

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

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5:44 p.m.

[Chairman: Mr. Magnus]

Committee of Supply: Designated Supply Subcommittee Education

THE CHAIRMAN: We have 16 minutes in government time. I'm not sure. Mr. Jacques, are you the first questioner? Then at that point we will go to the Liberal side and the Independent side for one hour, and Mr. Beniuk will be first on that list for obvious reasons from the last meeting. So now that we've started – and we need to get the two hours in tonight.

MR. ZATKO: Are you going to wait for the minister?

THE CHAIRMAN: Does he have to be here? Tell him to hurry up. Unless everybody would like a meeting called on Sunday.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: No.

THE CHAIRMAN: Okay. Well, then we're on.

MR. JACQUES: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Mr. Minister, referring to page 124 of the main estimates book and specifically in terms of references 2.4.1 and 2.4.2. Section 2.4 is the pensions and learning resources. I have some questions with regard to some of these items in here. With regard to item 2.4.2., the learning resources subsidies, the last year was in there at \$5.4 million, this year is \$5.45 million, and I have some questions in this regard. Number one is: could you please explain to us what the learning resources subsidies are? Maybe I could ask all of these questions at the same time rather than going three in a row. Or how would you like to have them? I'll ask all three, and then you can reply. Secondly, how is that amount calculated, and will that calculation be used, obviously, for the future or is it subject to change? Then, thirdly, under section 2.4.1, which is the teachers' pensions, current service payment, which shows about a \$7 million increase for '96-97. Could you just elaborate on that, whether that is moneys that are indeed paid out this year, or is that the funds that are going into the pension plan? Why that significant change?

MR. JONSON: Well, Mr. Chairman, if I could work from the last item backwards. With respect to the teachers' pensions, current service payment, in our budget through the agreement that was made – my understanding is that it was arrived at some years ago during the tenure of the previous minister – certain rates or percentages of payment were agreed upon in terms of supporting the TRF. Given the number of teachers, because it's a percentage that relates to their average salary which causes it to go up, that's the calculation that we have in terms of teachers currently in the teaching force that were paying our matching, I guess you'd call it, proportion of the premium. Given that the average salary is rising, that's the calculation that we make right now.

Now, there was also in the memorandum of understanding – my staff can correct me if I'm wrong here – an agreement to pay a certain contribution to the unfunded liability that was being dealt with on a long-term basis in that memorandum of understanding, and that particular calculation is under Treasury.

Secondly, with respect to the learning resources subsidy, through the Learning Resources Distribution Centre we provide a subsidy of \$9.30 per student. That's what our support is calculated on, at least, and this pays roughly 25 percent of the cost of core materials, authorized materials that are ordered by school boards for their classes. I think it's fairly well recognized that we do produce, handle, or authorize good core learning

materials in the form of textbooks, and so forth, that match up with the curriculum we have in Alberta schools. This subsidy, number one, is an assistance to school boards with their costs. The other thing is that it is an encouragement, quite frankly, and a direction, an incentive to use what we feel are the quality materials they should have as their core resources to offer the curriculum.

THE CHAIRMAN: And we are on the government side now. Thank you, Mr. Minister.

Mrs. Burgener, please.

MRS. BURGNER: Thank you. Halvar, I guess one of the issues that continues to be a concern, particularly in Calgary with the growth that we're experiencing, is the allocation of capital dollars and how we are going to fund the acquisition of new school facilities to meet that growth. However, having said that, I'm anxious that we also move into maybe what I would call nontraditional sites for education. I'd be interested to know in the business plan whether or not you foresee an opportunity to revisit or explore other opportunities for facilitating education in nontraditional sites. If that's the case, would you be interested – this is my second; I'll just give it to you now – in establishing some type of a task force or strategic planning process? I bring this forward as a Calgary MLA because of the tremendous growth that we're seeing, and I think it's something that has to be looked at in the future.

MR. JONSON: Well, thank you for the question. First of all, I'd just like to make a comment, because this whole area of capital allotment has been of interest to the committee. Certainly, one of the areas in the two-year capital plan that's just recently been announced is recognition of what seems to be very high growth areas. Calgary and the Airdrie and Cochrane areas, if you looked at the list, have certainly been recognized in terms of the growth or potential for growth. There are two new schools authorized for Calgary public, both junior high schools, very significant cost items, and as I recall, three for Calgary separate, because they do have that growth in enrollment. So I just make that comment in terms of the priority given to that particular area.

Now, in terms of being open to new ways of approaching things, while I guess a committee or a task force is always something that is proposed, I think we've signaled it quite well that we're open for alternatives and we'll facilitate and certainly not stand in the way of good alternative premises. We have of course an obligation with respect to health and safety requirements. In Calgary, as I understand it – I haven't, I'm sorry to say, had the opportunity to visit the school – there's the AGT workplace school in downtown Calgary. I'm aware that there is a proposal from a developer to lease or to build an ECS to grade 3 – I don't know if portable is the right term – relocatable-when-empty kind of facility.

5:54

Across the province there are a number of different combinations or alternatives being come up with. I don't want too much emphasis attached to the label, but in at least two locations in the province we have found very fine buildings, well built, of excellent standard, and, lo and behold, fairly good for school use. They happen to be the previous property of the Alberta Liquor Control Board. Those are located in Provost and Innisfail. At the moment – I visited one of them – they're serving very well.

So we are open to that. I appreciate the point made by the hon. member, but we're certainly open to that kind of alternative.

THE CHAIRMAN: Thank you.

Any other questions on the government side? Mr. Hierath, please, and you have about six minutes left.

MR. HIERATH: Thank you. I'll organize myself from eating to asking a question of the minister. Page 125, regarding the support block and central administration cost. It's a decrease from \$121 million in 1995-96 to \$96 million in '96-97. Could the minister explain what the \$24 million reduction in this area is? Also, what is considered as central administration under the funding framework? My third question to the minister would be: how is the amount received from central administration calculated?

MR. JONSON: Well, in terms of its calculation, the amount eligible for "administration" - I'll get into the definitions in a moment - for this current year for most school boards of significant size in the province is 5.2 percent, made up of 4 percent for administration in maybe the traditional sense and 1.2 percent for support services.

Secondly, in terms of how we achieve that reduction that you referred to in your initial numbers, that is the applying of that formula. I would like to indicate that many school jurisdictions across the province have had really, quite frankly, no difficulty or change to make in adapting to the formula, but some have had to really reorganize and focus money on the classroom or instruction versus their administration.

The middle question that you asked, hon. member, Mr. Chairman. In very simple terms, in terms of the definition, if it is a service offered out of the central office or out of the actual operation of schools, that is considered administration or central office support services. We're talking here about the financial management. We're talking about the duties of a superintendent. We're talking about the administrative component of such things as the school transportation system. There's the bus supervisor, that sort of thing.

So that's in a nutshell what it is. Perhaps it could be recorded that if the member would like a little more detail on that, we could give it, but that's essentially it.

THE CHAIRMAN: Thank you, Mr. Hierath. That's all?

MR. HIERATH: Yes.

THE CHAIRMAN: Are there any other questions? From Mr. Jacques, please.

MR. JACQUES: Thank you. Mr. Minister, there's been some recent controversy, if I can use that word, with regard to the funding received by certain school boards or school districts under the formula for transportation. In this connection I was wondering if you could, number one, outline the basic methodology, if you like, that's used today particularly between the various kinds of groupings, as I recall, of school boards, such as urban versus rural versus, I believe, Edmonton and Calgary, who are separate again.

Secondly, what initiatives, if any, are under way in terms of looking at the overall formula? Thirdly, could you just describe the criteria used in terms of transportation? There are things used like gate-to-gate, for example. In other words, what's the basic that we provide funding for vis-à-vis that which a particular board may adopt?

MR. JONSON: First of all, Mr. Chairman, basically the formula

is based on what we call a block funding formula for urban centres, which applies in Calgary and Edmonton, and I think Red Deer has adopted the block funding formula. So the two major urban centres in the province along with Red Deer use it, and that would be available to Grande Prairie or Lethbridge if they chose to go in that direction.

The other is a formula which is based on percentage load on school buses versus the mileage that they have to travel to serve students in a jurisdiction within our requirement that transportation be provided to all students in the province within 2.4 kilometres of their residence or, if it's the reverse, where they're talking about 2.4 kilometres from a school. I think that formula is outlined in the information booklet that was provided or available to all MLAs. If there are more specific questions, though, on how it applies in a particular area, my staff would certainly help with that question.

