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[Mrs. Gordon in the chair]

Subcom.A: Education

Subcommittee A – Education

Gordon, Judy, Chairman
Severtson, Gary, Deputy Chairman
Bonner, Bill
Burgener, Jocelyn
Cardinal, Mike
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Dunford, Clint

Friedel, Gary
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Pannu, Raj
Sapers, Howard
Zwozdesky, Gene

THE CHAIRMAN: We are here tonight in Committee of Supply to discuss the estimates of the Department of Education. This provides an opportunity for members to ask detailed questions about departmental responsibilities and expenditures.

With that, I would ask the hon. Minister of Education to please start the debate.

MR. MAR: Thank you, Madam Chairman. In January of this year this government was pleased to announce a major reinvestment in Alberta's future, including education, as part of our new Agenda for Opportunity that is designed to strengthen the solid foundation that we have in this province and to create and support growth by primarily focusing on our children. The reinvestment means that by budget 2000 we will be spending \$380 million more on educating our students, a 12.7 percent increase over the 1997 budget. The full benefit to school boards by budget 2000 will be \$440 million, the other \$60 million coming from interest savings because we paid down some of our capital debentures and from further savings in my department including the divestiture of the Learning Resources Distribution Centre.

Our policy of fiscal prudence continues to pay benefits to our education system. The 12-point plan, First Things First: Our Children, targets both the new and redirected dollars to our students and their learning needs. This plan responds to the priorities that Albertans, parents and educators, raised at public consultations like the Alberta Growth Summit and through meetings, letters, and phone calls.

The initiatives and programs fall into four categories. First is appropriate educational resources. This is about providing appropriate funding for instruction and rising enrollments so boards have the resources they need to deliver a quality education to all Alberta students. Next and perhaps more important is early academic success. By paying particular attention to the early years, we can give our students the best possible start on their learning careers and on life. The third category is special circumstances, to better meet the needs of our students with disabilities or those who are facing other difficult circumstances, nor can we ignore the needs of students who are gifted or talented. Finally, the plan targets nonacademic support structures in the areas of capital projects and transportation. I will talk more about these four categories and the reinvestments in each of them a little bit later.

As always, we look to our budget for any fiscal year to support the goals and strategies in our three-year plan for education. First Things First: Our Children does not replace our three-year plan. Rather it will help us address the priority areas for improvement in our plan. For example, problem solving is an increasingly important part of the math curriculum. Over time the impact of

the early literacy initiative on reading comprehension skills will contribute to a higher achievement in high school math. With this kind of academic help and with more teacher aides to provide extra attention, we expect more students will establish a pattern of success early on that later on may increase high school completion rates.

First Things First reaffirms our commitment to the co-ordination of children's services, which now is our number one area for improvement. By listening to Albertans and responding to their priorities, we will address a new key area for improvement: improving public satisfaction with education.

Together First Things First, our reinvestment, and our three-year plan deliver an agenda for opportunity in education. As we turn to fiscal 1998-99, I want to make a few points. First, it is a simple fact that government's fiscal year and the school year are not in sync. That means that in 1998-99 our budget covers seven months of the first reinvestment, from September through March, at a cost of \$221 million while school authorities will receive \$273 million for the 1998-99 school year with the balance coming out of fiscal 1999-2000. So except where I specifically identify the funding otherwise, all dollar amounts are for fiscal 1998-99.

To deliver a quality education to all students, school boards need appropriate funding for instruction and the funds to accommodate increasing enrollments. We know that school authorities are faced with rising costs for resources, higher teachers' salaries, and other cost pressures in the classroom. By the end of the three years we will be spending \$93 million more on basic instruction. For 1998-1999 the increase is \$41 million, or \$99 for every student in the public education system. This is the \$30 we'd previously announced for this April and another \$69 increase in September of this year. Together these two amounts represent a 2.8 percent increase in basic instruction funding for 1998-99. A further increase of 1 percent in each of the following two years will further offset rising costs.

Private schools also will see an increase in the basic instruction rate per student for the upcoming fiscal year: a \$15 increase in April plus \$34 this September. Any further changes to our level of support for private schools will be based on the recommendations in the upcoming Private Schools Funding Task Force report.

