well in a positive way. I'd also suggest to you that if you're looking at health care costs, we all know that lack of refrigeration of sandwiches is certainly not something that you would encourage for three or four or five hours.

I believe, Mr. Minister, that those are the main points I wanted to make at this point in time. I look forward to hearing with regards to how we're going to address funding in the future. The one area I didn't touch on: I'm still not quite sure where the power and pipeline assessment fits in, because I've been hearing two things, one that it's not up for review under the Tax Reform Commission. If it's not being reviewed under the Tax Reform Commission, what indeed is going to happen to the assessment that comes from that area? Is that also something that's going to be removed? That would also have a significant impact on the educational system.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, to the minister.

MR. JONSON: If I could just respond, I'll try and be quick, Mr. Chairman. First of all, there was one area that I wanted to comment upon with respect to a previous question with respect to school buildings and the reference to *taj mahals*. Keep in mind that in terms of school building funding the Alberta Education school buildings branch approves a level of provincial support on a certain number of dollars per square metre and, depending upon the type of school, certain other features. That is the base of support, and although I agree this could be debated, generally speaking that base of support will build a building to serve that function. Certainly site preparation and land costs are a local responsibility. I would just suggest to members that the difference between that sort of basic level of funding and a great increase is a matter of local decision-making in terms of the nature of the building that ultimately results. We have some places in the province where, at least in the past, school boards have chosen to go 30 or 40 percent in some cases above the supported costs of the provincial government.

9:10

With respect to the Member for Clover Bar-Fort Saskatchewan, actually, Mr. Chairman, I hadn't heard corporate pooling mentioned yet tonight until it was brought up. We were talking about the need to provide equity funding in education. Very quickly there, certainly the matter of an equity funding program is under active consideration, and I indicated earlier that in my opinion we should have a decision on this for the 1994-95 fiscal year.

With respect to the references to local autonomy, which I think was sort of implied in these remarks and also in the remarks from Edmonton-Centre, I'd just like to ask this question. I've asked it at other meetings; it's not something new. If it just happened that the assessment in this province was equally distributed in a natural way among the school boards of the province, would they be any less autonomous? Would they be any less autonomous? While I can very much appreciate the value of, in many areas of decision-making, local autonomy being the best way to do it, I don't think we should mix local autonomy in with the equity debate.

MRS. ABDURAHMAN: I didn't talk about it at all.

MR. JONSON: No, I'm going back to Edmonton-Centre here.

With respect to machinery and equipment and the references to power and pipeline, I agree. I recognize that if these things, machinery and equipment, were eliminated, there would be a need, as far as the education system is concerned, to find additional dollars, but I'm not going to comment further on that particular matter because it is a matter for the Financial Review Commission. Nothing has been decided, but if anything is to be commented upon in that regard at this stage, I think that's really the role of the Provincial Treasurer in terms of its terms of reference and how those might work out.

Those were the items that I wanted to comment upon. We could, Mr. Chairman, reflect quite a bit on school lunches. I certainly think that it's great if communities can provide those, particularly in our underprivileged areas, but we could have quite a discussion about whether the schools on a general basis across the province should be providing meals versus having lunches. We have a good education system right now, and it hasn't risen or fallen on having hot lunches.

MR. ZARIWNY: Mr. Chairman, I'd like to revisit an area with the minister that I discussed back on September 23, and that's English as a Second Language and the funding that hasn't been devoted to it. At that time I had mentioned that there was a

teacher from Calgary who had conducted a study of a small sample of students, and I related the examples to you. I have received a more extensive current report, which the minister may be aware of. The study is done by Hetty Roessingh, and David Watt of the University of Calgary assisted her on this matter. I thought today I'd just devote some time to the results, because I think they warrant examination, as well as some of the recommendations, because I feel that they also warrant some response.

In her current study, the results of which she presented in early October here in Edmonton, she had examined 388 students from 1988 to 1993. Two of the results she discovered immediately were that the Department of Education does not have any tracking mechanism in place for ESL students, and it seems that the department as well has very little knowledge of the issues that pertain to ESL. Apparently Alberta Education did a survey of about 165 students from grades 8 to 12, and this sample showed that there was a 61 percent dropout here. Her source focused on grades 10 to 12, and they tracked a number of variables such as first language proficiency, age on arrival, proficiency level in English upon arrival, length of time required to acquire basic skills, educational gaps, and the actual length of funding for ESL, to name a few. They also tracked their target group from kindergarten right on to English 30 and 33 departmental examinations and through their success and failure in postsecondary schooling institutions such as SAIT.

