

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

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5:37 p.m.

[Chairman: Mr. Magnus]

Committee of Supply: Designated Supply Subcommittee Education

THE CHAIRMAN: Ladies and gentlemen, we are here tonight of course to look at the estimates of the Education department. I think everybody here has been on these committees before. Do I need to go through all the rules? There are a couple I think that beg clarification. When you've got an Independent involved – and I'll read the rule. It says: "Opposition subcommittee members and Independent subcommittee members then have one hour for questions and answers." That's an agreement between the House leader and Her Majesty's Loyal Opposition signed by Mr. Bruseker and the House leader of the government of Alberta, and it was the agreement from 1995. So if that clarifies that point.

MR. HENRY: Perhaps, Mr. Chairman, because we're short of time, we could dispense with reading the rules and just get on with it.

THE CHAIRMAN: Well it was your question, Mr. Henry. So I felt you deserved an answer, and that's exactly what you got.

Ladies and gentlemen, I hope everybody does understand the rules. I hope we have little bit of fun tonight. I am here to keep the order. I am the chairman, and I'll make all the decisions reference Standing Orders or what's allowed and is not allowed. This is the estimates; it's not a policy session. We'll proceed from there. I've chaired these things for a long time, and everybody knows how I chair, and that's what'll happen tonight.

So without any further ado the Minister of Education will do his presentation. He has 20 minutes.

MR. JONSON: Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and good evening everybody here at the table at this committee meeting. I'd like to make some comments about the overall direction for education in Alberta and then answer as many questions as possible. The remarks that I will make this evening are, I think, going to be somewhat shorter than the allotted number of minutes, but I've endeavoured to provide to members of the Assembly information on our budget at least as it applies to their area of the province. Therefore I think that I'd certainly like to make points on some really essential items of our estimates.

Before proceeding with that, I'd like to introduce members of my staff that are here today. Seated on my left is Gary Zatko, assistant deputy minister in charge of money. I think it's financial planning, but that's what we're dealing with tonight. Also we've got Jeff Olson and Gary Baron seated right here on my right. These people have laboured long and hard in terms of our overall funding framework and the budget that is before you.

Mr. Chairman, two years ago, when I released our first three-year business plan for Education, I said that education in Alberta faced many challenges, challenges driven by changing societal structures and expectations, by rapidly changing technology, and by our province's fiscal realities. Over the past two years we have developed an education system with the task that they provide our students with the skills, knowledge, and attitudes that they will require to succeed in the 21st century.

Today we have an education system that provides the opportunity for more meaningful involvement in education decision-making through school councils and school-based decision-making. In our budget estimates for this year we have provided some support for that, but through our school-based decision-making and school councils, trustees, parents, and the local

community are working together to make decisions that impact education. The result is and I believe it will be in the future that these are better decisions and decisions that will better reflect local priorities and will better meet local student needs.

Our education system today, Mr. Chairman, also offers greater choice in education programs, education learning environments, and education delivery methods. Charter schools and alternative school programs are examples of how public school boards are addressing the needs of their students. With the implementation of the funding framework all students, no matter where they reside in Alberta, have access to a quality education and a fair share of education resources. No longer do the opportunities for an Alberta student depend on the wealth of the local tax base.

Today's education system is becoming more open and accountable to Albertans. Alberta's school boards and schools are providing more and better information to students, parents, and local communities. What we are trying to achieve: how schools are performing against other achievement standards. They're also receiving I think better information about how well our students are meeting standards set for any expectations.

We've focused, Mr. Chairman, our education dollars on the classroom, with a much greater proportion of education spending going directly to improve the quality of education and less spent on the administration of the system. Throughout our education restructuring we have had to adapt some very fundamental changes to the traditional ways of governing, funding, and delivering education. All stakeholders throughout the education system, including Alberta Education, have had to look at better and more efficient ways of meeting their obligations. Our goal is and continues to be improving student learning by developing a stronger, more focused, and more efficient education system.

Mr. Chairman, as you and members here are all aware, part of the change in our education system was a reduction in overall education spending. That reduction amounts to about 4.3 percent of total education spending between 1992-93 and 1996-97. Those reductions were difficult for the education system because of course we do have a client base where we cannot reduce the numbers. We serve all students in this province. In Education we made a deliberate decision to carry out our spending reductions in the first two years of our business plan. These reductions are now essentially behind us. They are behind us; we won't use that adjective. They are behind us, and there will be no further cuts to classroom funding.

In the coming fiscal year, 1996-97, we will be building on our achievements and progress of the past two years and continuing our efforts to provide the best possible education for all Alberta students at a cost this province can afford. In 1996-97 we'll be spending \$2.699 billion on education, including about \$1.15 billion from the Alberta school foundation fund and \$1.55 billion from provincial general revenues. When we add in the \$1.64 million that will be spent from education property taxes through opted-out, separate school boards, the total spending on education in 1996-97 will be \$2.863 billion, an increase of \$18 million over 1995-96.

I think that overall, Mr. Speaker – sorry I've got trouble. I used to be Chairman of Committees.

THE CHAIRMAN: If I'm the Speaker, do I get the extra bucks?

MR. JONSON: I won't respond. Pardon me, Mr. Chairman.

Also I think it's important to note, Mr. Chairman, that in addition to the overall additional increase in terms of our estimates of \$18 million, we will also in terms of our best estimates – and I think we are quite confident of those – within the overall

expenditure targets be directing an additional \$63 million to student instruction because of the direction that we've taken to reduce administrative expenditures and reduce in other areas.

Mr. Chairman, we did – and I think it is known to members of the committee – make some cautious areas of reinvestment as a government. One was the restoration from \$850 per child to \$1,182 per child for ECS to restore funding of the 400-hour basic ECS program, and we also of course restored the transportation funding. Also contained – not in this particular budget, but I think it should be noted – is some \$45 million from the provincial government to be directed over a three-year period to information technology integration and enhancement across the province.

Another feature of this particular budget, Mr. Chairman, is that we have I think quite effectively, although I know there are issues and concerns in some parts of the province, over our original budget projections increased capital funding some \$50 million over our previous three-year plan. We intend to follow through with that in the following two years. That I think and I'm quite confident is meeting the essential new construction and modernization needs across the province. As well we have in a considerable way enhanced what's called the building quality restoration program, which deals with support to school boards in terms of maintenance and operations and so forth.

5:47

I'd like to just make a couple of other specific comments and then conclude. We certainly, Mr. Chairman, are continuing with our policy of funding enrollment, which we announced right at the beginning of our restructuring process. We are also certainly continuing with our cap and controls on administrative spending, and that is factored in and included in the budget that is before you.

I'd like to make two other points. One is that certainly Alberta Education, the department that I work with every day, has not been at all immune from the demands of budget reductions. In fact the department will be reduced by \$17 million, or 32 percent of its budget, and by 214 positions, or 31 percent of its staff allocation, over the period of time we're talking about here.

Also I'd just like to briefly comment on the effect of education spending relative to the property tax in the province. Yes, we have pooled property tax revenue, except for the opted-out school boards, into the Alberta school foundation fund, and in so doing, we have been able to, modestly mind you – when you start adding it up across the province, it gets into many millions of dollars. The 1996 rate of 7.12 mills on equalized assessment will be down from the 1995 rate of 7.29 mills, so we're on target in keeping with our commitment as far as property tax rate reduction is concerned. Mr. Chairman, just by way of another comment, I have a line of statistics here which indicates that 295 of the 375 municipalities in the province will in fact drop in terms of their overall mill rate requirement.

I'd just like to complete my remarks by indicating that we've made some fundamental and I think very positive changes in terms of restructuring the education system. In the year ahead we are going to be focusing on those items which I think have more to do with the maintaining of standards, maintaining of quality programs and improving them. We're looking at our teaching quality paper. We'll be looking at our strategic plan for information technology, our PD consortium, and a number of other modest but I think very important initiatives towards improving education quality in the province.

I'll stop at that point, Mr. Chairman, and invite questions. This evening, since the question was raised by an hon. member a few minutes ago – I hope this doesn't influence the questioning; I'm

not trying to inhibit anybody – if there are specific items that we don't get to in the responses, we'll certainly provide a follow-up and answer those specific financial questions as we did last year.