Also, added to the basic instruction grant rate is an amount for mild and moderate disabilities. I will address this as part of our reinvestment in special needs.

The second area under appropriate education resources is enrollment increases. I have noted before that the Alberta advantage is attracting more families to the province. We anticipate a 2 percent annual increase in enrollment, or over 34,000 more students, by September of the year 2000. That represents a funding increase of \$171 million over Budget '97. In 1998-99 the 2 percent increase in enrollment will cost \$71 million. This is followed with an increase in the following two fiscal years to provide for a further 2 percent increase in enrollment annually. So by September of the year 2000 enrollment

increases will be costing us \$171 million more. This is a long-term commitment. Making it now gives school boards the confidence they need to look ahead and plan for the longer term instead of by one year increments.

One of the most important areas for reinvestment is early academic assistance. This covers the early literacy initiative, teacher aide program, and English as a Second Language for Canadian-born students. We know learning to read is one of the most important building blocks in our students' learning. Albertans and educators at the Alberta Growth Summit identified early literacy as a priority. Our schools do a tremendous job of teaching students to read. Eighty-seven percent of grade 3 students achieved the acceptable standard in language arts under the most recent provincial achievement test, but the 13 percent who did not achieve the acceptable standard are a concern. The early literacy initiative will assess the reading skills of students in kindergarten to grade 2 and will provide help to those who show signs of having difficulty with reading and comprehension.

Intern teachers are an important part of this initiative. We are working with the Alberta Teachers' Association, superintendents, and teacher preparation institutes to identify how internship can provide the best value to the classroom and to the intern. Schools will begin assessing kindergarten students this May so those students can get early help before they start grade 1 and be identified for assistance in grade 1. For the 1998-99 fiscal year the cost to government will be almost \$13 million. School jurisdictions can use funding in this area to introduce new early literacy programs or enhance existing programs. Private schools will also have access to funding for early literacy. Over time we expect to see the benefits in language arts achievement tests but also down the road in other subjects in other grades; for example, in math, where the emphasis on problem solving demands good reading comprehension.

Some students need extra time and attention, especially in early grades. Under the teacher aide program school boards will be able to hire about 370 teacher aides provincewide to work with classroom teachers in grades 1 through 6. In fiscal 1998-99 this program will cost \$5.8 million. The full cost per school year will be \$10 million.

It is a fact that some children born in Canada enter school knowing little or no English. These can be children from native communities or children of recent immigrants. For the first time we're extending funding for English as a Second Language programs to Canadian-born children. We expect more than 7,500 students to benefit in the 1998-99 school year. Extending the ESL program will cost \$3 million in 1998-99, and the annual cost thereafter will be \$5 million.

8:11

An area of particular interest to me is special circumstances. I believe that we can measure the quality of our society by the way we behave towards those that need our help. First Things First affirms our commitment to the whole range of special circumstances, including the co-ordination of services for children in difficult conditions or home situations. But we are here mainly to look at funding, and that focuses our attention on special needs. In the basic instruction grant we already include \$250 per student to pay for programs for those with mild and moderate disabilities including those who are gifted or talented. A 30 percent increase brings that funding to \$325 by this coming September for a total cost to the department of \$22 million for 1998-99. For the first time we will require boards to report on how they use this funding to provide programs and resources to these student. That \$75 per student along with the 2 percent I talked about earlier brings the

total increase in basic instruction to \$174 per student by this September.

For private schools the basic instruction grant including mild and moderate disabilities is increased by \$87. School boards and private schools will receive a 30 percent increase for every child identified as having a severe physical or mental disability. This category now includes autism. That will bring per student funding to \$11,600 to meet the high cost of special equipment, technology, and specially trained program aides. Where these students are integrated into regular classrooms, the extra resources can improve the learning resources for all students.

When added to the basic instruction grant, public boards will receive \$15,460 for each student with severe physical or mental disabilities. Private schools, with their lower instruction grant, will receive \$13,502. The \$8,910 boards now get for each student with severe emotional or behavioral disabilities remains unchanged. Added to the basic instruction amount the total comes to \$12,770 for these students.