They examined a number of issues, and I'd like to just mention some of them here. They included the concept of educational progress as well as achievement push-out, which is defined as too early integration into the mainstream, as well as something called fall-out, which is when no programming is available or there's no way to hold students in school despite their obvious need. As well, they examined the concept of drop-out, where a school of students entered the mainstream but there was just too much for them to deal with and they failed or quit.

The results of the study were devastating and incredible, and I'd very much like to have *Hansard* record these. Some 74 percent of the high school ESL students were not able to graduate. Ninety-five percent of the beginners dropped out, about 70 percent of the intermediates dropped out, and about 50 percent of the advanced students dropped out. As well, many of these students were illiterate in their first language. What they found as well is that most of the students must deal conceptually and linguistically with more advanced ideas in a more intense manner in a language that they did not know well. As Hetty Roessingh indicated, and I'll quote this remark she made: They have little to borrow from in their first language, and though significant numbers of these schoolchildren eventually graduate, they need both ESL support into the fifth year as well as flexibility on the age cap if they are to complete high school.

They also found that students over 16 who are academically competent in their first language and who arrive with English skills at school are more successful because they can apply what they've learnt. Generally the ESL students are compelled to compete in a school with no skills to understand at least 70 percent, according to their results, of the reading and lecture materials that are provided for their education. These students quit school early or they are placed in slow-track classes. She has told me that teachers she has dealt with are telling us, this Assembly, in very clear language that any cutbacks in ESL funding will have devastating effects on immigrant children.

[Mr. Clegg in the Chair]

The study also shows – and this is something which I'd very much like the minister to react to – that the department is not

allowing equal access to education for ESL students. Too few ESL students are showing signs of successful educational progress. The study also predicts that the change in the language ability of an ESL population at any one school may result in an increased dropout rate if no effort is made to address the specific needs of the changing population.

It is the recommendations, Mr. Minister, that I'd very much appreciate if you could react to at some time. I might add that your answers in the pamphlet that you gave to us earlier were very much appreciated.

The recommendations of this report are, number one, new program incentives to keep ESL beginners from dropping out in the first two years of high school. The second major recommendation is that Alberta Education and the local school districts develop a tracking system for ESL student progress in order to direct the efforts toward equal access to language minority students. This study is also asking that the age cap for ESL high school students be removed for any ESL student who is successfully attending at least three courses of their choice per semester. The fourth recommendation which warrants a response, an examination from the department, is that ESL support be determined on the basis of language need. The fifth recommendation is that ESL 10A be a credit-carrying course in order to provide an incentive to achieve recognized success and to promote the concept of inclusion in the school community. The last and concluding remark that I make, Mr. Minister, is that any ESL student who starts in junior high school be identified and be eligible for ESL support at the discretion of the high school. I'd very much appreciate if you could react to those.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

9:20

MR. DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: The hon. Member for Sherwood Park.

MR. COLLINGWOOD: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Just a few brief comments to the minister. First of all, I'd like to offer him my congratulations in the portfolio. I know it is going to be a tremendous challenge for the minister. I offer him my best wishes and again congratulations for continuing in this portfolio.

I wanted to comment when the Member for St. Albert was speaking and he mentioned that he was campaigning for you. My heart skipped a beat for just a minute until he qualified what the statement was for. I think perhaps the minister is aware that in a previous life for myself I also was a teacher for a number of years, so I have a very special place for education and the need for education and the importance of education. I think all of us in the Assembly who have obviously enjoyed our own experiences in education who now have children in education, certainly in speaking on behalf of my constituents, are all concerned about the future of education, certainly concerned about the future of funding for education. We all, of course, are seeking the same goal ultimately, and that's the best education system for our children and their children.

I think the minister made a comment about thinking back about the way things were in Alberta before. I was a beneficiary of those years. My schooling years were through the '60s and the '70s, and I did in fact have the benefit of a tremendous education system. We were perhaps in the '70s a richer province than we are now. I don't think anybody is attempting to try and recapture the past in terms of where we used to be in education and trying to achieve that again in education. I think we're all prepared to move forward in education. We as a society are changing. Technology is changing. Obviously our education system is going

to have to reflect the kinds of changes that are taking place and that are occurring in our society that will have to be reflected in the educational model for children as they go through a system to become proper and effective citizens in a very different society than you and I know today.