The other question that you raise. Our experience, Mr. Chairman, thus far is that generally across the province the transportation formula is quite adequate. In fact, we have indicated to school boards that the amount they received last year is the amount they can expect this year unless they have some particular growth or other special circumstances. What I'm saying is, quite frankly, that by trying to be fairly flexible, we might otherwise have experienced an unsubstantiated draw on money for transportation.

The final comment I would make, Mr. Chairman, is that some jurisdictions, yes, feel they have transportation costs that are very expensive. But the point is that if you want to have short bus routes or if you want to have gate-to-gate service or if you want to bus everybody into a school even though they might be six blocks or five blocks away from the school, that does add additional cost, and that's something to be decided at the local level. We feel that the formula does cover adequately transportation for students in a safe and reliable manner.

THE CHAIRMAN: Thank you very much. That's really, really close to finishing up the government time in this hour, so we will go the opposition members' time. I'll let the Liberal opposition designate their own order. Just give me a little list or something.

It would be Mr. Beniuk first.

MR. BENIUK: Okay. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. On page 126, program 3.1.4, language services. Mr. Minister, it is generally accepted that knowledge of international languages is of great benefit in assisting Alberta citizens and companies market their services, knowledge, and products abroad throughout the world in an increasingly interwoven, globalized marketplace. My first question: in addition to the \$1,869,000 referred to in program 3.1.4, are there any other funds provided through the Department of Education in support of instruction of international languages?

Do you want me to give all three questions?

6:04

THE CHAIRMAN: You can give them one at a time.

MR. BENIUK: Okay.

MR. JONSON: The answer is no. While I recognize the importance of languages such as Japanese and Spanish - they are worthy options or alternatives in the system - they would be treated the same way that mathematics 31 or physics 30 might be.

MR. BENIUK: Okay. Can I just ask for clarification of what that meant? It's not a question, but could you clarify what you meant when you said: treated like physics or mathematics?

MR. JONSON: Well, there's no additional funding, Mr. Chairman. The selection of courses and the setting up of a program is something that's done at the school level. School boards of course are required to offer core subjects in social studies, language arts, mathematics, and science. There are some others to be added to the list at the high school level. Second languages are optional. Therefore, the funding is there for them in terms of whether it's the per pupil grant or the credit enrollment unit at the high school level, but there's no additional money for that subject over any other.

MR. BENIUK: Okay. My second question, then, is: what percentage of this \$1,869,000 is directed towards Canada's official languages, and what percentage to the other international languages by this breakdown? I'm referring to 3.1.4.

MR. JONSON: I'd have to get the details back to you in written form, which I commit to do.

MR. BENIUK: Okay. My final question on this round. In preparation for next year's education budget, are you considering requesting input from Alberta citizens and companies regarding the need for funding for international languages?

MR. JONSON: I would have to say that we will be doing an ongoing discussion with school jurisdictions, particularly school boards and superintendents and administrators, with a view to any fine-tuning or refinements we need to make in our funding formula, and that matter of languages and courses will be covered. But to be clear, Mr. Chairman, we are not planning any specific separate consultation on languages. This would be part of our overall discussions that we conduct throughout the year.

MR. BENIUK: Those were my three questions, Mr. Chairman.

THE CHAIRMAN: Thank you, Mr. Beniuk.
I've got Mr. Henry, then Mrs. Soetaert next.

MR. HENRY: Thank you. I'd like to direct our focus to the Alberta Distance Learning Centre. I know there have been ongoing discussions regarding transferring responsibility of that from the province to a local jurisdiction. I know there have been several discussions. A couple of questions with regard to that. I wonder if the minister could outline the parameters or the criteria from a provincial point of view in terms of things that need to stay, when and if it is transferred, in terms of service levels, et cetera, as well as in terms of employee contracts. I've been approached by several employees, as you might expect, wondering or worried about if this service is transferred to a local jurisdiction, will the existing contract be assumed with the employees; i.e., the same positions, the same employees, and the same contract terms?

MR. JONSON: Mr. Chairman, the answer for this, I think, to satisfy the hon. member, is fairly detailed, and we would commit to giving him an overview of the situation. The only answer that I'd take up time with now is to indicate I wouldn't say that we have concluded but we have certainly moved the bulk of the way in transferring the School for the Deaf to the Edmonton public school board jurisdiction. I think there are some questions surrounding the pension, quite frankly, but in terms of salary, salary levels have certainly been protected. Anyway, I'll stop there.

MR. HENRY: There's a joke here I don't understand. Perhaps I can pursue that.

MR. JONSON: It's not a joke. Anyway, go ahead.

MR. HENRY: It's more complicated than we want to get into now; is it?
Okay. That's fair.

THE CHAIRMAN: Supplementary, please.

MR. HENRY: Yes. Thank you. Another concern that's been raised is that if this is transferred to a local jurisdiction, students who are using the centre won't have access to the RITE line, and therefore there'll be some costs downloaded onto students, who'll have long-distance costs in terms of contacting the centre. I'd like to know how that's been addressed in terms of: is the provincial government prepared to extend the RITE line provision to that when it goes to the local jurisdiction, or is there some way of compensating students in terms of lower course fees or something? I think I've made the point.

MR. JONSON: Mr. Chairman, that's one of the factors that involved in this transfer, something we have to look at. I don't have a final report to make, but it's a valid concern.

MR. HENRY: Okay. The next question, then, is twofold. I'm wondering if the minister could provide me with a chart, a report outlining the number of students served over the last 10 years and a breakdown too of how many of those are over 18 and under 18. Specifically with regard to that, what I want to know from the minister is: what's the rationale that this should be transferred to a local school jurisdiction, given the experience with Viscount Bennett? It's primarily adult, though the rationale has been to try and transfer that to a postsecondary. I suspect that a substantial number of students at the Distance Learning Centre are adults as well. So I'm wondering: why is it going to a public jurisdiction and not to maybe a postsecondary, an AVC or NAIT? Is that clear?

MR. JONSON: Sure. I think, Mr. Chairman, the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre recognizes that this is something we'd follow up on with the outline of the numbers.

The rationale. Perhaps I'd better be careful after today, but I think my memory is correct. I think I was actually correct today, but that's okay. We want to make clear in our overall business plan – that was signaled in our statements three years ago – that we do not see the role of Alberta Education and the government being that of actually operating schools. We see that best being provided by school jurisdictions. They have the operational infrastructure; they have the people that are tuned towards day-to-day operations of schools. Therefore, using the example that I did before of the School for the Deaf and now using the Alberta Correspondence School, the Distance Learning Centre, we're following up on our overall direction there to place the operation of ongoing school-type entities in the hands of operators outside of the provincial government.

THE CHAIRMAN: Thank you.
Mrs. Soetaert.

MRS. SOETAERT: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. My questions are going to be dealing with exams and the testing procedure that we have.

My first one is with regard to the grade 12 exam that was missed by some students because of inclement weather. From my understanding the minister has made a ruling on what students can do now that they've missed part of an exam. Are the students all aware of that? Because I just this week got another call from somebody saying . . .

THE CHAIRMAN: Mrs. Soetaert, can you link this somehow, just give me some clue how this is connected to estimates? This is a question that could be asked in a lot of different places.

6:14

MRS. SOETAERT: Does the minister mind it?

THE CHAIRMAN: Well, I'm the chairman, Mrs. Soetaert, and I've got to tell you that I do mind.

MRS. SOETAERT: Excuse me. I'm sorry; 3.1.2, student evaluation services.

MR. JONSON: Yes.

THE CHAIRMAN: Thank you. Now, if you could link all of your questions to the estimates, I would prefer that. Thank you.

MRS. SOETAERT: I certainly will, under 3.1.2.

With regard to the tracking process in testing, I was wondering: if we're going to spend money on testing, is there any way we can track how kids improve, rather than just evaluating them in grade 3? Some come into grade 1 at a different level, maybe because of cultural or gender biases. Is there any way of tracking them from grade 1 to grade 3 instead of just a grade 3 test? I guess my point is the value of these grade 3 tests and – I'll lump all my questions into one – how they are used. Does it help the student for the next year, or is it just an evaluation of where students are and then it's forgotten? So besides telling the government how wonderfully everybody's doing, I want to know what else they are used for.