On average boards have found this funding to be sufficient. The new funding levels are based on a review of the average board spending in this area. We wanted the reinvestment to meet the actual costs of providing programs and resources. Some boards were redirecting funds for other types of disabilities. These funds can now be spent in areas that may benefit all students in the system.

Looking at nonacademic support structures, it is important to remember that these do provide a direct benefit to students. First, in addition to teaching and programming, the school learning environment is also enhanced by a good physical environment. Plus we have a responsibility to protect the investment Albertans have made in our schools. We had previously announced an \$18 million increase in our base funding for capital projects. That increase goes into effect this coming fiscal year. That brings our base budget for capital needs to \$140 million in 1998-99 to help boards provide adequate space and a safe and healthy environment for our students. To make the best use of these and future funds, I will be developing a new capital plan to introduce new approaches to cover regular and ongoing maintenance of schools based on the School Facilities Task Force report, released earlier today.

The second area of nonacademic support is transportation. Every day thousands of students depend on transportation provided by their school board to get to and from school, but maintaining buses at the high standards expected by parents and us and buying new buses is expensive, and the costs are going up. School boards will receive \$13 million more for transportation in 1998-99 to better address the costs of new buses, insurance, maintenance, and fuel. This is an increase to the base funding that will continue annually. To make the most of these and all transportation dollars, we will be introducing a new transportation funding formula that will encourage and reward greater efficiency in rural jurisdictions.

Some people are quick to compare total education spending in Alberta to that of other provinces or states, but we know that the real story is where the money goes. To my mind, the best comparison is student achievement. On that score Alberta students consistently outperform their counterparts in other provinces and states and most of the English-speaking world. The proof is in the results of independent national and international testing programs. Student achievement is how we will assess the programs and the reinvestments that I've talked about today. For example, we should see the impact of the early literacy initiative on the results of grade 3 language arts provincial achievement tests. Longitudinal studies can measure improved student

performance in areas like special needs and English as a Second Language.

However, I believe that the real value of this reinvestment, like education itself, lies in the cumulative impact in all the different areas. Over time we expect to see a more positive and productive learning environment for our students, and we expect to measure that through an increase in Albertans' satisfaction with their education system. That is, after all, a priority area of improvement in education.

In conclusion, Madam Chairman, ultimately our goal is to improve learning for all of our students. That's what Albertans want, for their students to be the best educated young people in Canada.

Thank you.

THE CHAIRMAN: Thank you very much, hon. minister.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods.

DR. MASSEY: Thank you, Madam Chairman. It's with some pleasure I rise to respond to the minister and address the estimates and the business plan this evening.

I wanted to start off with a couple of questions to the minister. As a result of our experience last year, I wondered if we might get a commitment in terms of when we could expect answers to the questions we raise. As you know, a number of groups approach us and ask us to question the minister during the estimates of the department. Last year we found ourselves unable to respond to those groups because the school year had finished before we received the answers to some of the questions we had posed. Questions that were posed in April and early May we didn't receive any responses to until August of last year. That seems like an inordinate amount of time to prepare answers to the questions that were there. Many of them were not sophisticated questions that required a great deal of time in terms of statistical analysis or digging up information that wasn't readily available. We would really like to be able to pass on information from the questions asked in the estimates debates to those people who are interested a little more expeditiously this year than we did in the past.

A further change last year from the 1996 estimates and a change that I don't think was for the better was the omission of the briefing book that we had previously had prepared by the ministry. We had a briefing book that included a table of contents with items such as a funding overview, some news releases the department had put out that were pertinent to the estimates, then the funding framework announcements and some of the highlights. There was a congruency chart that listed the constituencies and the kinds of schools, the kind of student population that the constituency served, and a note on private schools. It was really a valuable document that had been prepared previously. It wasn't a long document, but it was a summary document that gave a very good overview of the department and highlighted some of the efforts that the department was involved in promoting. So those sort of preliminary comments about last year and the need for the briefing book, or at least pointing out the value we found in the briefing book that had been previously prepared.