I heard a speech today from a candidate in the federal election, and he was talking about a comparison between the industrial revolution and the fact that that was probably the most significant and most profound change in our society, as a human society. The next revolution, the technological revolution, is going to be even more profound. The technological revolution is going to dwarf the industrial revolution. I mean, we as a society respond to those kinds of economic revolutions. We have to think about the fact as to whether or not we're going to need school buildings, whether we're going to need office buildings, whether or not we're going to be running our lives and our schools and our families and our health care systems from computer screens in our home, whether or not the future is in long-distance learning. We have to think about the fact that we are part of a very profound change in the way society will function as a whole in the years to come, certainly as we move into the 21st century.

I just want to say to the minister that in speaking to a number of my constituents, as I've mentioned, they're very concerned about the future of education. They're certainly aware of the roundtables that are going on. In fact, in my constituency there are going to be a number of meetings held by concerned citizens who are not participating in the roundtable process but who want to have the same kind of discussion generated about where we're going to go with the future of education.

I think there is a tremendously high level of anxiety in the community about the future of education, and perhaps as a comment to the minister, I think one of the reasons that comes about is that we have not yet seen a strong, strong statement from the government about its commitment to education. We have been skirting the issue. We have been saying that there is a strong commitment to education. The roundtables are showing that everything is on the table. Programs may be cut. Other programs may not be cut. There's a very high level of uncertainty, and I think some comfort will build in my constituency, in all Alberta constituencies if a statement can come from the government, not rhetoric, a real statement of commitment to education.

Now, in saying that, I recognize that doesn't necessarily mean more money for education, because we know that in today's society that's not necessarily the answer. I do want to recall the statement that the Member for Edmonton-Centre made, and that is that across-the-board cuts are not the way to go. We have to look at individual programs. We have to see what's working for Albertans and what's not working for Albertans and continue to think about what's going to work for education in the future, not just this year but the years following. So I recognize that it isn't just more money to the system to make it a better education system. We recognize that.

In saying that, to provide the minister with an example, a constituent of mine indicated to the hon. minister and copied to myself that in her personal situation her child entering grade 1 had a very bad experience. The recommendation of the counselor was to take that child out of public school and to provide for that child a home schooling situation. Her response was that she was very pleased there was an option for home schooling that could improve her situation with her particular youngster.

Now, the issue of home schooling aside, because that's not the point that I'm getting at, the position and the statement that I made to her is that had that counselor been able to provide an option within the public school system, she would not attribute the relief

she was able to obtain in her particular circumstance to the option of having home schooling available. She's missed the point as well. If there was proper funding in education, that situation would have resulted in her youngster being placed in a proper setting, a loving setting where he and thousands of other children like him may not have been mainstream, typical kinds of students that we all recognize as the conventional public school student. We need more than that. We can't just accept that every child going into our school system is a mainstream, typical, normal kid. They're not.

I cautioned her that you can't say, "Well, gee, isn't it nice that we've got the home schooling option because when my child isn't a mainstream student, there's an outlet for him to get out of the public school system." Why should she and her youngster be forced out of the public school system? My real fear is that if we allow that kind of thinking to progress, what we're going to end up with is a public school system that simply accepts as the standard the typical, normal, run-of-the-mill child. What that does is take us off both ends of the spectrum. If I have very, very gifted children, they're not going to be satisfied with the mediocrity of public schooling. Similarly, if I have children at the other end, who are very difficult, they need the support of a public school system to keep them involved and keep them interested in a schooling program rather than taking those two edges and forcing them out of the public school system. So, again, my issue here is not home schooling per se, not private schooling per se. My issue here is: let's not force people out and say that those other options are good whereas public schooling is bad.

9:30

Again from my own personal experience – and this comes from campaigning in the provincial election – a number of people said to me: my preference is home schooling; my preference is private schooling. I challenged them: "Well, is it because you don't like the way the public system is working? Is that why you prefer the other systems?" In virtually every case that was in fact the answer. The hurdles to overcome in public education to those individuals seemed just too high to even bother trying, so they looked for another outlet that to them appeared to be a better situation. I want those people back in the system, and I want them accepting the challenge of overcoming those hurdles and making public education better for themselves and for all Albertans. That's the way we should be proceeding. I challenged those people, and I at least had them understand that while there is certainly a place for those other options, they are not the outlet from a public school system that has deteriorated that they just don't want to participate in anymore. We've got to turn that around. We've got to get back to promoting a public school system that is the best system, not taking different levels of standards and trying to become the lowest common denominator. We've got to be working as hard as we can to make the system the highest common denominator and not forcing those people out to find a better education somewhere else if they're prepared to pay for it.

Of course, that does lead into the question and the argument about whether or not in doing so we're going to end up creating a two-level system of education in this province, where those who can afford a good education get one and those who can't, don't. If that had been the situation when I was attending school, with the economic situation of my parents I would not have had the education that I had, because my parents simply would not have been able to afford it. So I'm glad that we didn't have that kind of a situation.