MR. JONSON: Mr. Chairman, to try and get to the point here. Basically, if we have an achievement test in grade 3 or grade 6, what the achievement test indicates is that in our best judgment, relative to the curriculum and the objectives or standards applied to let us say mathematics or arithmetic in grade 3, we are able to indicate to teachers and students and, very importantly, parents that their child is reading at a grade 3 level or reading at a grade 2 level or reading at a grade 5 level, which I think is very important for all concerned to know, whether they are in Hanna or Ponoka or Edmonton or Calgary. Of course, most concerns would arise if they are below the grade 3 level. Then it leads to the next step: what is the reason? What remedial action is necessary? Then the system works from there. But it's a very important indicator, a very important basis to work from.

MRS. SOETAERT: Are there any considerations made for cultural or gender biases in different parts of the province?

MR. JONSON: There is some consideration, certainly. We understand what you're talking about there. I think the point here is that certainly within the system and within the school we want those kinds of things to be considered, but the fact of the matter is that if I were disabled and on social assistance and had children, I would still want to know at what level they were achieving and do whatever I could to work with the school to address that. On

the other hand, if I was very wealthy and had a doctorate degree and so forth and owned a big company, I would still want to know and I'd want to be able to work with the school to improve achievement, if that was a problem.

MRS. SOETAERT: Thank you.

THE CHAIRMAN: Dr. Massey.

DR. MASSEY: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'd like to refer to the capital block in the new school funding. I go back to the amount of time and energy that's been spent on school buildings across the province by trustees, officials of the department, and school officials and the proposals that there were a number of years ago to move, at least in urban areas, to block funding of capital projects. I wonder: has that moved anywhere along the way? That would be the first question. I think it was recognized at the time that block funding wouldn't be adequate for rural areas of the province because many would never get a school, but for the urban areas it was a suggestion. So I wondered what had happened to that proposal.

The second one. Has there been a loss of building funds with local boards no longer levying property tax and making contributions to buildings? I'm not sure I understand any longer quite how that works, but I think of us on the public school board putting together Percy Page high school, the department making its contribution, and then, because of occupancy rates, the local board made its contribution. Now that local board contribution: is that lost, or do they still make that contribution out of that money they get from the government? I suspect not. If so, how much has been lost to the total building program across the province?

My third question is in regard to capital projects. What is the commitment or is there any kind of a statement of commitment to community aesthetics in terms of school buildings? Again I go back to the experience when the city of Edmonton amalgamated Jasper Place. The schools there had been built with just the amount of money that was allowed for the building. Many of those structures were anything but aesthetic, and 25 years later they had to be replaced or dramatically remodeled. So is there any kind of a commitment to the aesthetics of a community, any commitment to the architecture of the community? I know a school is what goes on between teachers and children, but those buildings do play a big role in the community and community aesthetics there. What is the department's view of that?

[Mrs. Burgener in the Chair]

MR. JONSON: Mr. Chairman, I'm a little bit confused. I guess I have a tendency before the committee – I'm sorry – to work from the last question back to the first. I'm a little bit confused about the reference to aesthetics, and also the hon. member was referring to quality. I don't think they go together necessarily. We've had some examples over the years where you've a building that was beautiful for five years. In terms of aesthetics, certainly we try to make our school buildings comfortable to look at. Quite frankly, we've made some decisions to cut down the rate of expenditure per metre over the past year, which will probably mean that some of the aesthetic things won't be there which were in schools that were completed two or three years ago, but I think they are still going to be pleasant looking buildings. I would refer you to buildings such as the junior/senior high school in Airdrie, which was completed I think about three years ago. That one was built within the provincial support levels at the time. I'm not an

artist so I won't say, but it looks fine to me. It's certainly sturdy and I think will last for a long time. So we're making sure that in terms of durability the buildings will last with the way we're funding them right now.

The second point that you raised was with respect to whether, quote, money had been lost through moving to full provincial funding. Any money that has been lost has not been lost. I guess I would say that it's been saved in the sense that school boards cannot quickly move up mill rates to finance buildings beyond the cost approved by the provincial government. So it depends, I guess, if you're a taxpayer or somebody who wants a more elaborate building, but we fund buildings now at one hundred percent.

6:24

That first question was the question of block funding, and yes, Mr. Chairman, that's been looked at by officials in my department. The difficulty with block funding for school buildings is that if you have city A with 200,000 people but their student population has dropped by 5 percent, the demand on buildings – for new buildings, at least, and modernizations – is obviously going to be far different from city B with 500,000 people which is experiencing a 10 percent growth in student population. That's where the block funding just doesn't work. So through the School Buildings Board they assess such things as health and safety requirements, rapid enrollment growth, the need to upgrade school facilities to meet modern program requirements, and work from there.

THE ACTING CHAIRMAN: Thank you.

We'll go to Mr. Beniuk now.

MR. BENIUK: Thank you. Mr. Minister, on page 130 under selected strategies it states that barriers to co-ordination of services for children with special needs are to be removed in co-operation with other departments and agencies. What barriers are you referring to? For example, is it greater access to special-needs classes in more locations? Is it more trained staff to help work with these children in integrated settings? Or is it providing necessary equipment, et cetera, for those with physical disabilities? What specifically are you referring to?

MR. JONSON: The first thing we're referring to, Madam Chairman, is barriers in terms of our administrative procedures among departments and our views that we have of our roles and so on. That's the first thing we're looking at: to work out protocols, to work out working arrangements so that social workers have a job description and a protocol which fits in with the way the schools operate and so forth. That's the first one really.

[Mr. Magnus in the Chair]

MR. BENIUK: Referring on page 126 to program 3.2.5, special education, is the funding for this removal of barriers included in the special-needs operating expense of \$1.5 million, or is the cost of removing these barriers someplace else in the budget, or would there be no cost at all involved?

MR. JONSON: This is an effort by the department, and the department lines of course are under vote 1, which includes myself, and vote 3, which includes the rest of the department. In terms of working on this, this is a department function done by department staff, mainly the deputy minister and the related ADM

and the special education branch. So the negotiations, the work, the planning on this would be coming out of that; sure.

MR. BENIUK: So what would 3.2.5, special education, refer to specifically? Is it the physically disabled, or what would it refer to?

MR. JONSON: The funding for special education students is in vote 2. If I could respectfully suggest that the hon. member look at the book that was provided to MLAs, he would see the formula: \$8,900, approximately, for high special-needs students, a block grant which is rolled in with the instructional grant of approximately \$250 for mild and moderately handicapped students. So that's the service money.

Within the department we have a special education branch which deals with doing special-needs assessments, which deals with special-needs appeals, which deals with special-needs program statements and support materials, all that sort of thing.

MR. HENRY: The minister has allocated money this year to fund the professional development consortia – I'm not using the right name – with regard to school councils and site-based management, et cetera.

So with regard to that, a couple of questions with regard to the role of the school council and the minister's objectives there.

I first want to state that I think the product that came out of the consultation regarding the school councils is a good one, and I think it's a move in the right direction. There's been some question about the liability of school councils with regard to fund-raising. If a fund-raising project goes belly up, is that the responsibility of the individuals involved or the school council or the school jurisdiction? Does the ministry have a policy on that? Initially there was some question as to whether the school council should be fund-raising or not.

MR. JONSON: Mr. Chairman, I think there are two parts to the answer, and that is that we made it quite clear in the last amendments to the School Act. Without going into detail, the coverage that is available to school boards is available to school councils. The second thing, though, is that we indicated that school councils are not to be commissioned to societies for fund-raising. If a school wants to do that, they set up another entity for that particular function under the School Act. There are a couple of reasons for that. One, I guess, is perhaps related to the area of liability. The other thing is that we felt that one of the things that was wrong in our previous situation was that our councils or committees were formed and then the only thing that was ever referred to them was raising funds. So we wanted to keep those functions somewhat distinct.

MR. HENRY: Again with these school councils, my first supplementary. I'm looking at the objectives as determined in the minister's business plan for Education, and of course every business plan from each school jurisdiction. If a school council in its wisdom decides that they have different objectives or different performance measures in terms of what they want to have happen at their school, then does the business plan of the school jurisdiction or the department prevail?