8:21

I wanted to focus on the business plans, if I could, for a few minutes, because if you take and look at the 1996 business plan, if you look at the 1997 business plan, and if you look at the 1998 business plan, what strikes you is how inconsistent they are. So if you're looking for performance measures – performance measures make up large parts of those documents – and you're

expecting to be able to trace from 1996 through '97 to '98 in the business plan, to trace a particular measure, then you look in vain for some items. True, there is consistency in terms of the achievement test results, and I would like to talk about those in just a moment. But some of the other measures – the technology measure has vanished for some reason. The student access, student improved, student computer skills: that measure has been dropped. The report on fiscal matters from the 1996 business plan has been dropped in the 1998 plan.

All in all, it does make it difficult. If we're going to use a performance-based model to try to show improvements or to identify areas in the department that need to be addressed, then it would seem to me that consistency is something we should be striving for. We've been in the business of making business plans for over five years now. One would expect that we might have settled on a pattern that could be used.

I'd like to talk a little bit about those performance measures and the wholesale adoption of a performance measure approach to education. In his response to a question last year the minister responded, and I would quote:

Key measures for our other goals provide the balance with a major focus on effectiveness and that includes how students perform on provincial tests as well as how parents feel about the education of their children. We also survey the public to assess how taxpayers without children in school assess our performance.

In the last summary sentence the minister concludes by saying:

What we have with this combination of key measures of effectiveness and efficiency is a balanced scorecard.

Well, I think one could question whether or not that scorecard is balanced. I think the basic question is: if there's going to be a scorecard, who should be preparing it? Should it be the people who in themselves are responsible for some of the measures that appear on the scorecard?

There's a striking contrast between the performance measures used by Alberta Education and those used by independent groups. I refer to the *Education Week* assessments of states and the schools and school districts in those states, a project that was a long time in being generated and was financed in part by the Pew Foundation. They attempted to put together a set of performance measures which really do look at a balanced approach to reporting on the state of the education system. Let me give you some examples. They have a number of performance measures that address school climate, and it's something that is certainly missing from our performance measures.

One of the indicators under school climate is the percentage of K to 6 teachers with class sizes of fewer than 25 students, and they base each of their indicators on some research they have followed. In this case the research that's been widely quoted is from Tennessee, the research from Texas, and the research that was used by Governor Wilson in California when he instituted a massive program that would reduce the number of children in K to 3 classes in that state. Referring to the California move, the report says:

Recently, California has aggressively sought to reduce class size. Gov. Wilson said smaller classes will ensure that young students get the individualized teacher attention they need to develop better skills in reading, writing, and arithmetic.

So there is a performance measure that I would like to see added to the departments as they try to come up with a balanced set of criteria, the percentage of K to 6 teachers with classes of fewer than 25 students.

At the secondary level they have an equally important measure, the percentage of secondary school English teachers with fewer than 80 students. They go on to support that criterion, indicating that if English teachers are going to have an opportunity to make

the number of assignments and to mark the kinds of assignments that should be required of students operating in English classes, then the number of students they handle, whether it be in a semester or a quarter or a full-year term, shouldn't exceed 80. So it would be interesting to go across this province and to have a measure that said: how many of our high school English teachers are responsible for more than 80 students?

There's a set of measures which are focused at local autonomy, and again I think it's an area where the government would probably look pretty good. They use as one of their measures site-based management, deregulation and increased flexibility, and public school choice. Well, those I think are areas where the government has tried to make some changes. If we were to go out and do some testing of the waters, I think it would be useful to see that measure. I predict it would be fairly high.

The percentage of schools that have a decision-making body including teachers. That would be interesting, to look at our parent councils.

The waiver of regulations. How many of our schools or school districts in this province have asked for regulations to be waived so that they could do a better job?

And states with statewide open enrollment programs, which we now have.

So there's a series of measures on school climate that would, I think, give us the balance that the minister talked about having in the performance measures in his response to our questions last year.