Now, we have had some discussion this evening, Mr. Minister, about equity funding and about the machinery and equipment assessment. I'm sure the minister will know that in my constituency of Sherwood Park that's a very, very important issue. It's an extremely important issue. In fact, our reeve in the county of Strathcona, Iris Evans, is spearheading a steering committee on machinery and equipment tax and is certainly desirous of coming before the Tax Reform Commission to argue the merits of the machinery and equipment tax and how incredibly important it is to our county education system in terms of funding for education in the county of Strathcona. Now, the minister did mention earlier that there's not much more to comment about the machinery and equipment assessment right now. It really falls into the bailiwick of the Provincial Treasurer, and we'll just have to sort of wait and see how that works out. What I'd like to say to the minister is that we need him to be the advocate for the machinery and equipment tax with respect to the whole review that's going on with the Tax Reform Commission. Yes, if we don't have machinery and equipment, we have to have a substitute. Now, I don't know what that substitute is; I don't think the minister knows what that the substitute is. But in the meantime, as we are going through this review process, if there's going to be a commitment to education, if there's going to be a demonstrated commitment to education, and we don't have the alternative to machinery and equipment yet that is a satisfactory answer to all Albertans, then to the minister: get on side and support as hard as you can. On behalf of education, to the Provincial Treasurer: in the portfolio that you've been given, the obligation to advocate within your front bench, within your government, fight as hard as you can to maintain machinery and equipment until a satisfactory solution is found.

We know from history that the machinery and equipment assessment has been debated and debated and debated. Industry has a different perception than the local municipalities have. We've never been able to come to any consensus. Minority reports are written all the time. I mean, can we realistically expect that the Tax Reform Commission is going to magically find an answer for us by the end of this year, come up with a decision about the machinery and equipment assessment? What I'd like the minister to do as we're going through all of this discussion about equity funding and corporate pooling and machinery and equipment assessment, is advocate as hard as he can for the maintenance of the machinery and equipment tax while we find the right solution. I don't want us to go through this process of saying: "Well, we just decided to abolish machinery and equipment. I guess the municipalities will now have to find some other source of revenue to fund education to the level that it needs to be funded at." That's my request to the minister in his capacity as Minister of Education: please fight for M and E.

One other point on the equity funding. I've had some discussions with the Member for St. Albert about this, and I think that one of the things to keep in mind – I know the minister has had comments about this, and I'm sure that he's well aware of it – is that when we talk about equity funding, you have to give some consideration to the municipalities who have in the past and who will want in the future to attract industry to their communities. If there is no incentive to attract industry to the community – and certainly funding for education is a significant part of that – if all communities lose any incentive to attract industry, I think that you've done a disservice to local communities. Now, that's only a part of it, and I recognize that's only part of the discussion about equity funding, but I would hate to see us go to the extent that no municipality is given any incentive or given any consideration for the fact that it has attracted industry to its community.

Sherwood Park has Refinery Row – lots of industry there. We always have to consider the safety factors and the safety concerns that go along with attracting industry. Communities such as my colleague's from St. Albert do not attract industry. They have not attracted industry; they don't want the stacks in their community and so on. Now, because they've taken the position that they do not want industry and we've taken the position that we do want industry, are we treated equally? Is there some consideration given to a community that does work very hard at attracting industry into its community? I think that has been reflected well in terms of education funding, and I'd hate to see us go completely away from that so it's just entirely a disincentive.

One other comment to the minister, and I think those will be my comments. You asked the question – and I'll try and paraphrase the question that you stated earlier tonight; I'm not sure if it was rhetorically stated or not because I think there's something more to it than that – if equity funding were in place, whether or not boards would be any less autonomous. Was that the question? Does that paraphrase the question reasonably well?

MR. JONSON: I said if their assessments were equal.

MR. COLLINGWOOD: If assessments were equal. I don't think I'll comment, then, because I thought I heard you say that in effect if there was equity funding, boards would be less autonomous. I did want to comment on that, but in hearing you again say what you were talking about with respect to the assessment, I think that perhaps the comments aren't as appropriate now.

I just want to check my list here. I think I've covered all the points.

Thank you, Mr. Minister, and thank you, Mr. Chairman.

9:40

MR. DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: Thank you.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-McClung.