Perhaps I can give an example that might help. The business plan, of course, focuses on academic achievement, yet we may have a school council that might say: "We're satisfied with the academic achievement. We see no need to improve, although we know we could always improve. What we want to focus our energies on are racial conflict on the playground, or, rather than

more money going into improving academics, we'd like to accept what we have and put more money into intercultural things that are happening in various programs in our schools," et cetera. If there is a conflict of that, which shall prevail?

6:34

MR. JONSON: First of all, I think it's important to keep in mind the general role of school councils, which I think is a much enhanced and improved one over previously. Nevertheless, it is advisory. So keeping things in that context, we have, yes, established an accountability framework. The list is not long, but the accountability framework does require, I believe it is, four or five essential things, at least according to our initial stage of this policy, in our view and in the view of the consultation results that must be reported on. One, as I recall, is achievement test results. Another is diploma examination results if it applies to that school. Another is general parental satisfaction with the school and so forth. Now, those are givens. The way we see it is that the school must be conscious of those things; they must report to their public on how they are achieving in that area. If at the school level in a working relationship with their school board they decide they want to emphasize fine arts, that is something that's possible.

The point I'm getting around to making is – this is just a hypothetical example, but it illustrates my point. If the school council says they want to emphasize fine arts, and by some chance when the achievement test results come in and are duly reported to the school community and all their grade 6 students are reading at the grade 2 level, then I think it would be something that everybody would have to reconsider as to whether there was a relationship between the two.

MR. HENRY: My heart goes out to the principals.

MR. JONSON: Well, it's something we would all think, if you're a principal.

MR. HENRY: Speaking from experience? That's not a question.

My last supplementary. School councils are encouraged to create more links with local community business and business partnerships. My question to the minister is: in terms of achieving that goal provincially, do you have any monitoring or any reporting mechanism to determine the quantifiable level in terms of numbers of hours or numbers of dollars or whatever that the business community is contributing to our school system on a jurisdictional and provincial basis?

MR. JONSON: Mr. Chairman, there's been ongoing work done on that. I think the fairest response and the best response right now is that we do have an implementation team chaired by Denis Herard, MLA, and Hung Pham, present at this table as MLA, working with an advisory group on that. I hope before too long that we'll be able to release an initial statement on that.

THE CHAIRMAN: Thank you, Mr. Henry.

Mrs. Soetaert, please.

MRS. SOETAERT: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. My questions to the minister are regarding Ritalin and the rate that the use of it is increasing. I'm wondering if the department is doing any monitoring of what's happening with the issues of Ritalin and the kids at school and what's happening as the rates increase, the effects that Ritalin is having. Are you aware of any studies of Ritalin that would affect later drug addiction?

THE CHAIRMAN: Mrs. Soetaert, I hate to bust in again. Every member on both sides of this table has asked questions related to estimates, and your questions are policy questions, no linkage whatsoever that I can see, and quoting the page number to me just doesn't cut it. I'd appreciate it if you would get to the estimates, please.

MRS. SOETAERT: I think this would be under special needs funding, 3.2.5.

THE CHAIRMAN: Well, then can you rephrase the question and get into the estimates with the phrasing of the question?

MRS. SOETAERT: Is the government considering spending any money – I think he's picking on me tonight, Mr. Minister. Just a little bit.

THE CHAIRMAN: I might add, Mrs. Soetaert, that I am the chairman. I do decide on each question what is in order or what isn't, and I don't appreciate the side comments from you.

MRS. SOETAERT: Sorry, Mr. Chairman, with all due respect. I'll try to make my questions more pointed to the budget.

Is the minister considering spending any money monitoring the effects of Ritalin in the classroom and, with the rates increasing, on what's happening?

MR. JONSON: I guess the first point that I would like to make – and I think it puts things maybe a bit in context here with what I said earlier, which is maybe getting down to the meat of your question. If you don't mind, Mr. Chairman, since the question is sort of general, I'll make a kind of general reply.

I was driving along the other morning listening to CBC, and in the interview that was being conducted, an individual reported on that program that he'd been monitoring and studying the use of Ritalin in Calgary. He was, you know, discussing things back and forth with the announcer. The announcer was pursuing things along the lines, I guess, that the hon. member is raising, Mr. Chairman. What's important, I think, about that, and the reason that I raise that kind of vignette or anecdote, is that he did comment that the use of Ritalin was increasing. He further, if I heard correctly, indicated that the high rate of increase was with respect to boys from I think it was 5 years of age to about 13 or 14. Also, his comment was that the concentration of increased use was with what he categorized as middle- to upper-class families.

Now, the reason that I mention that is that the prescription of a drug is something that is not handled by the school system. It is something that is arrived at, I assume, I hope, after careful consideration by the medical profession and the family. I think we're open to doing anything about it if we can, and certainly we're trying to keep alert to adverse effects here, but I think that if it is not justified, it is something that has to be taken responsibility for certainly by families and by the medical profession. Certainly we have a related interest to it, Mr. Chairman, but it's not directly the responsibility of Alberta Education, although certainly anything that might be detrimental to children, period, and certainly as it pertains to their education is something we're concerned about.

MRS. SOETAERT: Thank you.

THE CHAIRMAN: Dr. Massey, please.

DR. MASSEY: Thanks, Mr. Chairman. Can I ask about the budget item – I believe it's probably under information services, or I suspect that's where it is – that's the key performance measures that are on page 133? You may not have the information handy, but it would be interesting. Who does the surveying and the compilation and the interpretation of the data that appears here under these measures, and how is the population that doesn't have contact with children accessed? Am I making it clear?

MR. JONSON: Sure.

DR. MASSEY: What kind of sampling size did they try to work on?

MR. JONSON: Mr. Chairman, if it's acceptable to the committee, I'd like to refer that question to Dr. Sloan and his staff that are here. It also gives me an opportunity, if I might, if it's acceptable, to introduce to members of the committee, if they've not had the opportunity to meet him, Dr. Leroy Sloan, the new Deputy Minister of Alberta Education.

DR. SLOAN: I'd ask Gary Zatzko to give you the background information.

MR. ZATKO: The firm we hired is Environics, a survey firm out of Calgary, and we hired them to initiate the survey last year. In terms of your question relative to the public, it's a stratified random sample across different age groups in the adult population, and they generally draw that from telephone sources and so on. The sample sizes are different in each group, and I'd have to refer to the survey itself. Actually, I have a summary of the survey that outlines that kind of information, which I'm sure we'd be happy to send to you. It's within the confidence levels of plus or minus 3.5 percent overall for all the groups that are assessed in the survey.

6:44

We are looking at doing another survey. Again, we generally will be doing surveys of certain groups annually. Perhaps as we get to understand the survey's implications a bit more, we might do it every two years rather than every year, but right now we're doing it every year to establish a trend line. So last year was the first year we had the survey results as were reported in the performance report. We have some earlier surveys. They're not quite comparable, but we have some background information to that. So a trend line is what we hope to establish this year and carry that on for a while, and then we'll probably spread out the surveys to every two years rather than one year and also isolate on certain questions where there are significant changes going on, up or down, in terms of the performance measures.

DR. MASSEY: Can I just ask for a clarification?

MR. ZATKO: Sure.

DR. MASSEY: Are those co-ordinated, then, with the ones the boards issue?

MR. ZATKO: Not at the moment. In terms of the accountability framework that the minister was speaking of earlier, there are certain things that we are requiring school boards and schools to look at. In this case the survey is dealing with satisfaction measures. One measure, of course, is parent satisfaction, which is a key one to our performance assessment.

The second measure that's really important is the students' satisfaction with their learning environment. We asked that question at the provincial level, and that's one of the questions we're requiring school boards to look at as well. As you know, Dr. Massey, the research indicates that the students' perception of their learning environment, whether it's positive or not, contributes to their learning efforts and accomplishments, so that's one of the questions we are requiring at the provincial and school board level.

We've sent out the questions we have used on our provincial survey to school boards, and we've suggested that they look at those specific questions, and that if they want comparability with provincial data and with their colleagues in other school jurisdictions, they use that survey question so that there is comparability. We have not made that question mandatory yet. There have been some requests by some school boards for us to make that survey question mandatory, but in the first year of implementing the performance measurement reporting at the school level, we're doing a bit more consultation before we go to that next stage, if indeed we do go to that next stage.

DR. MASSEY: Some boards have been asking that question for a lot of years.