THE CHAIRMAN: Thank you, Mr. Minister. As is the usual practice, we will take names as I see them, as the hands go up. Normally speaking, we have an hour for the opposition and the Independent in this case, and then we'll move on from there for an hour for government. We'll take them the same way we always have: one main question, two supplementaries. You can do your own lists and meander around with names in any way that you want, from either side.

With that, I'm looking for hands for questions. Mr. Henry.

MR. HENRY: Just for clarification, Mr. Chairman. We're not going back and forth? Is that right?

THE CHAIRMAN: Well, the only way to keep the time on who's got the time is to do it one side, back and forth. One of my members just asked me the same question: why can't we just do that? But there is no valid way of keeping time at that point.

MR. HENRY: Okay. Thank you. That was just for clarification.

If I could be permitted a couple of comments back to the minister. I wanted to on record express appreciation for the minister's briefing book that was provided to all members with the relevant information on their jurisdictions. It's helpful not only in terms of estimates – and I know government members often historically receive this information – but it's nice as opposition to be included in that. It's useful information for us to answer questions in our own jurisdictions as well, and we appreciate that. I also appreciate – I was talking to the minister earlier about repeating the practice of last year: the minister responding in writing to questions that we don't get to or that require more detail. My only plea is, as I said to the minister before we started, that if we could have those prior to actually voting on the Education budget, it would allow us to vote in a more informed way.

What I would like to do perhaps with the first question is ask a couple of general questions. I'm wondering if the minister could outline in his budget, both in expenditures and revenue, the assumptions that were used with regard to those figures. What I'm talking about specifically – I realize with funding for next year's school year that you're estimating certain kinds of growth, and also in terms of the revenue side of the picture from the property taxes you're estimating certain kinds of assessment growths as well. Usually within the budget you have a list of assumptions that you make that we see if time bears out. I'm wondering if you could outline some of those assumptions later.

MR. JONSON: Later.

MR. HENRY: Is that later we're going to do that? Or do you have them at hand? That was my first question.

MR. JONSON: I'm used to long speeches from you, Member for Edmonton-Centre. In terms of making projections, Mr. Chairman – and I'll answer that because I think probably all members are interested – you make your best estimate. But given the enrollment projections from last year and the growth that we experienced plus what we see coming through the system, we just work on – and maybe Gary could comment on that – a best estimate of what we see in terms of students coming into ECS and then grade 1. Grade 1 we've got a fairly good handle on, I think. Mind

you, if we have, as we hope, economic growth in the province, we could quite frankly be out in terms of growth. It might be a little bit higher.

In terms of assessment, the same sort of thing. We work closely with Municipal Affairs in terms of trying to project assessment growth. I'm not being very profound here. I'm just saying that we go back to previous years and try and be modestly optimistic in picking up . . .

MR. HENRY: If I can for clarification. What I was asking, Mr. Minister – I understand how you get to the assumptions. I understand their role. Specifically what were the assumptions that were made this year in terms of population growth?

MR. ZATKO: In terms of the school jurisdiction estimates, for ECS we projected zero percent growth to next year. When you look at the cohorts and the demographics of Alberta, that's actually a declining cohort overall in terms of the Alberta population. For grades 1 to 12 we looked at a 1.5 percent increase over our fiscal year, and in private schools a 4 percent increase. That was for our fiscal year budgets.

In terms of the school jurisdiction estimates, we used the most available data for each school jurisdiction in terms of student counts, program by program. We took last year's enrollment numbers by program, and to get an estimate, we assumed a 1 percent growth for every school jurisdiction. Now, we know that's a broad brushstroke in terms of doing that. We know some jurisdictions will grow more, some will grow less, some will lose some student population. So in the course of the estimates becoming real numbers for school jurisdictions, those estimates are adjusted as the September 30 enrollments come in, and we adjust that forecast.

In terms of revenue, the major assumption growth for property growth would be 2 percent. We estimated that overall assessment would grow at a 2 percent level, and we consider that pretty conservative overall. Generally, a property assessment has grown about 3 percent.

MR. JONSON: Could I just interject one other thing, Mr. Chairman, since he's talking about projections. One area I'd just like to mention. We have made our best projection in terms of numbers, but we do seem to have an increase occurring in terms of high special-needs students, those that suffer from Down's syndrome and that area, and we make our best estimate. Since we're talking about what might be the difficulty with projections, that's one of them.

MR. HENRY: Okay. Thank you.

Again sticking with assumptions made, there's been a decrease in the transportation overall block funding, from \$133 million – I'm rounding off – to \$129 million. That's down from a couple of years ago of \$141 million. I'm wondering on what basis this was made and what assumptions were given. The reason I'm asking is because I'm hearing that there's not enough money in transportation out there, yet you must have had some indication. So what assumptions led you to believe that you could reduce that kind of funding without reducing services?

MR. JONSON: I just have a bit of a question in terms of the procedure here and the time available to members. We're quite happy to respond to individual questions from the Member for Edmonton-Centre. I just want to make sure I'm doing the right thing here. Perhaps he would like to pose his questions, and other people may want to get into the discussion. It's up to you, Mr. Chairman.

THE CHAIRMAN: The way we've always done it in the past is again back to what we do in the Assembly, a main and two sups, and I hesitate to change that. Without an answer to a question I'm not sure how they could progress from where they start. You know, I'm at the committee's will to some extent, but this is the way we've always done it in the past.

MR. JONSON: I'm not sure what that means, but we'll answer his question.

MR. HENRY: Just to clarify. My main question had to do with overall assumptions of the budget. My supplementary has to do with: specifically what were the assumptions made for the transportation part of the budget? I have one more supplementary on assumptions as well, and then I'll turn it over.

MR. ZATKO: If I may respond to that. Page 125 of the estimates – and that's a fiscal year basis. A couple of comments. The transportation rates have remained the same. To calculate the transportation amount, we would use the enrollment figures that I talked about earlier, because it's basically enrollment driven. On a school year basis the overall funding has increased for school jurisdictions by about \$1.29 million, so we're talking about a provincial fiscal year vis-à-vis a school year. It does cause some complications in overall communications, but on a school-based year there's an additional \$1.2 million for transportation based on enrollment growth. So the funding rates will remain the same, and there have been additional moneys put in for the increased number of students being transported.

MR. HENRY: I'm not sure I understood that answer. I can follow it up with the minister at another time.

My last is specifically in regard to the instruction block on the special needs. I'm talking about the mild to moderate disabled that are lumped into the instruction block or so I'm told. What assumptions are used again in terms of the numbers of children or percentage of children who would receive services in those categories?

5:57

MR. JONSON: Mr. Chairman, on the mild to moderate it's block funded. In other words, we pay at a rate which is approximately 200 and some dollars for every child in the system. Therefore, the assumption in terms of growth there is the same as the assumption for the total student population. Then we expect school boards – because they have, as I think all members know, made representation to want to have as much flexibility in this area as possible. It's provided as a block grant, and we expect for the mild to moderate students, considering there's this additional pool of money of let's say 225-some dollars times the total number of students in the system, that that money plus the basic per pupil allotment, which was \$3,686, will be applied to programs meeting their needs.

In terms of the specific question that you've asked in terms of the way we calculate the funding, it's the same assumption as Mr. Zatko just outlined on projecting enrollment growth.

THE CHAIRMAN: Thank you.

Sorry. Mr. Henry, you're wagging your arms and I'm not sure why.

MR. HENRY: I'm trying to point out that Mr. Beniuk was having his hand up.

THE CHAIRMAN: Thank you. I've got Dr. Massey first.

DR. MASSEY: Thanks, Mr. Chairman. I was interested in the minister's introductory comments that it depends less on where a child lives in terms of equity. I'd like to ask: are school boards required to include funds raised locally in their accounting to the provincial government, from their boards to the government? I think it's a great source of inequity. A principal at one school raffling off a car and using the funds to enhance programs, another parent paying for a teacher aide. How are those funds that are raised locally accounted for, and when they are, what's done with the information? Is there an attempt to level out the field?