MR. MITCHELL: Mr. Chairman, I welcome the opportunity to enter this debate for one particular reason, and that is that over the last year and a half education and issues surrounding education have become the most pressing issues brought to me as the MLA for Edmonton-Meadowlark prior to the election and now for Edmonton-McClung. While currently issues such as health care have become extremely intense amongst the people of my constituency, education is becoming more intense every day. Over about the last year and a half to two years its level of interest amongst constituents and the level of frustration it has brought to many of my constituents I think are notable. I welcome the opportunity, because I would like to reflect, express on behalf of a number of parents – and not necessarily parents with students still in the school system – a number of people in my constituency who have raised them with me, their concerns about education.

These concerns and their bringing them to me prompted me to set up a group within my riding, which has met periodically over the last year or so to discuss concerns and issues with respect to education. We had as a group put some of these ideas into a paper, which reflects I think in most respects the consensus, the general ideas of the parents with whom I have been in discussions. I'd just like to read their points, their concerns, their appreciation of the issues, to note them in *Hansard* for the minister's consideration. I will say that this group of parents and others who are concerned about education have a great intensity of concern, a real desire to make the education system work well.

I'm sure the minister confronts this all the time. There is nobody whom I deal with who has a malicious bone in their body with respect to the education system. If ever criticism can be well motivated – and, of course, it can be – it is certainly well motivated here from a genuine concern generally about what this means to my children, to their children. Some of the issues I think are quite common, and the minister will have run across them time and time again. I'd just like to put them into the record and add to the emphasis that I'm sure he is experiencing with respect to those issues.

The first one is program continuity. The minister is aware, I'm sure, that there is a great deal of concern with this concept, this idea, whatever it might be. Certainly the members of the group in my riding with whom I have been discussing it are no exception in this regard. They have heard various explanations: on the one hand that all children learn at different rates, and therefore inherent in all classrooms is the concept of program continuity, whether explicit or implicit. On the other hand, I think they are not entirely convinced of that. They have a concern that program continuity does not allow for proper testing of students perhaps, for holding back students who do not progress sufficiently to warrant advancement to the next grade, or for the establishment of rigorous objectives for children's educational achievements.

Now, it may well be that program continuity is being unfairly maligned in these regards, given that any of these problems could exist in any education system, and it wouldn't necessarily have to be tied to program continuity. Certainly these issues are related in people's minds to the matter of program continuity, and I guess they have generated several questions from my group. One is: does the minister's decision to discontinue – and I believe he has made that quite clear – program continuity bind school boards and school administrations to ensure that that will occur? Some of my constituents aren't absolutely convinced, given that they see a commitment at the level of school administration to that concept, and they're not certain about how the structure of authority operates between the Department of Education, the minister, and other elements of the education institutional structure.

Does program continuity solve the problems perceived by parents, or are testing, passing, failing, and establishing student achievement objectives issues that are quite discrete and distinct from program continuity? They would also be very, very interested in receiving information, if the minister could provide it to me so that I could provide it to them. They would specifically like to know whether there are empirical evaluations of this concept of program continuity and whether those could be provided for public consumption.

A second issue – and I'm sure this is really a matter of a checklist for the minister; he could probably anticipate what these series of issues would be – is testing. There is great concern that it is not adequate, and questions have arisen as a result. One, is it being done frequently enough in our school system, and what guidelines are there for the frequency with which it should be undertaken? Secondly, is testing designed in our school system to evaluate children against curriculum standards? These are questions that I am expressing on behalf of parents. Is there any merit to having children evaluated against other children? I will say that that of course – and, you know, there are two sides to all these stories – seems to be a common issue amongst the people who have brought these issues to me in my constituency.

A further issue arising out of testing is whether it should be done prior to grade 3 or whether it shouldn't. What is the standard? Are there empirical evaluations of whether testing at early ages helps or hinders – are there studies that can give us

some indication? – and whether evaluation against a curriculum is more effective than evaluating students against one another?

A third issue that is high on the list of constituents' concerns with education is report cards. There seems to be a general sense that there is no standard report card format. There seems to be, therefore, concern that one report card format has no particular merit over another one. How is that the Department of Education or some authority couldn't find a format that evaluates children effectively and communicates effectively to parents? It may be that the whole process is in part encumbered by the difficulty of parents to understand quite technical terms and the variety of report card items, and maybe it is incumbent upon parents to pursue that with the school that seems to have a say in how the report card will be structured.

Is there something that the Minister of Education could do to streamline and standardize report card formats to give parents some sense of comfort that they eventually will learn what these report cards mean and that they will, more importantly, be meaningful to them when they put them down and say: well, my child is doing well or not so well or needs improvement in certain areas or whatever it is. It's very, very difficult. Some of these report cards, I know in my personal case, seem to be very technical and difficult at best to understand.