MR. ZATKO: Yes. There are some differences. Edmonton public has been asking that question for some time. We just met with their staff. They are going to include our questions on their survey because it's very easy for them to do. So they will be able to maintain comparability with the questions they've asked over the last 10 years, but they will also have our standard question as well so they can compare it to provincial results.

THE CHAIRMAN: Mr. Henry.

MR. HENRY: Thank you very much. In terms of the capital projects and BQRP, is there a provincewide inventory of age and condition of buildings by jurisdiction?

MR. JONSON: Yes.

MR. HENRY: I'm wondering if that can be made available.

MR. JONSON: Maybe. We'll check on it.

MR. HENRY: Perhaps I could meet with the minister's staff, and we can find a way that makes sense to give us that. I mean, I'd be interested in categories. I don't think we need the whole block.

Again, with regard to capital projects, we touched on this last time. The issue I'd like to get at is: at what point do we say we need a new school? Does the school have to be a hundred percent full? I know we do some projections in terms of student growth and whatnot. To narrow the specific concern that I've had raised with me by several jurisdictions, we seem to wait until a school is a hundred percent full, and then we say, "Okay, let's put it in the budget so three years down the road we'll have a school." By then, especially if it's rapidly growing, you've got dramatic overcrowding. Is there a rationale for not building when we know that we're going to be a hundred percent full in three years at a particular school?

MR. JONSON: Mr. Chairman, if I could just comment on the first question raised by the member. Certainly the question has been asked, and we'll see what we can come up with that is

manageable. It's not being contrary to the freedom of information Act, but when you think about it, we have hundreds and hundreds of schools in this province. We have data which has been gathered, boilers and buildings; we're talking about a lot of material here. You know, I wouldn't ask for it unless I had a purpose to ask for it in a particular area of concern quite frankly. I just would make that comment. I mean, it's a lot of work and a lot of stuff to dig up and duplicate.

MR. HENRY: Certainly, Mr. Minister. I recognize and I grant you that. That's why I made the comment that perhaps I could sit down with staff. I'm interested in sort of general categories about where we're at.

MR. JONSON: Well, general categories certainly.

MR. HENRY: I think we can work out what I need for that. Okay?

MR. JONSON: Yeah. Do you want to comment?

MR. ZATKO: I think we can deal with this, at least initially. We have a survey that was done by a private-sector firm of conditions of schools in Canada which looks at general conditions of buildings. There's a rating of the Alberta situation in terms of conditions of school buildings relative to others in the country. That's a public document, and we'd certainly be happy to give that to you as a start.

THE CHAIRMAN: Thanks, Mr. Henry.

MR. JONSON: Mr. Chairman, with respect to the second question I think the member makes a valid point, and that is that your degree of flexibility and your degree of being able to anticipate is judged by the amount of money you have available. Yes, we do want to see a school full or nearing being full with promise of the enrollment increasing. Sometimes if you try to anticipate too far ahead, you end up with a problem.

One of the, I guess, good examples in the province, although through the good efforts and policies of the government that promises to change again in the very near future, is in Fort McMurray. At this moment in time we have considerable school space which we had built in anticipation of rapid growth. We were trying to be forward-thinking at the time. Right now it's a bit of an awkward situation quite frankly. But with the recent announcements, away we go again. You know, that's the difficulty you have with these things. We try, though, to be reasonable and keep things in balance according to the money we've got.

MR. HENRY: My last question is with regard to disbursements of funds to the jurisdictions. In capital, are local jurisdictions responsible for any of the financing? In the end the provincial government carries the full cost now of schools, but in terms of interim financing and paying the bills, is the money up-fronted to the school jurisdictions or do they have to finance that and then come back to you after the fact? That's related to the concern raised by some jurisdictions that they have to forward their yearly assessment to the province prior to being able to collect it all at the local level, and they have to finance that.

MR. JONSON: That's changed since the time of some jurisdictions contributing above the approved amount, but in terms of the mechanics of it perhaps a department person could respond.

MR. ZATKO: There's no appreciable difference in the current system as opposed to when school jurisdictions requisitioned directly from the municipalities. The money is provided by municipalities to the province. There's about a one-day turn-around in terms of money back out to the school jurisdictions. We've improved the situation as well because there are four quarterly payments now to school jurisdictions whereas before from municipalities . . .

MR. JONSON: This was with respect to capital projects.

6:54

MR. ZATKO: Okay. Was that only capital projects?

MR. HENRY: It came from a general concern, but it was specifically about capital.

MR. ZATKO: Capital money is provided in installments as per the construction progress of the building. When a building is approved and it's been tendered, a 40 percent advance is provided in advance of any construction occurring. So I don't think there are any cash flow problems in terms of paying the bills.

THE CHAIRMAN: Thank you, Mr. Henry.

Mrs. Soetaert.

MRS. SOETAERT: Thank you. If I may, Mr. Minister, could I ask for a breakdown of 3.1.2, student evaluation services, with regard to how much money is spent on administrating and how much on marking and then implementing it? What would be the cost of each one of those?

MR. JONSON: I don't have that information. It's rather specific, but that's accepted. We will try and provide that. We will provide that information to you.

MRS. SOETAERT: Thank you.

Which of these tests are being marked locally now? It's my understanding that some are being marked locally.

MR. JONSON: The option is there to mark them all locally. The achievement tests, not diploma exams.

MRS. SOETAERT: Not diploma, only achievement. Okay. Thank you.

MR. JONSON: Then they have to be forwarded in. There's a system for forwarding them to us for checking in terms of keeping up a standard and quality of marking.

MRS. SOETAERT: So is any of the money that was spent previously on marking here rather than locally being deferred to the school boards?

MR. JONSON: No.

MRS. SOETAERT: So the teachers mark them on their own time, or do they get subs? How does that work?

MR. JONSON: Well, we fund the marking that we do. Teachers involved in marking at the local level mark these tests. But, Mr. Chairman, I think we have to recognize, perhaps not at the grade 3 level but at the grade 6 level, the grade 9 level, the grade 12 level – I think it would be a safe estimate to say that the teachers

themselves administer probably 10 or 12 tests possibly during the year, you know. If you have an achievement test mark, which I think provides valuable information, that might replace one of the ones that they were going to mark anyway.

What I'm trying to say is that I do not think it's an onerous burden. I think that the feedback we've received from teachers is that they do appreciate the rapid turnaround in terms of being able to have the results and the diagnostic materials that we provide to support the tests so they can follow through on what the test results mean.

MRS. SOETAERT: Okay. Thank you.

THE CHAIRMAN: Dr. Massey.

DR. MASSEY: Thank you. I wonder if I could follow up on something you answered in response to Mr. Henry. You said – and I can well imagine – that there's a tremendous amount of information about the physical plant in the province. Why do you keep it? Why do you keep that kind of information? That would be my first question. I think of the amount of time that's spent on tracking and keeping track of whether a class is on stage and using that space or not so that occupancy rates and things can be computed. It's got to be a tremendously expensive system in terms of the information that is being kept. So that's one question.

Related to that, why do you pick out buildings to monitor in that way? The big expense is teachers' salaries, yet there's no attempt to monitor teacher time. If a board has 300 teachers, full-time equivalents, there's no one that goes around and says: now, let's count the number of hours in a day that that teacher is in front of children. It just seems that school buildings are singled out maybe because they're easy to count and work with, but it's the one area of school board operations that seems to take up a lot of energy and a lot of time. Is it really necessary to keep all that information?

MR. JONSON: Well, Mr. Chairman, the data on school buildings is accumulated over a number of years, and you go back and add to it and check it and update it. Our school buildings branch is not a big entity. Dr. Sloan, how many people do we have working there? Ten or 12?

MR. ZATKO: Ten.

MR. JONSON: Ten people work in our school buildings unit within Alberta Education, and we could get you the figures on the amount of money devoted to their work.

To the second question, Mr. Chairman, I just have to note that the hon. member has raised an intriguing question.

DR. MASSEY: Now, don't start.

MR. JONSON: Mr. Chairman, let me put it this way. That is something that has interested me for a long time, but at the moment we're not entering into that detailed analysis. Although, as I said at a conference not too long ago, it is something that we're often compared to other countries and other jurisdictions with. I just acknowledge that you've raised an important issue.

DR. MASSEY: And I think I have a third supplement. Now, what was it? You got me off . . . It's escaped me, and I didn't have it written down, Mr. Chairman. I'll get it next time.