MR. JONSON: Yes. In terms of our financial reporting structure, we are in the process of requiring – we have actually, but we want to refine that and improve it – the reporting of revenue from fees charged. So the answer is yes, but I would like to comment. That, I think, Mr. Chairman, ladies and gentlemen, is just one of the realities that is out there. I'm sure you're not suggesting that we should put a rule in saying, "Thou shalt not have fund-raising activities." We have always used quite deliberately the term "equitable." I think we've come a long way in providing equitable funding across this province. We have never said that it's exactly equal. We have a number of grant programs at the early childhood level and also we have the enhanced opportunity grant and so forth where we're trying to address some of the high-needs areas, high-needs schools and jurisdictions. I don't think necessarily that raffling off a house to have a set of lights and other artistic equipment to be the best in the province necessarily affects the quality of core education for students one way or another.

DR. MASSEY: If I could just pursue it. You said that it was fees that were charged. What about extra moneys that are raised – and I think revenues do affect the core program. For instance, if the school raises money to buy extra computers, are those moneys accounted for?

MR. JONSON: They have to report all revenue, yes.

THE CHAIRMAN: Last supplemental.

MR. JONSON: If I could, Mr. Chairman. On that particular score this is not a change from what has existed for the last 50 or 80 years. There's always been that difference in terms of somebody going out on a fund-raising project for one thing or another. Perhaps in the modern era it's increased, but it's always been there.

DR. MASSEY: The reporting hasn't always been there.

MR. JONSON: It is now.

6:07

DR. MASSEY: Where would you find those funds in the budget? Where are they accounted for in the estimates?

MR. JONSON: They're not accounted for in the estimates of Alberta Education, of our budget as a department, no. They're accounted for in the financial reporting that comes in from school jurisdictions.

THE CHAIRMAN: Dr. Massey, you get one main and two

supplementals.

Well, let's see; I have Mrs. Soetaert next.

MR. JONSON: I'm sorry. Perhaps I should just clarify though, Mr. Chairman, if I could. I think we always have to keep in mind here, as we go through this discussion, that school boards across the province are required to generate financial statements and statements of revenue and expenditure, which are supposed to be available to their publics. So we have to keep that always in mind.

THE CHAIRMAN: Mrs. Soetaert.

MRS. SOETAERT: Thank you. Mr. Minister, I've spoken to you about this before, last summer, and it is with regard to the school in Spruce Grove that was about to be built and got pulled. Now, I realize that was a board decision, and I must say that I'm glad you changed from the county system to the school board system out in Parkland. My concern out there is that the city of Spruce Grove is not represented proportionately on that council, so no matter what decision is made, Spruce Grove does not have a great influential vote on that. I guess my first question would be: have you looked into what happened to that school and why the funding was pulled from it? What I'm saying is that I question the board's decision on that. I know there's growth in Spruce Grove. The renovation money, as I understand, went to Graminia school in the county of Parkland rather than to the city of Spruce Grove, where there definitely is growth. I'm asking if the minister has looked into this.

MR. JONSON: The answer to your question is yes.

Secondly, as I recall, Mr. Chairman, I think it's been a concern of hon. members of the opposition that we may possibly interfere in local autonomy and those sorts of things. We've tried to be respectful of local school board decisions. As with anything, local school boards sometimes want to reconsider. So in this particular case, from our point of view, we knew that there had to be some additional building in the Parkland school division area. That money, which we had actually committed last year, we kept available to the school board. We can provide you with the details in terms of where it's being allotted in the year ahead, but we're following through on the commitment of money and support. The decision as to specifically where it's going to go is a school board decision.

Certainly there are occasions, not very many – we try and keep them to a minimum – where we might intervene and say: this is exactly where you should spend it for health and safety considerations or some other special circumstances. In this case we knew there was an increased demand there. We allotted the money. We carried it through. We're prepared to honour that commitment, but exactly how it's spent is something we've worked out with the local school board.

MRS. SOETAERT: Okay. Then I know tied to that school, or that school that is not going to be at the present time, would be the condition of Queen Street school, which was hopefully not going to be used or certainly renovated. Now, with that other school not being built, are there moneys going into Queen Street school? I know that to get to some of the classrooms, you have to walk through the gym. It's an old school, and I have some concerns about the condition of that school. Is it on the list anywhere for improvements?

MR. JONSON: Mr. Chairman, that's something that we will

commit to get back to the member on. There are three or four different projects that are being funded in this school division, and we'll get back to you on exactly what's being done. I'm sorry that I can't commit them all to my memory, but we'll get back to you on it.

MRS. SOETAERT: Okay. I guess, Mr. Minister, I'd like to know more details about how it all fell through with that school suddenly on the day of the sod turning. So I guess if you could get me more information on that. I just want to express my concern about the imbalance of that board. Hopefully, Spruce Grove will be getting some of the people from the bases coming up from Calgary. There is a concern about growth in that community and the lack of a school in that area. I guess that's a comment rather than a question, a voiced concern.

Thank you.

MR. JONSON: Perhaps I could respond to the first part, though, Mr. Chairman. We can certainly provide a description as to what happened from our point of view, but the response we will provide will be based on what motions were passed by the board, what events actually took place in terms of decision-making. We're not going to comment on the give-and-take and whatever nuances there may be, as there always are, here or wherever, when we're making decisions. We can provide an accounting in terms of the steps that took place, but I hope the hon. member is not expecting us to be able to – or is it even suitable for us to? – prejudge what people were thinking and why they voted. That's not appropriate.

THE CHAIRMAN: Thank you.

Mr. Beniuk.

MR. BENIUK: Thank you. Referring to page 131, capital projects, Mr. Minister, it's noted that "\$110 million is provided for new school construction and modernization of existing facilities." This amount is higher than initially proposed in the 1995-98 business plan, and one can assume it is reflective of the increased demand for funding. How much of this \$110 million is currently allocated for new school construction versus modernization of existing facilities?

MR. JONSON: Gary, have you got it?

MR. ZATKO: Of \$110 million, roughly \$38 million would be for new construction, and the rest would be for modernization and BQRP.

For 1996-97 we have \$20 million for new and replacement schools, about \$11 million for additions, about \$7.5 million for portable projects to be added onto core schools, and about \$15 million for modernization projects, which are major capital works, somewhere around a million dollars.

Then for BQR projects it's about \$38 million. BQRP is ongoing maintenance, and it's done on a block basis per school jurisdiction. So about \$57 times the number of enrolled students in a school jurisdiction gets a block grant and can use that money for whatever purpose it sees fit. That adds up to about \$92 million, and the rest of the money that's been allocated is for previous commitments and flow-through. Again, this is on a fiscal year basis, so when we look at a school year basis, which goes beyond our fiscal year, that would account for the remaining \$110 million, the remainder of it.

So when we look at our budget, you have to keep in mind that we're talking about a fiscal year basis, which is the provincial

fiscal year, which is different than the fiscal year that school jurisdictions use. So there are some differences in budget numbers because of that reason.

MR. BENIUK: Okay. Thanks. I'll go over those figures and sort them out myself.

While there is a desire and a subsequent need for new school construction in newly developed areas, there is a stronger need for schools in older areas to be upgraded to a level comparable to the newer schools. Has the minister considered placing a freeze on new school construction and allowing the same amount of funds to be routed specifically to upgrading and modernizing existing schools or possibly replacing the older schools?

6:17

MR. JONSON: I think, Mr. Chairman, it's important to emphasize that the basis on which we make our decisions in terms of funding is a report or a request from school boards. We're depending upon school boards to assess the needs in their jurisdiction and to come to us with their proposals in terms of their relative priority. While certainly we would intervene, we would I guess you'd call it mandate or forcibly inject money if there was a health and safety need within a jurisdiction. Generally speaking, we think of school boards as being the best people to assess their needs in terms of new construction versus modernization of other schools. We certainly try and provide some leadership, some advice, some direction from Alberta Education, but that is still the overall way these things proceed.