A fourth issue is the matter of parental involvement. It is true that there are a number of structures, certainly parent advisory committees, certain kinds of advisory boards at various levels, the Department of Education level, perhaps public school board levels. I think the group of people with whom I've been working would be very interested in seeing a formalized structure, if the minister could provide that, of where parental input is provided for in a structured way throughout all levels of the education system.

9:50

I think this is an appropriate time for me to raise another broader issue, and that is the issue of public input, especially now, with the cuts that are being proposed. Even a year ago, before cuts were being proposed, the group with which I was working was very concerned about prioritizing education and ensuring that it wasn't cut back. In fact our party's response to input like that was that education should be the one area where we would increase funding because it is so fundamentally important. But now the question of prioritizing is even more significant, given the era of cuts that we are being confronted by, and it really raises the importance of public input.

You know, the health care roundtables started as only roundtables. The minister responded to input that there should be a public hearings component. I'm not saying that that is entirely adequate, but it certainly is better than strictly roundtables by invitation by and large to professionals who have a certain vested interest and a certain perspective. I'm not saying that they're wrong by any means, but certainly parents to some extent can feel excluded from that particular process. I think that there is really a strong argument to be made for public hearings on education, particularly now, and I know that it would be fundamentally well accepted by the kinds of people who have been expressing their concerns with the education process to me.

A fifth issue, very controversial I know, is the question of how you evaluate schools and whether that information should be public: arguments on both sides. You know, you can really destroy schools that don't rate as well. On the other hand, the fact is that if you're not measured, you're not managed. So there may be something lacking in the system in that regard. What the group that I've been working with would like to know is what the thinking is on the part of the minister with respect to this issue.

Should schools be evaluated publicly, or shouldn't they? What could be achieved by establishing some public evaluation? This is a very important question raised with me by this group.

The next issue is curriculum development. Their sense is that curriculum is changed often with some expense, with the difficulty of perhaps inadequate in-service in some cases to allow teachers to know how to present it. This is a concern that was expressed to me. Could the Department of Education release publicly, if they don't already, the justification for curriculum changes and alterations each time that is done so that parents could see what it is that is going into this decision-making process?

Those are the issues that were raised with me by this group of people with whom I've been working. I present them in the Legislature on their behalf so they know that they've been heard by me and now they've been heard by the Minister of Education.

I would simply like to close by raising the matter of Bill 212. You know, this is very, very controversial, and I would be very interested, as I know teacher after teacher after teacher across this province and from within my constituency would be very interested, to know exactly what the minister's position is on that Bill. I think that teachers have taken some comfort in the fact that the minister has been one of them and has not endorsed or sponsored that Bill in any way. It would be of great comfort to teachers and education administrators across this province to simply have the minister stand and say that he is opposed to what is a very, very poorly conceived, poorly drafted, and poorly founded private member's Bill.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

MR. DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: The hon. Member for Calgary-North West.

MR. BRUSEKER: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Just a few questions to put to the minister. No disrespect to the former Education minister, but I'm very pleased that we have as the new minister an Education minister with an education in education. I'm looking forward to good things from this minister, given his extensive background in education.

Mr. Chairman, I did want to ask a couple of questions about program 2, in particular 2.1.2, Student Instruction, Transportation, and Boarding. Why is that even in the book like that? Why are we lumping one rather huge number, \$951 million, into one great big lump sum of money for instruction, transportation, and boarding? My mind identifies those clearly as three distinct, separate things. It's too late for this budget, but for next year's budget can we split that out and have a separate figure for instruction, a separate figure for transportation, and a separate figure for boarding? I think that then it would give a clearer picture to Albertans as to how much money is going into instruction, because instruction of course is the key issue of education and the delivery of education in the province. I think this is ambiguous at best. So I would like to know out of that \$951 million, which as I said is the biggest chunk in Education, how that gets broken down. Could it be broken down more clearly for the future?

Whatever figure comes out of the \$951 million as the instruction figure, I'd like to know how much of the dollars is further broken down into dollars that are going into the classroom, dollars that are going to administration, and dollars that are going to the purchase of support materials, textbooks – I was a science teacher, so the stuff of science – beakers, thermometers, test tubes, all that sort of stuff. I think it's important for people to understand where the dollars are going. We keep hearing that 80 to 85 percent of the dollars that are committed to education are going towards salaries.

I think we need to reflect that and see it broken down a little bit more in our Education estimates. I'd also like to know how much of the instruction component is going out to administrative costs. I'm wondering also about school-based administration costs versus central office administration costs, because I think again those are different kinds of things.