THE CHAIRMAN: Thanks, Dr. Massey.

Mr. Henry, and we have five minutes left for the opposition side and the independent side.

MR. HENRY: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'm referring to the instruction block, English as a second language instruction. I'm aware of the figure provided by the department, and I believe it's \$640 per ESL student. I'm wondering: assuming that figure is correct, whatever exactly it is, how did the department arrive at that being the appropriate amount to fund over and above the basic instructional grant for a student who requires English as a Second Language? Is it based on numbers of hours of extra instruction or tutoring? Okay?

MR. JONSON: Mr. Chairman, I know the general concept of it and the fact that this is one area, one the very few areas, where federal government funding is involved in our department. Perhaps the department could give you the specifics though.

DR. SLOAN: Basically it's an historical perspective. In creating some of these formulas, there's a clear rationale that's based back to specific features, like miles or sparsity, that you can go on to a large extent. This is looking at historical data.

MR. HENRY: Okay. Then, again, on the administration. In terms of federal funding, how does that play a role? Does it come directly to the department, or is it directly to the school division?

MR. JONSON: I guess the best example here is with respect to Francophone. Pardon me. Not Francophone. Well, French education. It goes to the jurisdiction.

MR. HENRY: But that's not ESL. That's Francophone.

MR. JONSON: I used that as an example, but we can give you the formulas and how it works.

MR. HENRY: Okay. If, another time later, we could get that.

My last question on ESL. I've asked the minister this repeatedly, and I'll ask it again. If a child can't speak English when they go to school, whether they were born here or in a different country, it seems to me we have the same learning needs and the same costs involved in dealing with that child. I'm wondering what the rationale is for the provincial government funding, only children who are born outside of Canada, regardless of what languages they've been exposed to. There are two groups; i.e., children who are born of immigrant parents who stayed at home and spoke in their mother language and those who are born in Canada of, perhaps, aboriginal parents who want to reinforce that language and that heritage at home, so therefore their English is limited when they get into kindergarten or more often grade 1. So what's the rationale?

THE CHAIRMAN: Sounds like straight policy to me, but I'll allow the minister to answer, if that is the last question from the opposition side.

MR. HENRY: Well, the question is regarding funding. It's a funding question. Why do you fund one and not the other?

7:04

MR. JONSON: We fund the first one in terms of the relatively recent immigrant population. This is, as I indicated before, related to a federal policy and partial federal funding, which we'll

get you the information on.

With respect to not having additional funding for students who do not speak English or French when they enter the program they choose to go to, I guess the answer is that we do not provide additional funding across the board there. Although we do have our education opportunity fund and the PEP program for pre-school children, which does provide some additional funding for projects where you have a high concentration of students with this particular need. So that's the answer in terms of funding.

We could go on to talk about how the school system might approach this kind of situation. Whether you happen to be native North American or someone from China who's been here for a long time, we've always I think looked at it as something that – in terms of the program as students enter into the school system, there are certain things that have to be priorities.

Now, I've said across the province that if you have a school of 500 students where 30 of the students cannot speak English, before you worry about a broad program for them in the various subject areas, put them in a class and teach them to speak English, to the best of your ability. I guess the point I should make is that when we set certain hours and certain subject allocations, particularly at the elementary level, those are guidelines. There is flexibility within the system to zero in on the highest area of need, and if this is the case, that's something that a school jurisdiction can do. I acknowledge the point you're making about additional funding, which I've given you a candid answer to, but I'm just talking about a way that could be approached.

THE CHAIRMAN: Mr. Minister, we appreciate your candid answer, but we're about four minutes into the government side's time, so we have about 35 minutes or so of government time now. I have a speaking order, Mr. Pham and then Mr. Jacques.

MR. PHAM: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I would like to continue on the line of the questioning that was raised by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre, the extra money that you provide for an ESL student per year. Many of my constituents have a tough time figuring that out, because when an ESL student attends school, he also spends the same amount of hours in the school environment as anyone else. He takes the same number of instruction hours. They fail to see where the additional costs incur.

[Mrs. Burgener in the Chair]

Can you explain why a student who takes a chemistry class, which seems to cost more than an ESL class – why do they say that this ESL student needs an extra \$648 per year?

MR. JONSON: Part of the answer I endeavoured to give earlier, and that is that the additional funding, Madam Chairman, is matched with a program and funding at the federal level. With respect to the member's point, I think really I gave the answer, and that is that you can put that concentration within the existing school system and provide that service if you've got the economies of scale for having a number of students to offer a class to. I think it is an additional cost pressure in a school jurisdiction, though, if you have, let's say, five out of a class of 25 people with perhaps different language backgrounds, where they need individualized instruction. That, I think, can be shown to be an additional cost. If you have 25 people who are of one particular language background and you can put them in one class and teach them to speak English, I would agree with you.

THE ACTING CHAIRMAN: Your first supplemental.

MR. PHAM: Maybe I can follow up with you on that later on.

MR. JONSON: Okay.

MR. PHAM: The other question that I have pertaining to the situation we have in Calgary today with the Viscount Bennett Centre has nothing to do with your department, but what I am going to say is that one of the key measurements of your department is to decrease the level of students dropping out of school. The money today that we set aside for instruction of students: when a student drops out, what happens to that money? Are we going to put that into a separate fund that we can use later on if they in fact return to Viscount Bennett, for example, or does it go back to the general revenue fund?

MR. JONSON: A rather good point, Madam Chairman, but I would like to assure the hon. member and all members at the table that the funding that we have allocated is based on our projections of how many students we will have from year to year. I agree that, ideally, if we could keep everybody in to complete their grade 12, there would be some cost implications, but I think that if we were able to have one hundred percent retention, members of Treasury Board, such as the hon. Member for Grande Prairie-Wapiti, would be most helpful. It's a valid point in terms of accounting for money, but just as we make a projection as to what we think overall enrollment increases are each year, we try to project what we hope will be a very modest improvement in the retention rate.

MR. PHAM: The reason I raised that question is: one of the arguments that is being used in not providing extra funding for Viscount Bennett students is that they have already got those moneys before.

[Mr. Magnus in the chair]

Anyway, my last question. We currently have a cap on administration. Some of the local school boards, especially the ones in Calgary, seem to have a problem with this, and one of the complaints I keep hearing is that we do not have a common definition of what constitutes administration. I understood last year or even the year before that the department committed to sit down and work with the local boards to address these differences. How far are we on that, and is there any good reason why the Calgary board cannot live within the cap that was put on?

MR. JONSON: I think, Mr. Chairman, two questions are being asked. One is a question of information, which I'll try and respond to. The other is a question of assessment or, I guess, opinion or judgment. With respect to the definition, we have acknowledged the point that was made some time ago, I guess almost a year ago now, shortly after the report on the funding framework, and tried to make sure that was clarified. I think it would be fair to say that in the overwhelming majority of school jurisdictions in the province the definition we have provided is understood.

With respect to the Calgary public school board, I understand in reports through the media that they seem to have some issue here. I understand also that they are entering into some meetings about their budget, which I understand has been approved sort of in principle but has not been finalized, so we'll see how that turns out.

I would just like to offer, Mr. Chairman, to try and put it very much in a nutshell in terms of the definition. If people are

assigned to the staff of a school, be they teachers, which the majority are, or a child psychologist, let's say quarter-time, they are considered to be part of the staff and the instructional component of that school. Therefore, they are not considered to be in central office administration. They don't have to be, because they are working, as I assume it, with students and applying their expertise.

DR. MASSEY: Or teachers.

7:14

MR. JONSON: Well, I'm just using an example, which is: they're sometimes pulled back and funneled into central office and perhaps they don't, you know, serve schools directly all the time.

On the other hand, if an individual's primary time and work and function is one of an administrative nature and outside of the schools, then that's considered administration. Now, the definitions are a little more detailed than that, but that in a nutshell is the way I think it should be looked at.

THE CHAIRMAN: Next, Mr. Jacques, please.

MR. JACQUES: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. My fortune cookie said: you will be fortunate in the opportunities presented to you. I'd probably have a better chance in my questioning if the vice-chair was in the chair rather than yourself, but I want to pursue it in any case.