MR. BENIUK: Would the minister assist the school boards in realizing that in many cases the older schools are not energy efficient by today's standards? They have old plumbing, heating, ventilation systems and are not presently capable of integrating computer systems into the existing facilities. Would it not be more economically viable to spend funds to improve older schools where there is already a well-established school population?

MR. JONSON: Mr. Chairman, Alberta Education will certainly provide – and I do think we have some very knowledgeable people within the department – advice on these matters, things that the school jurisdictions should be looking at in terms of assessing their needs. But I have to come back and say that we also take very seriously the priorities they recommend to us and work off those in terms of actual approval of projects.

The other thing, though, for the hon. member that I think is very important here is that, as is my understanding, he represents a constituency in Edmonton. The Edmonton public school board, under the building quality restoration program, which is the ongoing maintenance, repair, and upgrading, is receiving \$5.7 million this year and next for purposes related to I think what the hon. member is referring to. So they should be looking at using that money effectively.

THE CHAIRMAN: Thank you. By the way, I've got three names here now for the whole Liberal side. So if you don't like the order, stick up your hand, and you can rearrange your own order here, as far as I'm concerned.

Mr. Beniuk, would you like back on the list again?

MR. BENIUK: Sure.

THE CHAIRMAN: Thank you.

Dr. Massey.

DR. MASSEY: I ask specifically about vote 3.2.2, national and

international education. Maybe I can give you all the questions at the same time. What is the money spent on? Is there a joint effort in any of the expenditures with advanced education? What is the extent of the overseas marketing of Alberta education programs?

I can't stand what we're doing.

THE CHAIRMAN: I didn't make the rules, ladies and gentlemen. Three questions.

MR. JONSON: I'll try and answer the questions briefly, Mr. Chairman. What is the money spent on? Well, we have a very small component of our staff – I think it's two people – so that would reflect their salaries and their office support. These people are facilitators or arrangers of a number of student exchanges that we have. With respect to those nationally, the main ones have been over the last number of years based to Quebec, also exchanges to Europe and to our sister provinces in the Pacific Rim. No, this is not a joint effort with advanced education, at least not at this time. What is the market? This is a popular program. You raise a legitimate question, though, in terms of whether it should be a core responsibility of Alberta Education, and that's something that we're currently reviewing. In terms of something that people want to do that we get positive responses on, and so forth, if you can evaluate a market that way, it's been quite positive.

THE CHAIRMAN: Thank you.

Mr. Henry, please.

MR. HENRY: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Again, looking at assumptions in the capital part of the budget, both the BQRP and the new construction, I'm wondering: what are the assumptions and criteria that led to the development of those two figures? Specifically, what assumptions were used to create the formula for BQRP, and in terms of capital construction, what are the criteria? What I'm after there, just for clarity: has the province done an inventory? Do you wait to see where new schools are going to need to be built in the next five or 10 years? Do you wait until they're at 95 percent capacity or 100 percent? What are the criteria? Okay? Is that clear?

MR. JONSON: In case I've missed the wording here, Gary can correct me. We have a fairly simple but I think workable set of criteria, Mr. Chairman. First of all, in terms of any capital expenditure beyond BQRP, it's health and safety considerations. If a heating system completely breaks down, which sometimes happens with older schools, those sorts of things go first.

Secondly, we look at growth areas where there's a great pressure on enrollment and the facilities are not adequate. Thirdly, we look at growth, yes, but also inadequacy of facilities to meet program requirements. For instance, providing technology studies is creating a demand on some school facilities.

MR. HENRY: With regard to the funding for technology – I recognize that the \$5 million was for the current fiscal year and there's money down the road. What are the benchmarks that are going to be used to determine the formula for the distribution of that money; i.e., is it going to be on a per capita basis, or are you looking to achieve certain benchmarks in each jurisdiction, such as has been done in British Columbia?

MR. JONSON: Mr. Chairman, in this regard, I think we can come up with a figure as to how much it is per student. I mean,

we're committing and we are fully intending in partnership, I guess is the term these days, with school jurisdictions to put money together here. In terms of our specific policy, we do plan to make an announcement on that within the next, I'd say, probably about two to three weeks in terms of the specifics. So at this point in time I'm not prepared, not through reluctance but just through not having it completely refined in terms of specifics, to answer that question, but that information will be public as soon as we make those final, specific decisions.

MR. HENRY: Okay. I'll look for the benchmarks at that point.

The last supplementary has to do with high school funding specifically. A point has been raised with me, and I'd like to know the department's rationale. The minister can see the question coming – I can tell – which is that there's funding on a per credit earned basis at the high school level, yet we know that the cost of providing perhaps an academic program where you sometimes can have 30 or even more students in a classroom is significantly lower per student than the cost of providing a vocational program. I would like to know the rationale for having one funding formula for two very different types of programs and very different costing and if you've looked at that in terms of revising it. Is that clear?

6:27

MR. JONSON: Sure. I've been there; done that over the years.

MR. HENRY: I expect you'll be there to do it again.

MR. JONSON: Well, don't get anxious.

MR. HENRY: You misinterpreted that comment.

MR. JONSON: I know the point, Mr. Chairman, that the hon. member is making. Generally speaking, the credit enrollment unit sort of averages out across, say, a high school. I mean, it's quite obvious that if you have a particular career and technology studies class or, as they used to be called – and there are still some operating – vocational classes, you say, well, those are the ones that have the low enrollments. But if you looked at high schools across the province, you'd find that there are low-enrollment classes in a number of other areas. Math 31 would be one of them, some of the fine arts courses, some of the senior or grade 12 level business education courses. So it's not, I don't think, hitting one particular category or achievement level of students.

The important thing, Mr. Chairman, that I think has been achieved with the credit enrollment unit – although I fully acknowledge here at the table that we've got some glitches. We have people concerned about the work and the details of reporting, which I think we're gradually overcoming as we put it on-line and develop computer-based formats for it. The main thing that we're accomplishing there, which grudgingly but I think constructively principals and their assistants in the system are acknowledging, is that we're paying for service delivery. In other words, you offer the course, and if they take the course, we pay. If they're not getting a course, they don't get paid.

We are, I think, definitely addressing that problem that was starting to become a little endemic to the system a while back, where particularly at the grade 12 level there was actually a reverse incentive, that appeared to be quite common in the system, where you would be claiming as a full-time student a person taking five grade credits. That was costing the rest of the system, I think, a disproportionate amount of money.

THE CHAIRMAN: Thank you.
Mrs. Soetaert.

MRS. SOETAERT: Okay. Thank you. I'm into capital expenditure in my riding, obviously. From my understanding, St. Albert's Catholic school board is getting a new school in the northwest corner, a good area of St. Albert, I might add, the best area in St. Albert. I just happen to represent that area. I will also table this for the minister in case he hasn't seen the article on the crowding in the present school, Bertha Kennedy, that houses a good portion of the children that will be going to the new school. So I guess my question is: is there any possible way this school could start construction sooner than next year? Could it possibly start this year? Because there is an overcrowding problem right now. Just say yes.

MR. JONSON: Mr. Chairman, I think perhaps Gary, Mr. Zatko, would want to respond. I appreciate the urgency. You know, you've got a surplus – I shouldn't use the term here – but you have lots of students, many students that need to be accommodated. When you're building a new school, I think we have to just hold back a bit, because something else is very important to local communities. Even though their children may be in crowded schools, they do want to make sure the school is located properly, that it is planned properly. Many jurisdictions really involve their community in the planning of the school so that all of the tendering proceeds the proper way to get the best possible prices.

So I'm just saying that if there's that urgent enrollment need, certainly Alberta Education would try to facilitate things moving ahead as quickly as possible. The school's going to be there for a long time, I hope, and we want to make sure that it's a quality product when it's done.

MRS. SOETAERT: Okay. Thank you.

My second question is: if a school or a property is sold, who gets those funds? Does the school board get the funds, or does it come back to Alberta? How does it work?

MR. JONSON: Mr. Chairman, the funds are divided on the basis of the amount that the respective parties put into it. If a sale is a hundred thousand dollars and the history of it is that out of general revenue it was funded 60 percent provincially, 40 percent locally, that's the way the money is divided.