There's also a set of resource questions, and I heard the minister talk about how much money is being spent and his claims to increases. But if you look at the spending since 1992, the investment in children's education as a percentage of our GDP was 4.1 percent in 1992, and it's 3.2 percent in 1998-99. That's down 22 percent. So if you take that kind of measure – and it's the kind of measure that we find in the *Education Week* performance measures. The per pupil expenditure is adjusted, and a second measure, the change in inflation adjusted per pupil measure, is used as an indicator. A third one – and that's I think what we were getting at here – is the relative fiscal effort. They indicate that it's not good enough for states to claim that they are putting a priority on education; they've got to follow it with their actions. That is a measure that should be made public: what is the relative fiscal effort the government is putting into education? And not just education. What is the relative fiscal effort in health care, in social services, in energy, the other programs that the government is involved in planning and is responsible for?

There is a section on the allocation of resources. At one point we had that, and for some reason it was dropped: the percentage of the budget that is spent on instruction. Again, we had that in a measure one or two business plans ago, and for some reason that is no longer there.

They also include a technology measure. Again, we had one, at least I think the beginning of a technology measure, and for some reason that has vanished.

They finish in the resources section with a measure, an indicator of building adequacy. They start off with a percentage of schools with at least one inadequate building. So if they were applying their indicators in Alberta, they would look at school districts across the province, and they would give them a rating based on the number of schools they had with inadequate buildings. To get top marks in this area, you have to be able to have a school district with only one – at the most, one – building that is rated as inadequate.

8:31

The *Education Week* Pew Foundation indicators are heavy on student achievement, as our measures are. It's interesting. Because of the recent surveys on student achievement, I know that the government is very happy to tout the performance of our students on international measures and on the achievement tests, and well they should be, because certainly that's what schools are about: having youngsters, having students perform well.

But there is more to it than the numbers that appear on paper, in documents like the business plans, and the testing program. Using those tests as a performance indicator has had a number of unintended consequences across the province. That's not peculiar to Alberta. There is good experience elsewhere with using test-based accountability schemes. They have become an accountability scheme in this province. When we find school districts publishing the achievement scores for particular schools, when we find school districts advertising, "Come to our district because we do well on the achievement tests," then this is being used as a test-based accountability scheme in many ways.

An article last year in a book by Darling-Hammond entitled *The Right to Learn* – they look at the last 10 years of using testing and the way that it's now starting to be used here. I'd like to quote a comment from their conclusions.

Focusing on testing without investing in organizational learning is rather like taking a patient's temperature over and over again without taking the necessary steps to promote greater health. Equally important, such policies heighten existing incentives for talented staff to opt for school placements where students are easy to teach,

where they do well, and where there are low numbers of special-needs youngsters with which they have to deal.

I think we have to be concerned about what's happening in those classrooms as we achieve these results of which we're so proud. I refer to a couple of surveys that have been done that look at the effect of achievement testing on classrooms. It's not good, some of the material that you read. We have teachers being placed on the basis of whether or not there's going to be an achievement test written at the end of that grade, so there's a selection unconsciously by some administrators to pick out what are considered better teachers and place them in those grades so that the school will look better. There is an attempt to teach to the test. I think there have been numerous examples where 6th graders in the province now in January are being prepped for the test that will appear in June.

All of the ills that we've known go along with achievement tests and final tests are gradually creeping into the system. I think if you look at the recent survey of teachers, a number of them consider the test to have a negative impact on grade 3, grade 6, and grade 9 classrooms. It's time now, before it goes any further, for that to be looked at. Before we brag about the results of those achievement tests, let's be sure that we are not doing other things to children that we would never intend to do and would regret doing if we knew they were happening.

I would commend the *Education Week* Pew indicators to the department. They look at adequately prepared teachers. We have no measure in our performance measures here that talks about the number of teachers that are teaching in a subject that they're actually qualified to teach in, whether they hold a degree at the secondary school level, and then some other measures focusing on tools for learning.

I've almost used my time for the first round, Madam Chairman. There's a lot of good material here. It's an interesting document. It's been interesting to watch as the business plans have evolved

over the last three or four years. Again, my plea would be for some consistency.