Mr. Minister, on page 132 of the main estimates book and on page 190 of Agenda '96 there's quite a bit of information with regard to performance measures and, more particularly, improved student learning and, more specifically, provincial achievement tests. I assume there are various definitions or purposes in which one could state what the definition of an achievement standard is. My question is: why would we compromise and tend to use a mediocre standard as opposed to a hundred percent?

THE CHAIRMAN: Oh, yeah. I'm sorry. I appreciate drawing the business plan into it and a couple of other pages, but . . .

MR. JACQUES: If I may, Mr. Chairman, on your point. There was a very deliberate attempt by all ministers to expand upon the estimates in the historical sense in terms of the business content which was contained in the main estimates which got into the whole area of the business plan and, secondly, even more so by tabling Agenda '96 at the time that the estimates were tabled, which really took the business plans and put even more, if you like, meat on them rather than the kind of condensed version. I thought there was a clear understanding that by tabling them at the same time that estimates were tabled, they became part and parcel of discussion and question.

THE CHAIRMAN: The business plan – you're right, right up to the point where you get into a pure policy question. It's still not a policy hearing.

MR. JACQUES: Well, it's not a policy question. If I could, Mr. Chairman, on the basis that if one looks at the total resources that are allocated within the Department of Education and more specifically . . .

THE CHAIRMAN: We have about 32 more minutes.

MR. JACQUES: If you look at the vision and you look at the mission and those components and you look at the strategies and

everything that supports that, it would be hard to say that it was only, you know, dollars and cents on line 2.4. Indeed there are some issues, if you talk about an achievement target, that to a large extent kind of set up, if you like, the strategies and ultimately the dollars that you're going to spend.

MR. HENRY: Point of order, Mr. Chairman.

THE CHAIRMAN: Recognizing Mr. Henry on the point of order.

MR. HENRY: I'm wondering if the hon. member was asking the question as to why you would spend \$1.3 billion, I believe it is, in the instructional block and not have a hundred percent standards.

MR. JACQUES: Hey, that works.

THE CHAIRMAN: I appreciate Mr. Jacques' masterful usage of time here, but on the other hand I think we've all done this once or twice before.

MR. HENRY: The opposition members have more questions directly related to the budget, Mr. Chairman.

THE CHAIRMAN: Well, yeah, but I have a couple of government members on this side too. I mean, we could take the next 30 . . .

MR. JACQUES: I'm going ask a very specific question. I will ask the minister then: what cost is associated with achieving only an 85 percent standard versus a hundred percent standard?

Thank you.

MR. JONSON: Mr. Chairman, I want to try and give a succinct answer to the member's very basic question. If you don't mind me making an analogy to a driver's test, usually on a driver's test, as I remember it, there are a hundred questions, and knowing the answer to 85 or 90 out of those 100 questions is deemed to be important to be able to meet the minimum standard to drive. But there is no allowance there to recognize those people who are particularly good drivers and know more than is required according to minimum safety standards, nor is there any real recognition given to how far you are below the average and what needs to be done specifically to try and bring you up to meeting those standards or that acceptable level. The solution is simply to go back and take your course over and write the test again.

In the education realm we set a standard which is acceptable in terms of the judgment of what should be done at that level of age and maturity, and then we have the range in either direction so that we know how far out they are. We have developed our achievement tests to the degree that there's a certain amount of sophistication whereby you can even pick out the specific areas of weakness. In other words, what particular parts of the mathematics program are they failing in as opposed to others? So that's why we have a standard which we feel a student should be able to achieve in terms of a percentage of answers correct at the grade 6 level, and then we've got other data off the tests which shows that they've done extremely well or done poorly or in between.

MR. JACQUES: You kind of ducked it, but let me try it another way. If I accept that rationale then – and I'll refer to page 191. If I translate that, the costs of achieving, for example, English 30 achievement results of 87 percent acceptable, 88, 89 but we only want 15 – that means we're probably overeducating, and we

should be able to cut dollars out of the instructional amount that is going to these particular school boards and schools.

MR. JONSON: I'll take the question under consideration, Mr. Chairman.

THE CHAIRMAN: I appreciate that. I have no further members on the government . . .

MR. JACQUES: That's not my third question.

THE CHAIRMAN: Oh, I'm sorry. I thought that was three.

MR. JACQUES: No. That was two.

THE CHAIRMAN: My mistake.

MR. JACQUES: We argued over the first one. It took a long time.

THE CHAIRMAN: Yes, you're right. You're right.

MR. JACQUES: If I could come at it another way. The question was obviously facetious in that sense, but let me rephrase the question and ask you then: how was an 85 percent achievement standard established across the board for all subjects?

MR. JONSON: Mr. Chairman, we have to keep in mind that Alberta is fairly described as a leader in setting goals and achievement standards. I acknowledge that we don't have a great deal of evidence from universities or from other jurisdictions that would support this. But it was our judgment that it was reasonable to expect that over time, hopefully a short time, we should have all of our students in a given subject, let's say, at the high school level achieving the acceptable standards: certainly 85 percent.

MR. JACQUES: Thank you.

7:24

THE CHAIRMAN: Thank you very much. I do not have any other government-side questions at this point, and it is the government's last 40 minutes. We have about 20 minutes left to go.

MR. HENRY: Is the chair opening it up for questions?

THE CHAIRMAN: Well, no, I'm not. It's the government side at this stage, and they still have that right.

MRS. BURGNER: I'd like to make a motion that we now conclude consideration on the debate of the 1996-97 estimates of the Department of Education prior to the conclusion of the four-hour period allocated.

THE CHAIRMAN: In order for this motion to go through we need unanimous approval. So I'll put the question. All those in favour?

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Aye.

THE CHAIRMAN: Any opposed?

SOME HON. MEMBERS: No.

THE CHAIRMAN: Then in that case the government has the right to conclude the last 20 minutes. Do I have other questions?

Mrs. Burgener, then Mr. Pham, Mr. Jacques.

MRS. BURGNER: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'd like to refer to an area in your estimates, Halvar, that hasn't been spoken to, and that's the Premier's Council on the Status of Persons with Disabilities. In the business plan documentation Agenda '96 you are identifying that

the ten-year mandate of the Council expires on July 1, 1998.

This mandate will be reviewed and recommendations made to ensure that public policy continues to promote full and equal participation of persons with disabilities.

To the minister. On the income statement on page 136 under the expense program voted it would appear there's an increase in expenditure from the '94-95 actual on dollars allocated to persons with disabilities, and I'm wondering if you could explain why the increase is there, and secondly, is that related to the pending review of their status as an ongoing agency?

MR. JONSON: First of all, no, that would not be related to the review, although you raise an important question, one that we're actually just now starting to look at in terms of what might be a suitable way to consider the lead-up to a decision prior to 1998 in terms of the future of the council. But, no, the expenditure there does not relate to that. It relates to the work that led up to and the publication of two different documents during the past year, and actually a third one will be out shortly. These are documents that followed initiatives by the council to look at and report on and engender discussion on the implications for the disabled community in light of our changing economy and for that matter, quite frankly, our changing government programs and methods of providing support. I think hon. members would probably have seen these documents that are out there for discussion.

MRS. BURGNER: Thank you. Mr. Minister, one final question then. In respect to the current status I appreciate that the impact of integration into the schools of students that have learning disabilities is a factor. Will there be fiscal provisions allocated for their needs as you move to a review of the overall program for the status of persons with disabilities?

MR. JONSON: I don't, Mr. Chairman, see the two as being directly related. The review of the mandate of the council I think would be looked at in terms of the total disabled community in the province, not one particular sector of it, and the importance of the service of that council in the future to that community.

MRS. BURGNER: Thank you.

THE CHAIRMAN: Thank you, Mr. Burgener.
Mr. Pham, please.

MR. PHAM: Thank you. One key performance measure is the achievement test results that you use. I worry that perhaps some of the schools could remove certain students from writing the tests to boost the test results. I see that we've spent much money on doing this. Have we established a clear regulation as to who can be exempted from writing the test?

MR. JONSON: Yes, and I would be quite prepared to provide the policy document to the hon. member. Please, Mr. Chairman, to hon. members, I realize we're running short of time, so I would like to get all of the questions from members, and we'll respond in writing.

MR. PHAM: One of the other concerns that the local school boards from Calgary seem to have is that they say they have some activities, something they might want to do but cannot do within the current fiscal framework and funding structure that you provide to them. Have you ever asked the Calgary boards, both public and separate, to submit to you a list of a few of the things that they cannot do under the current structure?