MRS. SOETAERT: Okay. Now, my last one. Was there a sizable amount of reserves when all the pools went into the big pot in the sky? Some school boards had reserves stored up. What was the amount of that?

MR. JONSON: It was very sizable. Gary, can you give us an estimate?

MR. ZATKO: I think that the year before last it was maybe around \$16 million, \$17 million.

AN HON. MEMBER: Almost done?

MRS. SOETAERT: No. I'm done, but I'll go again.

THE CHAIRMAN: Thank you, Mrs. Soetaert.
Mr. Beniuk.

MR. BENIUK: Thank you. Computers once again, on page 131,

technology initiative. Currently a problem exists in that while in some areas the parents are able to contribute to the purchase of computers, parents in other areas either cannot or are limited in the amount they can contribute. This results in a high student/computer ratio or, in many cases, not having computers at all. All schools should be providing the same level of education and access to technology. Referring to the \$5 million which is noted on page 131: is it allotted for the computer network access to improve student learning opportunities? To put it another way: does it simply cover the subscription to the Internet carrier, or does it also include the purchase of computers and software programs from that \$5 million? What does it cover?

MR. JONSON: Mr. Chairman, the \$5 million in supplementary estimates includes only funding to schools across the province for the Internet or network connection. I'm not an expert on this, but as I understand, that includes the connection, the modem, the terminal. It has very, very clearly nothing to do with re-equipping schools as far as computers are concerned, but it does provide every school in the province access to the resources, albeit one terminal, but the library resources, the other things that are there now available to schools.

MR. BENIUK: That presumes there is a computer.

Can the minister find some way of cost sharing between the province and the school boards and parents for the purchase of computers so as to allow all students equal access to necessary technology?

MR. JONSON: Mr. Chairman, the answer is yes, and that's the basis on which the \$20 million per year is projected as coming into this system over the next two years: next year and the year beyond.

MR. BENIUK: Are there or will there be any funds available to the older schools to overcome their disadvantage in that a computer room requires extensive wiring, lighting, ventilation, air temperature and humidity control?

MR. JONSON: Well, Mr. Chairman, the answer is this: we do have the building quality restoration program, which has been increased this year. It's the \$30 million that we referred to earlier, which can be applied to this.

Secondly, one of the requirements that will be connected to our \$40 million, three-year investment in technology is that school jurisdictions have a plan. In other words, it's not that we're going to get into debating the details of their plan, but we want school jurisdictions to show that they have a plan and that they are with this money meeting their highest needs. Therefore, I would think that it would be logical for school jurisdictions to prioritize their expenditure in terms of meeting the needs of schools that have no technology base at all.

6:37

THE CHAIRMAN: Is that your third, Mr. Beniuk? [interjection]
Who would like to go from the opposition? Mr. Massey first.

DR. MASSEY: Again, I'd like to refer specifically to votes 1.0.10 and 3.1.2. One is the \$7.7 million in information services, and the other is \$9.2 million in student evaluation services. My first question is: how much is spent on diagnostic testing as opposed to achievement testing? The second question is: to what extent are individual student programs changed as a result of the achievement testing? The third is: when will we see some

qualitative measures rather than quantitative measures in terms of achievement? I refer to the kinds of measures that are used nationally to indicate literacy and numeracy skills of the Canadian population.

MR. JONSON: Mr. Chairman, I appreciate the questions. I think they're important although I have a little difficulty with I think probably the most important one, the last one. There are a number of different examples that I could use. Let's just use, say, grade 6 mathematics. The way that a grade 6 mathematics achievement test is designed is that you set a test, a series of questions which are designed to test a standard which has been developed using the expertise of teachers and others knowledgeable in the area. The quantitative part of it is very qualitative in the sense that if a student has answered that test very successfully, they are deemed to have achieved a grade 6 or grade 6 plus level ability to do mathematics problems and calculations.

Now, I know there were other questions asked, but is that, Mr. Chairman, what was pursued here? I mean, when we say, and I hope someday we can, that 50 percent of the students in the province – that's probably not realistic. Let's say 30 percent of the students in the province achieve a standard of excellence in grade 6 mathematics. That means that the qualitative measure has been met by this number of students.

THE CHAIRMAN: Thank you.

After Dr. Massey I've got Mr. Henry, please.

MR. HENRY: I'd like to pick up on Dr. Massey's earlier question with regard to revenue other than that from the department. What I want to know is: how do you monitor or do you monitor the amount of dollars put into our school system through fund-raising by parent groups and other associated groups in the school? Specifically you answered Dr. Massey's question saying: fees that were charged and expenditures by the school board, but are you doing any monitoring? Suppose a parent advisory council or friends of purchases new computers for the school and puts them in. That wouldn't necessarily show up on the school board. How do you monitor that?

MR. JONSON: It wouldn't show up specifically right now. No, it wouldn't. It's a valid question to raise and have a look at, but we don't.

MR. HENRY: Next, with regard to monitoring again. If I can give a two-sentence explanation beforehand. With Bill 41, I believe, back in the spring of '93, section 39 of the Act was removed regarding health services. What I want to know is: do you in your reporting of school boards monitor the amount of dollars school boards spend on purchasing health services? Conversely, is there any quantitative analysis done in terms of the amount of health services provided by local health authorities in schools? Do you understand that?

MR. JONSON: Yes. The answer is yes, we have been doing that over the past year. I don't have specific numbers to quote to you right now, but we have been doing that, in fact making a fairly extensive effort at compiling that information.

MR. HENRY: The last again is with regard to monitoring and specifically stress in the classroom. Again, in explanation, the Minister of Labour in his estimates indicated that there are indicators in terms of numbers of days lost through injury and numbers of days lost through work stoppages, labour disputes.

Does the department do any monitoring in terms of professionals in education with regard to numbers of individuals on long-term or short-term disability and either number of or percentage of allotted sick days being used by individuals? I believe that may be one indicator of stress. Or are there any other indicators that you use to measure this?

MR. JONSON: No, not at the moment.

MR. HENRY: Okay.

MR. JONSON: May I just make two comments? On the last question I gave him the straight answer, but when figures come out which appear to be alarming, such as recently were reported in Edmonton public, we do certainly check with the school jurisdiction. In this particular case, when we checked with the school jurisdiction the figures that were in the paper were not at all what the actual figures in the jurisdiction were. Not that isn't an area for concern; I'm just saying that we do follow through with the school jurisdiction when it appears that we've got a problem area.

The other thing is back to fund-raising, since this item, Mr. Chairman, has come up about three or four times this evening. Just to kind of keep things in balance – I think the members have raised a good point. It's something that we should look at in terms of trying to have a handle on the amounts of money involved, but we have to acknowledge that while middle-class, upper middle-class communities, sure, can probably raise quite a bit of funding, we've also had on the other side to balance it out quite a bit of business and other types of community support helping out some of our inner-city schools. Alex Taylor, I know, here in Edmonton, gets quite a bit of support and I think Norwood to a degree. So the fund-raising is a factor there. It's not always going in one direction. That's all I'm saying.

THE CHAIRMAN: Mrs. Soetaert.

MRS. SOETAERT: Okay. Thank you. I'm going to go to something a little different here. Like Dr. Massey, maybe I can lump all three questions in one if that's easier. I'm wondering about programs for our young people, maybe starting at the junior high level. It has something to do with my question in the House the other day. There was a recommendation by the group in Calgary about prostitution, young teens and prostitutes and what could be done within the schools to help that situation, and maybe something to do with self-awareness, which might help to address the teen pregnancy issue – for example, you were talking about special needs being particularly high – maybe an awareness about fetal alcohol syndrome and that kind of thing being started at a junior high level, maybe in the health curriculum. Are we looking at some sort of program at that level that will make our younger people more aware and maybe prevent some of these problems down the road? That's kind of all three rolled into one.

6:47

MR. JONSON: Well, Mr. Chairman, as I said in the House, during the past year we have not taken any additional initiative there quite frankly, but at the elementary level and in the new program statement for early childhood services and at the junior high school level we do have a health program which deals with everything from healthy diets to regular exercise to drugs. It's there. It's required that students take it. I think the objectives are there that would hopefully deal with the issues that the hon. member has raised.