Thank you very much.

THE CHAIRMAN: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Creek.

MR. ZWOZDESKY: Thank you, Madam Chairman. I rise to speak to the estimates tonight with respect to the Department of Education as put forward by the hon. Minister of Education earlier this term and as commented on by him a few moments ago. I'm propelled to my feet for several reasons. Among those reasons is of course the fact that I used to be a schoolteacher and I enjoyed it thoroughly. I firmly believe that our students, our young people, our children really are the future. This is where we're going to go for our future leaders, our future decision-makers, and our future participants perhaps even in the Assembly where we stand today. So I would never, ever underestimate the tremendous importance of education.

I'm going to go beyond the buzzwords of the day, such as global competitiveness and globalized village and emerging market strategies and new information technology and all those other things that we're talking about right now, because I want to cut to the core on some of these issues tonight.

I listened very carefully to the Minister of Education explain some of the planned increases, and I would welcome those increases to education, particularly given the large amount of cuts we've experienced over the last several years. In fact, I did some comparisons for tonight's debate. I went back as far as 1992-93. I noted that total education investment in constant dollars at that time was somewhere just over \$3 billion. Today we see a budget for 1998-99 down around \$2.9 billion. There's perhaps not that large a decrease, but it does represent a change of about 11 percent. At the same time as we're seeing this change, this downward trend on investment in education, it's interesting that we are experiencing a natural upward trend in the total enrollment picture. Again to compare 1992-93 to 1998-99, the number of children that were enrolled in K through 12 education in '92-93 was approximately 518,000, whereas today we have projections of about 561,000 students, and that marks an increase of 8.3 percent.

Then I look at the next area, Madam Chairman, which has to do with the per capita investment in our children's education, and I notice there as well a downward trend on the part of the government, wherein we're reducing our per capita investment by at least 1 percent, from \$1,136 per child in '92-93 down to \$1,124 in 1998-1999. It seems to me that we're getting back up to a certain acceptable and perhaps tolerable level. I guess it's the thinking that eludes me here on some of the government policies and budget figures that accompany those policies. When I look at the investment in children and the investment particularly in the education of our children expressed as a percentage of GDP, I note that in 1992-93 it was approximately 4.1 percent, and today our investment in children's education as a percentage of GDP is down to 3.2 percent, which is a change in the negative sense of about 22 percent.

8:41

Then, of course, we come to that famous statement that says: where do we stand overall in terms of our ranking? The minister alluded to this, and I just want to briefly add a comment on it. That is that we used to pride ourselves not so much on being the wealthiest province that put the most money toward education but we prided ourselves on having the highest quality education

system that was backed by sufficient dollars to meet the aims and objectives of not only the government but of Albertans and Alberta educators. I was struck, when we did this research, to find out exactly where Alberta stood.

I know that the minister commented on this and has said that more money doesn't necessarily mean a better education. I don't disagree with some of that, but I do fundamentally disagree with the extent to which the cuts have been made and the ideology that I believe is driving some of those cuts. I find it very, very alarming that we have dropped to something like 55th place in terms of our per pupil expenditure ranking when compared with all the other provinces and states, our brothers and sisters to the south, to the extent that we are even outdone by virtually every other province in Canada on our per pupil expenditure. I think that says something about where it is that the government is placing its priorities, or not placing its priorities is perhaps the better way to say that.

[Mr. Severtson in the chair]

I recall receiving this pamphlet from the government, which I've distributed to a number of my constituents. It was provided to us by the hon. Minister of Education, and it says, "First Things First: Our Children, agenda for opportunity." Yes, it is a tremendous agenda for opportunity if the government would accept that agenda, embrace it, and make the significant changes that are necessary to do what they are talking about doing in this document, such as building on a strong foundation and listening to Albertans and putting the building blocks together and so on. I was interested to see and very pleasantly surprised to hear that the Alberta Growth Summit had said that people development was going to be the first priority for the province and that that should translate into a very strong emphasis particularly on education. So that's what I was looking forward to in this budget.