I know that Student Evaluation Services is in another section, in program 3, but I'm wondering also if in that instruction component there is a section that is allocated for either province-wide evaluation testing or even school board. For example, the Calgary public school board would have a section that did a lot of testing as well.

Strictly on a very local, urgent request from my constituents, I know that the minister has received probably numerous letters from Hawkwood community. Hawkwood community, as the minister is probably aware, has part of the school, I guess is the way to describe it. My constituents want me to ask the minister if they are going to get the other part. As the minister may recall, the Calgary public school board was a little pressed for funds and built the core half of the school in Hawkwood community and built the portables and sent those down to the south end of the city of Calgary to Sundance community. We now are accommodating up to grade 3 students in Hawkwood. The parents are very interested and eager to get the other half, so I am sure they would like to get a response from the minister as to whether or not the commitment that was made before will in fact be completed.

Along that line, Calgary-North West is perhaps unique – I'm not sure – in that it only has elementary schools. There are no junior or senior high school buildings in Calgary-North West constituency. So all of those junior and senior high school age students are bused elsewhere, and some of those trips are starting to get long, perhaps not long in terms of distance, but in terms of time people are spending three-quarters of an hour to an hour on the bus. Now, that's maybe not what some people are spending in the rural areas, but in the cities that gets to be a fair amount of time. I guess I'm wondering if there is any kind of policy within the Department of Education that looks at that ratio of how long it takes you busing students some distance before you start to say, "Well, the busing costs are starting to get so high that now it's more worth while to build a school rather than keep on renting buses and paying for busing kids." Busing costs, as the minister is aware, add up significantly and quickly as well.

My concern is not just with today. The Calgary-North West constituency is growing by leaps and bounds. The community I live in, Scenic Acres, for example, in 1989 had 400 homes in it. By the time this election rolled around, it had 1,700 homes in it. Most of those homes are being occupied or filled by relatively young families with school-age children, so the demand for schools is increasing. In fact, we do have a new facility that just opened in Scenic Acres, the Monsignor Doyle school. The Hawkwood school, the part that's there, just opened in September. Steps have been made in the right direction, and I compliment the department for taking those steps. The growth is there. I'm sure the school board is aware of it. I know that the minister is aware of it. What are the long-term plans for future facilities, including the junior and senior high schools? I know the sites have been allocated, but I'm wondering about the long-term request there.

I have many other questions that I could ask, but I know that many of my colleagues have asked them. I'll leave the minister with those few requests for information.

10:00

MR. DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: The hon. Minister of Education.

MR. KIRKLAND: I'll just, if I could be so brief and so quick, Mr. Chairman, take my usual two-minute air traffic control time.

MR. DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: Okay. We'll have the hon. Member for Leduc then.

MR. KIRKLAND: I would like to bring to the minister's attention maybe a good example to use when we're attempting to factor some efficiencies into the system here. I will bring to your attention the city of Leduc, and as far as educating a student, in the way of dollar cost per student they are below the provincial average. Obviously, by the results that are presented in the way of achievement tests, the proficiency achievement tests that are held in grades 3, 6, and 9, they score above the provincial average, likewise in the grade 12 diploma situation. I bring that to the minister's attention, because when we look at a comparison basis of what other school boards are actually encountering for cost per student, there are some that are as high as \$1,500 to \$2,000 over and above that. The end result suggests that in fact the education they're receiving is not that much better in the results area. I should add that Leduc has a composite high school, so it's not a limited program by any stretch of the imagination.

The point I would like to make is that when you find a school board such as the city of Leduc school district that is operating at the absolute minimum – and I would suggest there are some below that – and we look at if it happens, a 5 percent rollback, certainly what it impacts in this particular case is programming directly. There are other school boards, of course, that have more cushion to deal with that rollback. I would ask the minister to give serious thought, if we have determined a benchmark in this province, as to what it really costs to educate a student. I know there are factors that enter into it such as capital costs, location of the school such as Fort McMurray, heating costs, interest costs, when they were built. If we could determine a benchmark when we look at attempting to find efficiencies and if we're looking at reducing funding to them, certainly I think we have to look probably at the schools that come closest to the provincial average and know full well that they have very little room to reduce.

Having said that, I guess what we're looking for is an equity solution somewhere along the line. Certainly in a case like this, this school board would probably be hit harder than a school board that's spending \$1,500 more. I would ask him to keep that in mind when we're making those sorts of decisions.

MR. DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

MR. HENRY: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I note the hour, and I have about 25 more questions. What I will do is I'll find some time to send those over to the minister, and as I've chatted with the minister earlier, I'll allow him to respond in another format.