I mean, if we're talking about childhood prostitution, Mr. Chairman, I don't think the answer is a specific program on childhood prostitution. If you're addressing that, then that's now cure rather than prevention. I do think the programs are there. We can question, certainly, if we're effective. Obviously we're not totally effective, but then this is a societal, a community, a home issue as well.

MRS. SOETAERT: Thank you.

THE CHAIRMAN: Thank you, folks.

My problem right now is I've got two and a half minutes or thereabouts in this hour, and Mr. Beniuk is next on the list. Are your three questions short, or shall we save the two and a half minutes and get them on the next round?

MR. BENIUK: We'll get them on the next round.

THE CHAIRMAN: Okay. In that event, does anybody on the Liberal side have a short couple of questions they'd like to ask?

MR. HENRY: To the minister. With regard to – I want to be careful how I phrase this. You hired a new deputy minister.

MR. JONSON: Yes.

MR. HENRY: I understand that there was an advisory committee.

MR. JONSON: Yes.

MR. HENRY: Because of other events, I don't want this to be a reflection on the choice, because I've . . .

AN HON. MEMBER: But . . .

MR. HENRY: No. And I'm very serious about that. There are no buts about it. Just for the record, the things I've heard on the street, if I can say, are positive. So this is about process and not about the selection of the individual.

I understand that there was an advisory committee, and I'd like to have the terms of reference and the membership of that advisory committee, if that could be released. You'd have to follow that one up. I don't expect you to have it here.

MR. JONSON: Mr. Chairman, the first point is that when we launched upon the search for a new deputy minister, I engaged a – I don't really like the term, but I guess it's so much in vogue that I can use it. We requested offers from search firms, sometimes referred to as headhunters. We had – I forget – somewhere in the neighbourhood of four or five qualified applicants for that task.

One was selected, which was Price Waterhouse. Part of their process – and it was something that we worked out together – was that there would be an advisory panel that looked at those applications and vetted them and conducted the long-list of interviews: you know, shortlist, long-list, that sort of stuff. Price Waterhouse did the advertising, the search, the initial vetting and checking of references and all that sort of stuff. Then the advisory panel was involved, as I said, in dealing with the long-list of candidates and recommendations were made and a selection was made. That's the process that was followed.

THE CHAIRMAN: That's pretty good timing.

Oh, I'm sorry, Mr. Henry. You have two sups to go with that.

MR. HENRY: Very quickly.

THE CHAIRMAN: Because I'll have to add that time on, then, to your next allotted time. We're right on the money.

MR. HENRY: I just wanted to note that I'd still like the minister to follow up on my question with regard to the membership and terms of reference. That's it.

THE CHAIRMAN: Your choice.

So we'll go on, then, to the government side now. Thank you.

From the government members' side I have Mr. Doerksen, Mr. Pham, Mr. Stelmach, and Mrs. Burgener. Who would like to go first? Mr. Doerksen, please.

MR. DOERKSEN: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Mr. Minister, I'd like to ask you a couple of questions that have come up from our school districts in Red Deer that I think also pertain to Alberta as a whole. The first one: the Red Deer public school board brought to my attention a potential problem of what to do if the GST rebate were to be lost, a move that would cost them, according to their figures, in the neighbourhood of \$300,000. I think the federal budget has removed that concern, for the time being in any event, but what are the steps we're taking to make sure we protect our schools from that potential action?

MR. JONSON: Mr. Chairman, through the office of the Provincial Treasurer and the office of the Premier this issue and a number of others were brought forward in prebudget discussions with the federal government. I think that was probably the most important initiative, quite frankly, because I think other provinces did the same thing. On a lesser note, as ministers of education across Canada we have discussed that and put forward our position as well, but it was dealt with, I think, mainly in the context of discussion with the Treasurers and Premiers across the country. It seems that for the moment, at least, we are okay on that score.

[Mr. Stelmach in the Chair]

MR. DOERKSEN: Okay. My second question or supplemental to my main question is to do with a request from both the Red Deer public school district as well as the separate school district. It has to do with whether they are allowed to charge for ECS now that we restored the funding to the previous level. Their rider on that would be that they would only charge to what they used to charge before the funding was reduced by the 50 percent.

MR. JONSON: I can't answer the question directly because I don't know what they used to charge and what for. Basically, from where we're coming from, where I'm coming from as minister, there should be no instructional fees for instruction time. Certainly in terms of books, materials, field trips, that kind of thing, as is the case for students in grade 6 or grade 9, that type of fee is certainly permissible. It was before; it is now.

MR. DOERKSEN: Okay. Then to follow up with that particular question, is there any restriction now placed on school boards with respect to fees in general? I'm even thinking of my own experience, where we have to pay book fees, course fees, et cetera, et cetera. Is there any restriction placed on a school board of what they can charge?

MR. JONSON: No, there isn't. Certainly if something were

very, very out of line as we monitor budget reports, we would make inquiries and if particularly outlandish would intervene. You know, one of the things that we think will maybe not be the highest thing on the list in terms of importance but one of the things that we hope will come out of our school councils is that those kinds of councils would advise on fees as they pertain to a specific school or something and could be depended on to make them realistic in terms of their community.

THE ACTING CHAIRMAN: Hung.

6:57

MR. PHAM: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I have a couple of questions to ask the minister. I know some of these answers, but my constituents in Calgary are kind of confused because they were presented with two sets of numbers, one set from Education and another set from the local school board. I'd like to have an opportunity to ask the minister to put the numbers on record so I can send it to them. They are wondering how much money we spent on education in 1992-93, including both the provincial portion and the local portion for the Calgary area, how much money we'll spend on education in 1996-97, how many students we had in Calgary then, and how many students we'll have in Calgary for 1996-97. That's my first question.

MRS. SOETAERT: That's four.

MR. PHAM: No, only one. Only the statistics in 1992-93 and . . .

AN HON. MEMBER: Plus the statistics over the last year.

MR. JONSON: Which is fair enough. We'll get them for you, Hung. I don't have them, but we'll get them.

MR. PHAM: Pertaining to the Calgary area only.

The second question that I have. There is a rumour in Calgary that when we amalgamate some of the school boards, some of the boards are more fiscally responsible than others and some of the boards run up a debt. Do we have to cover any debt from any board? Do we set aside any money to do that right now? The people from Calgary say that they are fiscally responsible; they do not carry any debt.

MR. JONSON: Mr. Chairman, I can answer the second one. That is that across the province, school jurisdictions were not allowed to have a debt that they could carry from year to year, and they did not. Where they had a debt, though, was on debentures that they held on capital projects, and there are still some of those. We picked up the debt on capital projects when we went to provincial funding, but it is correct that at the time the funding systems changed, there were jurisdictions that did have, in some cases, very significant capital debt, yes.

MR. PHAM: Okay. My last question deals with the money that we are going to spend on technology integration. My understanding of this is that it would be a matching fund. The provincial government will come up with half the money, and the local board will come up with half the money. If the local board doesn't have the money or has no interest in participating, will that money go to some other jurisdiction or will it be put back into general revenue?

MR. JONSON: Mr. Chairman, as I indicated earlier, the final

details of the proposed funding system for this information technology money have not been announced, but certainly I think in general terms, yes, we are looking for matching money or partnering with school jurisdictions. I, quite frankly, understand from what is the sort of preliminary response that school jurisdictions across the province are spending about that amount of money now, and requiring them to match the funds is not going to be a big burden. The only burden will be that as they put together their \$10 and our \$10, they're going to have to think through a plan and sort out their priorities as to where they really think their highest needs are in their system. Now, the hon. member may very well be highlighting a problem that may come up that we don't anticipate, and it's good to hear it. But I think, generally speaking, that of the 60-some school boards we've got across the province, all of them are committing a certain amount of money in this area right now. To put that together with what we might provide provincially under a plan I think should work fairly well.

THE ACTING CHAIRMAN: Okay. We'll proceed to Jocelyn.

MRS. BURGNER: Thanks, Ed.

MRS. SOETAERT: Mrs. Burgener.

MRS. BURGNER: He knows that.