MR. JONSON: Mr. Chairman, no, we have not. But I think it's important to remind members of the committee that the generating of the funding framework was quite an extensive process. The Member for Grande Prairie-Wapiti and two other members of caucus worked with a stakeholder committee including school board representatives to develop that funding framework. So the point I'm making is that school board involvement was quite significant in the development of a funding framework.

In direct answer to your question, no, we haven't asked them for a list. If we did so, I think we would have to ask every school jurisdiction in the province. Quite frankly, we think they are quite busy with what they have to do right now and doing a good job.

MR. PHAM: The reason I asked the question is because it seems like the Calgary board is one that is quite vocal, saying that they have a problem with the funding framework that you provide to them, that there are things that they want to do but cannot do under that framework. About two weeks ago we had a meeting with them down in Calgary. At that time I asked them, you know, if they can forward to the government a list of a few things that they wish to do but cannot do. Maybe we can look at it and see if there is any deficiency in the funding structure, or if there is any misunderstanding, then we can address that problem.

The last question that I have deals with the grade 12 students who are older than 19 years and come back for a fourth year. I represent a constituency where there's a high number of immigrants. Some of these kids come in at the age of 16 and 17, and they are labeled a high-risk group. When they stay in school, when they spend three years there – usually in the first year they have to take ESL, and it is very unlikely that they could complete high school in three years, and they want to return for a fourth year. I understand that with the current system now, if they're older than 19, then they would have to go and take their education somewhere else. Are you prepared to work in conjunction with the Family and Social Services department? I understand that they have some money set aside now for youth in high-risk groups to assist those kids to study and complete their high school.

MR. JONSON: Well, certainly we do, and we are trying to improve our co-ordination with Family and Social Services. Mr. Chairman, I recognize the concern raised by the member. Perhaps just to clarify one or two things. Effectively, we do end up funding students, assuming that they register in grade 10 at the sort of normal age, for up to four years, because we fund them until 19 years of age.

7:34

The other thing is – and I know this depends upon the circumstances of the student. You can cover a lot of ground in high school in three years and a lot more in four years, because in most schools I think there's a flexibility in terms of how many credits you register in. There's the availability of challenge tests. There's the availability even if necessary, although I think many students want to or need to work over the summer, of summer courses. For the motivated student I think it is really quite

realistic to say that if you're 16 years of age when you hit high school, you can get your grade 12 in three or four years.

MR. PHAM: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

THE CHAIRMAN: Thank you, Mr. Pham.
I have Mr. Jacques next, actually.

MR. JACQUES: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Mr. Minister, I'd like to go back and follow up on the achievement standard, as well, and that is in two areas. When the funding framework was being developed, there was initially a provision in there with regard to performance standards and what would happen if performance standards were exceeded in particular, and there was, quote, a reward system that had been identified. It prompted a lot of discussion and a lot of controversy, and it was subsequently removed from it. But the issue, I guess, in terms of the achievement standard raises the question on accountability. That is: how do you define or have you defined where the responsibility lies if there's a shortfall? Where do you give the recognition if the standards are exceeded? How do you deal with that on a school district basis or even within a school district?

The second question is with regard to the disclosure of the information. Is it available in some kind of summary form for the average person who wanted to find out what was happening in the Edmonton school district, for example, versus Grande Prairie's versus Calgary's, say, at the English 30 level for the last three years? Is that information available through the department, or would it mean that the individual would have to go to each school district and request that information?

MR. JONSON: First of all, in terms of the first question on the credit or the onus for correcting the situation, I think the credit or the onus, quite frankly, with due consideration for the age and maturity of the student, rests with the student, and we shouldn't take any other point of view in my estimation. In other words, it's the responsibility of the student. Of course, you have to treat the whole situation differently for the grade 3 student versus the grade 12. Nevertheless, they should get recognition. They also should have to recognize when they need to improve. Then, of course, the other very important people here in terms of the service are the parents or guardians or whoever the child has for support as an adult and the teachers and the school staff. The school board and Alberta Education have responsibilities. There are different areas of responsibility for having the best possible system in place, but that's where the frontline onus is quite frankly.

Now, what was the second question? Pardon me, Mr. Chairman. Just remind me. Sorry.

MR. JACQUES: The second question was relevant to . . .

MR. JONSON: Oh, reporting.

MR. JACQUES: Yeah. How do we get that information? Is it available through Alberta Ed, or do we have to go to the districts?

MR. JONSON: Mr. Chairman, we are currently not publishing any provincewide lists of schools and achievement levels. We do put out a composite report on achievement across the province. That's the direction that we've taken because we think that is the best place at which it should be received and discussed with parents and students. We are saying that this information as to the achievement of the Ponoka elementary school versus the provincial standard must be available at the local level.

MR. JACQUES: Thank you.

MR. HIERATH: Mr. Minister, further to some of my earlier questions about administrative spending, you explained the cap on central office spending, but you really didn't explain what mechanisms are in place to monitor the office and the school boards.

MR. JONSON: The department has developed a budget reporting form. We've tried to keep it manageable in terms of the number of categories, but this is certainly one of them. We monitor those reports, and if they were out of line with the guidelines, we would of course discuss the whole situation with the school jurisdiction. As I said in the House the other day, we'll try to work with them, but the minister would certainly be prepared to take action to ensure that they do come within the cap.

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

MR. PHAM: The chairman may want to try that motion again. The Member for Edmonton-Centre has . . .

THE CHAIRMAN: Hon. member, I don't believe we should be making those kinds of comments in this committee. We're so close to the time now; we're within a couple of minutes here, folks.

Thank you very much.

MRS. SOETAERT: Then let them ask their questions.

THE CHAIRMAN: Mrs. Soetaert, I believe I'm chairing the meeting, and I'd really appreciate a little calm and quiet from your chair.

MRS. SOETAERT: Sorry. I'm sorry, Mr. Chairman, with all due respect.

THE CHAIRMAN: Thank you.

MR. HAVELOCK: Because you got to go first, I'm sure you covered all the points we possibly could have wanted.

THE CHAIRMAN: Order please. Does somebody from the government side have one more question?

MR. JACQUES: If you wish.

THE CHAIRMAN: Thank you, Mr. Jacques. A short one.

MR. JACQUES: Thank you. With regard to page 191 of Agenda '96, Mr. Chairman, under the heading Student Satisfaction with Schooling, could you, Mr. Minister, please outline the methodology or the sampling that is used to determine this. You're talking about high school students. Is it all three grades? Is it one grade only? Is it a sampling, et cetera, et cetera? In other words, give us a feel of how you do that.

Secondly, could you indicate the type of variability on whatever this scale is that you use in percentage terms. Without identifying who's involved, can you indicate, say, between districts the type of variability you might get or even within districts between schools that might exist on some of these categories?

MR. JONSON: Mr. Chairman, I'd refer that to Mr. Zatko, who is more up on the specifics than I am.

MR. ZATKO: Thank you. I'd have to look at the actual data in terms of sample. What's the stratified random sample of all grade 12 students? We asked them a number of questions. What you have on page 191 is a summary question: how many of the students "are satisfied with the overall quality of education," and the response level was 94 percent.

Just for your information, we broke that out into some other subquestions. We asked students if they agreed that teachers used a variety of approaches to meet their needs, and 82 percent of the students said that teachers did do that. We asked students if they were being challenged to do their best, and 81 percent of the students said they were challenged to do their best. Are they learning to take responsibility for their own actions? Ninety-three percent of the students said that they were being taught that. They were asked if they had an opportunity to make choices about the courses they could take, and 92 percent answered in the affirmative. A very important question: do teachers provide the help and support that students need? The answer was 84 percent.

THE CHAIRMAN: Thank you very much, Mr. Zatko. We are out of time, and a brief answer will work there, seeing that we all have other places to be very, very shortly.

Under Standing Order 56(8)(b) it's required that we as the designated subcommittee of supply on Education have four hours of discussion on the estimates of Education, and I would like a motion to conclude discussion, rise, and report.

MRS. BURGNER: I move that we conclude discussion and rise and report.

THE CHAIRMAN: Thank you very much.
All those in favour?

HON. MEMBERS: Aye.

THE CHAIRMAN: Any opposed? Thank you. We're adjourned.

[The committee adjourned at 7:44 p.m.]