I couldn't resist jumping up and responding to the minister's question with regard to: if all school boards had equal assessment, would there be an issue of local autonomy? I need to respond to that. Obviously, I agree that if all school boards had equal assessment, it doesn't necessarily follow that there would be a loss of autonomy. However, the issue that I raised earlier in terms of school board autonomy – and I was alluding to the issue of fiscal equity and the former education trust fund plan, which is that it depends how that equalized assessment is achieved. Certainly there needs to be something done in fiscal equity, but if we're talking about taking a substantial amount of assessment value or tax revenue away from the school divisions and have them administered by the provincial government – I hasten to add

that that may have been considered more positive 20 years ago. In fact today, because of the experience that municipalities and school divisions have had with the Alberta Municipal Financing Corporation fund, where in fact it was controlled by the provincial government prior to the current minister being in cabinet – albeit it was controlled by the provincial government – and when it was a surplus which belonged to those municipalities, et cetera, who contributed to that, in fact \$200 million was skimmed off and sent equally across the province. In fact, some municipalities who had not contributed to that fund benefited, and some municipalities who had contributed substantially to that fund at great cost to their own taxpayers did essentially lose that money.

So the issue you're talking about is not as simple as saying that if there was an equal assessment, if everybody had an equal assessment, does that necessarily mean less autonomy? No, of course it doesn't, but if the control of the dollars is taken away from the local jurisdiction, then there is a problem. It's a matter of trust. Certainly in my experience professionally, personally, and politically, if a trust is broken, even if it wasn't broken deliberately, it takes a long time to earn back that trust. I would suggest that for local authorities that trust has been broken with the Municipal Financing Corporation experience last year. At least that's what they tell me. I wanted to make sure that was on record.

I will send the minister some more questions and get some information, but I also wanted to thank the minister for the answers he's given for questions previous, as well as tonight. I think we have a long way to go to reforming the budget development process here. I don't believe this process works very well. I think we need to make a lot of changes, but it is refreshing to stand here, ask questions, and have a minister of the Crown get up and actually provide some answers.

Thank you.

MR. DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: Thank you hon. member.

The hon. Minister of Education.

MR. BRUSEKER: Just one quick question. I was just wondering if the minister was aware that it's 15-14 for Toronto in the bottom of the eighth.

MR. DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: Yes.

Okay, hon. minister.

MR. JONSON: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'd like to just make two points at this time. First of all, we will certainly provide additional answers to the many questions that were raised this evening. I would also refer hon. members to the information booklet that we handed out at the beginning of the estimates, the first day of estimates. That won't answer all the questions posed this evening, but it does provide you already with the information in terms of the breakdown, say, of 2.1.2 and that kind of information.

Secondly, Mr. Chairman, I would like to thank the members for their participation and their ideas. There are many of the points made that I agree with, and hopefully we can act upon those initiatives that were talked about.

I would move, Mr. Chairman, that the vote be taken.

MR. DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: Thank you, hon. minister.

All in favour that the question be taken?

HON. MEMBERS: Agreed.

MR. DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: Opposed, if any? Carried.

Agreed to:

Program 1 – Departmental Support Services	
Total Operating Expenditure	\$15,185,050
Total Capital Investment	\$400,800

Program 2 – Financial Assistance to Schools	
Total Operating Expenditure	\$1,644,281,000
Total Capital Investment	-

Program 3 – Development and Delivery of Education Program	
Total Operating Expenditure	\$37,676,450
Total Capital Investment	\$456,700

Summary

Total Operating Expenditure	\$1,697,142,500
Total Capital Investment	\$857,500

Department Total	\$1,698,000,000
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10:10

MR. DAY: Mr. Chairman, I move that the committee rise and report.

[Motion carried]

[Mr. Deputy Speaker in the Chair]

MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER: Order.
The hon. Member for Dunvegan.

MR. CLEGG: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Committee of Supply has had under consideration certain resolutions, reports as follows, and requests leave to sit again.

Resolved that a sum not exceeding the following be granted to Her Majesty for the fiscal year ending March 31, 1994, for the department and purposes indicated.

Department of Education: Operating Expenditure of \$1,697,142,500, Capital Investment of \$857,500, for a total of \$1,698,000,000.

Mr. Speaker, I wish to table copies of a document filed by the Minister of Education on this date for the official records of the Assembly.

MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER: Does the Assembly concur in this report?

HON. MEMBERS: Agreed.

MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER: Opposed? Carried.

[At 10:14 p.m. the Assembly adjourned to Thursday at 1:30 p.m.]