I have three questions that I think bear some scrutiny and I'd like to have some clarification on. One is the review from an external audit of the department that is currently going on. You have an independent group working within the school communities as a whole and individual schools, and I think it would bear some discussion as to that process and who's involved and its status. I am concerned, as I think I shared with you, that it's not well known in the community that it's happening.

I'll just give you my three questions. In a similar vein is the issue of the consortia to develop professional development, the partnership between the ATA and the Alberta School Boards Association, and again the clarification on how that is working and its status. The other thing I would like to ask is: in the changes that are possibly forthcoming because of the western protocols on curriculum standards, do you foresee or do you anticipate for school boards or Alberta Education any reduction in staff, with specific reference to curriculum, once that type of standard is in place?

MR. JONSON: Mr. Chairman, with respect to the external audit which we have under way right now, it was one of the recommendations which was accepted from the report of the implementation team on accountability, chaired by the Member for Red Deer-South. That is under way. The process that was involved is that we advertised for external firms. I interviewed them. We had some certain criteria and selected a firm to do the report.

That firm has had a number of meetings across the province. They had a particular methodology they have used in approach to it. I would assure members at the table that it has involved teachers, administrators, school boards, and parents in terms of their audit or evaluation design. I'm just trying to think, now, in terms of a time line. Within the next month or two we will have that report completed. Certainly it'll be brought back through a process, and ultimately down the road it'll be public.

[Mr. Magnus in the Chair]

In terms of the consortia, certainly I think it's important to know if people feel we haven't publicized it well enough and

that's acknowledged. But across the province we've had staff from Alberta Education out discussing the proposed consortia model, which is really not terribly new. It is building off a successful example in southern Alberta that's existed for about four or five years. We're committing \$1.9 million for this year and two years following; in other words, a three-year projected expenditure. We'll be looking at about six consortia across the province, which roughly would approximate the old Alberta School Boards Association zones.

The overall co-ordination of professional development activities is the goal of this consortia initiative in a nutshell. It relates to goal 4, improving teaching. Although there have been some concerns raised along the way, as of last report, at the last meeting that was held with stakeholders it seems to be moving along well.

MRS. BURGNER: If I may, Mr. Chairman, for clarification. Mr. Minister, what happens to those school boards that opt out of this process? Where do we get the provincial attention to professional development when school boards can opt out of this process?

THE CHAIRMAN: That would be a sup.

MRS. BURGNER: Thanks, Richard.

MRS. SOETAERT: That's your fourth sup, but it's you guys.

MRS. BURGNER: I'll pull back on my third question if it requires your attention on that, or perhaps you could address it in writing.

MR. JONSON: With respect to the third question, Mr. Chairman . . . [interjections] There were three questions. I could get to the third one.

THE CHAIRMAN: Mr. Minister, would you like to respond to the third question?

MR. JONSON: Mr. Chairman, in answer to the question about the western protocol and Alberta Ed staff, Alberta Education staff are being reduced in number. I don't think that at this point in time going to the western protocol is going to help one bit with that. In fact, it's going to have the reverse effect. Right now we are working on mathematics. The goal is to work next on other core subject areas. So this is actually one of the areas where there's an increased demand on what's expected from Alberta Education staff. Nevertheless, we're going down.

7:07

MR. STELMACH: Mr. Minister, I wish to pursue the consortia that was mentioned by a previous speaker. You said that roughly \$1.9 million is to be spent across the province. Would that \$1.9 million be divided equally amongst the six regions?

MR. JONSON: The initial proposal was \$150,000 per region for what might be called infrastructure, and then the rest, \$2 per student, was on a per student basis. So certainly, you know, the one in central Alberta would obviously get less in total than the one in the Edmonton area.

MR. STELMACH: The per pupil allowance, does that reflect the administration – you know; a larger zone, more children, more admin dollars – or will the administration be set at an amount?

MR. JONSON: Well, Mr. Chairman, the way the proposal was devised, we felt initially that whatever the size of the jurisdiction, they would need sort of a minimum entity in terms of administration. That is, some director or councillor would be heading it up plus secretarial staff plus an office, access to materials and communication, telephone, all the rest of it. We costed it out, and we thought that that kind of base could be provided for about \$150,000. So that was costed out the same for all six of the proposed consortia, and then the rest was on a \$2 per student allotment.

Since that time, in the give-and-take of discussion on the consortia, one of the proposals that came forward was, "Well, we can do it for less than \$150,000," and we said, "Fine; if you can do it for \$50,000, the other \$100,000 can be reallocated on a per pupil basis in that zone." So we're all in favour of reducing administration. If they can do it, if they have free office space and all the rest of it, go right ahead.

MR. STELMACH: A third question also relates to the six zones. The six zones, then, would co-ordinate and plan the program which would include all of the, let's say, Francophone, separate, and public boards. There wouldn't be any separation there?

MR. JONSON: No. I know in a few cases this issue has been raised, but I've taken a definite position on this, and that is that the whole goal of this thing is to bring together jurisdictions in a planning process, in co-ordination, not to fragment our system. Given that they're working together right now, quite frankly it boggled my mind a bit to understand why they would want to break up into different segments over this kind of an activity. I mean, in Calgary – what was it? – two weeks ago they had a major, major convention, and as I understand it, the Catholic separate and public school board teachers were there together.

MR. HIERATH: Mr. Minister, I'm referring to the key performance measures on page 132. The Department of Education has set achievement standards of 85 percent for diploma exams. Given the variation of teacher-awarded marks in diploma exams, does the standard include teacher marks, or is this just the diploma marks?

MR. JONSON: Just diploma marks.

MR. HIERATH: That really leaves out a little of the true picture; doesn't it? Or does it?

MR. JONSON: Actually, Mr. Chairman, I thought the hon. member was asking the question the other way.

Mr. Chairman, as with the achievement tests, the diploma examinations are ones that we develop and we measure our standards against. It's quite true. I hesitated just to make sure here. I don't think it gives you a warped view, because that's what all students did across the province on the same examination.

MR. HIERATH: That being said then, if we are using department diploma exams, when we go over to page 133 and we're talking about the overall parent satisfaction of the children's education, are those performance measures, then, carried out by the school or the department?

MR. JONSON: Well, in terms of parent satisfaction, this is an opinion survey. We simply ask them.

MR. HIERATH: The school board or the department?

MR. JONSON: I don't know what firm we used last time, but we use one of the major opinion poll groups, and they ask the questions.

MR. ZATKO: It's a provincial survey, so all the questions are the same across school jurisdictions. So they're comparable, yes, just like the diploma examination.

MR. HIERATH: That's all, Mr. Chairman.

THE CHAIRMAN: Thank you, Mr. Hierath.

Mr. Jacques, and then Mr. Doerksen.

MR. JACQUES: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Mr. Minister, I'd like to ask a few items that surround this whole issue of the Alberta school foundation fund, and specifically to start with on page 138 of the main estimates book. Have you got it?

MR. JONSON: No, but go ahead.

MR. JACQUES: Oh, okay. In the four columns that are there, there's an item identified in the '96-97 estimates: other taxes, deferred revenue in the amount of \$19,201,000. My first question is: what is that?

MR. JONSON: Okay. Deferred revenue. I think my staff can give you the details, but basically there are two reasons for this amount of money coming in. One is that our collection year through municipalities for the last number of years does not jibe exactly with the payment schedule of the school boards, according to their fiscal year. The second part of the problem was the timing of implementing the funding framework. We ended up with a number of different carryover issues here in terms of revenue flowing into the fund. Gary or one of my other staff can give you the specifics of that. The fact of the matter is that we received money into the fund out of step with the normal budget year, so we had a little extra money.

7:17

MR. ZATKO: In essence, we went from three payments from municipalities to four payments in the transition to full provincial funding. When we went from three to four payments, there were some additional funds coming in. When we looked at the school year, the fiscal year, the municipalities' calendar year, and then the deferred revenues in the order of \$55 million, we straight-lined that over three years in terms of our three-year budget. So the \$19 million is a portion of that.

MR. JACQUES: In your answer, Mr. Minister, you made reference to the funding framework, and I want to compliment you on what a fine funding framework it is too.

The second question - I'll go back to this other page here. Bear with me for a minute. On page 192 in your Agenda '96 book there's a section in there that deals with the average annual provincial equalized mill rates for education. I understand what that is, but the question I have is: what will the mill rate be, this average mill rate that will be used, in residential and agriculture for the calendar year 1996? What was the comparable number for 1995?

MR. JONSON: The figure in 1996 is 7.12 mills. I think I mentioned that when I made my introductory remarks.

MR. JACQUES: Okay. I must have missed that.
And a comparable '95?

MR. JONSON: Seven point three.

MR. JACQUES: All right.

My third question then, Mr. Chairman. When you announced this program some two years ago in terms of the whole issue of the collection of taxation going provincial, at that time you announced also the phase-in process, and I've lost track of where we are in that. The properties that exceeded the average mill rate by whatever it was or those below were phased in over a period of time. Where are we in that phase-in process?

MR. JONSON: Well, we're in the second year of it. The figures I have here, Mr. Chairman, are that in 1996 87 percent of the municipalities will have completed their transition to that 7.12 mills that we talked about a moment ago.

MR. JACQUES: Eighty-seven percent?

MR. JONSON: Eighty-seven percent now. Mr. Chairman, we can work the statistics out. By Jove, here it is: 353 of the province's 374 municipalities will be phased in to the uniform provincial rates by 1997, which is the year following, but if you wanted to figure out the 87 percent this year, you could take 87 percent of 374.

MR. JACQUES: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

MR. DOERKSEN: Mr. Minister, you've answered several questions already to do with capital funding, and I'd like to ask you one more. Of course, it arises on these issues. We generally go back to our own constituents, and there have been a number of letters that I've had with respect to Eastview school and also Lindsay Thurber. I know those are two projects that have been identified by the school board as being on their priority list, and that's good. I support their decisions on that matter. The question I do have though: is there a list that's available provincially that shows the order of schools needing upgrades or repairs that are projected into the future?

MR. JONSON: Well, there is. I'd have to say, Mr. Chairman, that this is a matter of protocol. I think, particularly at this point in time when we've made our announcement and with school boards in the process of planning again their priorities for the next year, it should be something that a school board's prepared to provide you with, because we might be just a bit out of date in terms of their priorities right now. I can provide you with the priorities that they identified for this round of approvals, yes.

MR. DOERKSEN: My question was not necessarily about the priorities for the local district. For instance, the two schools I mentioned in Red Deer may be in relatively good shape compared to schools in Calgary or Taber or wherever. I'm wondering if there was a provincial priority as opposed to a local.

MR. ZATKO: We took all the school jurisdiction recommendations and ranked them according to the three priority criteria that the minister mentioned earlier: health and safety, growth, and program needs. We have that list available, yes.

MR. JONSON: Mr. Chairman, I know the member's concern, and yes, sure there's a list. Obviously there's a list that we have. But I'd just be a little bit cautious about this in the sense that the production of a list is not the problem. We do have a School Buildings Board. Contrary to maybe some of questions, I think

they've got a pretty good reputation, and they do make decisions on their own. I'm a little bit concerned that we might, if we get down this road, get into making other evaluations of what they've taken months to sort out in terms of priorities. But there's a list. Sure.

MR. DOERKSEN: Just a question or two to do with independent schools. We've seen the Edmonton public school board approve through the alternative program a local school, which then falls under the Edmonton public school district jurisdiction. We may see, perhaps, some other independent schools also apply to school boards. From my calculation that would mean, because of our funding formula, this is going to create some extra expenditure requirements from Alberta Education. My question is: if the funding for the independent schools were to be transferred under the auspices of the public school systems or the separate school systems, would the per pupil grants have to be reduced to make sure that you stay within your budget?

MR. JONSON: Mr. Chairman, if we funded independent schools at the same rate as we fund separate and public schools in the province and there was no authorization by Treasury Board and government of additional money, our calculation is that it would mean another \$26 million. You'd have to average that out, and it would mean a reduction for all students to accommodate that \$26 million.

MR. DOERKSEN: I'm done.

MR. PHAM: Going back to the money that we've set aside for the capital projects, will this money only go to the school boards that do not have any outstanding capital debt as we are speaking today?

MR. JONSON: Well, school boards don't have any outstanding capital debt as of today.

7:27

MR. PHAM: Given your answer earlier, you said that there are some school boards that have some outstanding capital debt and we take over the full funding. You provided that answer about 20 minutes ago. Some other school boards feel that they have been fiscally responsible and they should be rewarded for being fiscally responsible. They say that certain money that we set aside for capital projects should go to them first before it goes to any other board that has spent an excessive amount on capital projects in the past.

MR. JONSON: Well, Mr. Chairman, I apologize if I appeared to misanswer the previous question. As I understood the previous question from this hon. member, the question was getting at something that, yes, was an area of controversy when we went to the funding framework, and that is that there were some jurisdictions that were debt free and there were some that were carrying a fairly substantial debt for the servicing of debt on capital projects. That was the case. Under the funding framework and subsequent Treasury Board decisions the province has assumed their capital debt and taken care of it in terms of our accounting procedures under consolidated debt financing.

MR. PHAM: Yeah, but still the question that I have. I understand the mechanism that we use with the capital debt, but now with the new money that we put into capital projects, will we put that money into the board that didn't have a problem before, or will we treat everybody the same now?

MR. JONSON: We treat everybody the same, and we pay as we go.

MR. PHAM: Okay.

Another question that I have is on the money that we will spend on the technology integration. One of the things we have heard again and again is that if you learn something and you don't have a chance to use it, you will lose it. Have we thought of spending any money on developing a new way to assess the technology ability of the student after they have acquired a new skill and after we have spent all of this extra money on technology?

MR. JONSON: Mr. Chairman, in terms of assessment of a person's ability to use technology, I'm not aware that we do have any performance measures or evaluation of that. I don't think we have, and I guess I'd confirm by saying that we don't.

Certainly what I see as being the greatest return on investment in technology is that students will better learn mathematics, better learn chemistry, physics, and that we have the performance measures in place for right now. This is a vehicle for better delivering the concepts and other learning expectations of courses. In fact, probably most important, I think there is considerable potential for improving student learning in the area of reading – not writing, I'm afraid, but reading and sentence construction and so forth. We do have our performance measures there.

MR. PHAM: My last question, and maybe I should clarify a question I tried to ask earlier. When you learn things in a different way, when you learn things differently, then you should be assessed differently as well. For example, in mathematics a student with the help of a computer can write a program to solve a mathematical equation rather than using pen and paper, but if he's being tested with pen and paper, then he cannot prove the skills that he has acquired, and he cannot use the skill that he has learned to solve that problem. Is it fair for the student that when we invest all of this money in teaching him all the new skills and when it comes assessment time, we still assess him in the old way? That's the thrust I am putting in my question.

MR. JONSON: Well, Mr. Chairman, I acknowledge the point the hon. member is making. The hon. member, I think, knows 10 times as much as I'll ever know about computers, and I acknowledge his area of expertise.

I can only, though, stand behind the answer that I gave earlier, and that is that we have not really addressed the very major issue the hon. member is raising. We are looking at it, I guess you'd have to say, Mr. Chairman, in a much more basic and mundane way. That is, we're looking at it in terms of improving the student's ability to respond in a traditional way with the additional information and illustration and three-dimensional presentations and so on that are available for, say, a course such as physics.

THE CHAIRMAN: Thank you very much, ladies and gentlemen. That will have to finish us for this evening. When we come back, the government side will have about 15, 18 minutes. I'll get the exact number of minutes. Mr. Jacques will be first, if he could remind me of that, and Mrs. Burgener second on the government side. At that point, when we conclude the 15 minutes, we will then go to the opposition members for their one more hour of questioning, Mr. Beniuk to be first on the list because he gave up his place to Mr. Henry, and then we'll go back to our old rotation, unless you folks would like to change it.

With that, we'll recess. See you in two days, 5:30 to 7:30, this room.

[The committee adjourned at 7:34 p.m.]