As I look at where and how the government intends to spend the money, I note that there's approximately \$380 million more that's being allocated overall, if I understood the minister correctly, which marks about a 12.7 percent increase, but I can't help but ask whether or not that is simply the minimum amount that's required to cope with increased enrollments. Is that the minimum amount required to do the very basic upgrades and maintenance that are required for our infrastructure in education? Is that the very basic minimum amount required to meet the coping demands of teachers' salaries? Is that the minimum amount required to cope with new materials that are required, computers in the classroom that are required? Or is there actually a plan for sustained growth built into that figure?

The minister talked about four primary areas. He probably alluded to more, but one of the four that I recall him singling out was appropriate funding for quality education. That is a very laudable objective, and I, too, would like to see appropriate funding. The question is: what is appropriate funding? Is ranking 53rd or 55th out of 60 appropriate funding? What measurement is the government using to tell us that that is the appropriate level? Is the government simply inventing a figure here and hoping it will work, knowing full well that it's going to take a number of years before we're able to properly evaluate whether we did a good job educating this generation or whether the government screwed up educating this generation? How will we know that? It will take too long for us to find out. Unfortunately, it's not a risk that I would be prepared to take, not when it comes to education and not when it comes to our most precious resource of all, that being our students.

The other area that the hon. minister referred to was early

academic success. By that, I inferred that he was talking about kindergarten and preschool children in a general sense. It was interesting for me to note that a few years ago, again propelled more by ideology I think than anything else, there were significant cuts made to the ECS programs, only to see a retraction earlier in this current term and the reinstatement of significant dollars, particularly to help educate those children, who I believe are at the grade 2 or 3 level now, that did not have the benefit of that early childhood education programming which other children in other jurisdictions had. I mean, I'm thankful that the government recognized that particular shortfall, some would say mistake, and moved to correct it.

Again, I think we have to be very careful that we don't allow those kinds of circumstances to happen again and that we're ever vigilant that the budget reflects proper funding, not only for the educational classroom needs of these children but also for some of the surrounding assistance that we provide to them. Let's talk about transportation grants, for example. I recall the '96-97 budget, Mr. Chairman, when there were significant cuts made to the ECS transportation grant, excepting thereout children with disabilities who required special transportation. There again, to me that was another signal of withdrawal of support for the ECS programs in a general sense. So I welcome the minister's review of that particular circumstance.

Then the third point the minister talked about that intrigued me was special circumstances: disabilities and special-needs students as well as the gifted children. Mr. Chairman, I have a number of special-needs students in some of the classes that I visit in my riding. I'm sure that you do and all members here do. I was very struck in particular by a visit I made last year to the Hazeldean school in the Edmonton-Mill Creek riding, where I had another firsthand experience with some of the special-needs students and the parents of those special-needs children, whose meeting I attended, as well as the instructors who were being asked to try and teach some of these children.

Now, some of them ranged from what's called mild and moderate special needs to severe handicaps to disabilities that are difficult to describe in this Assembly. I was very struck by the dedication of the teachers who were attempting to cope with some of these children. My concern there lies in the fact that if we don't provide adequate dollars for special-needs instruction, we're going to get a very difficult situation developing, or perhaps a better way to say it is a difficult situation getting worse. These instructors are finding it very difficult to teach these children when there are more than one or two of them in an integrated classroom, yet we see some crowding happening there. So I hope the minister keeps a vigilant eye on what's developing in that respect, because it's a critical needs area.

8:51

I'm always concerned as well with the other end of the spectrum, which would be perhaps what we call the gifted or accelerated students, because they, too, need some special consideration. But let's face it; they're able to cope perhaps better and will do better on their own than perhaps a special-needs child would do. So we have to be very watchful that we don't improperly impose programs on these students that somehow disadvantage them.

The other area that he mentioned: was it the nonacademic sector? I didn't quite catch the exact gist of what he was saying there, but I will read through *Hansard* and pick up on it.

I don't have much time left here, but I would like to just comment on basic instruction, that I welcome a \$41 million increase to public education, which amounts to about a 2.8

percent increase. Again, I'm concerned with whether or not that is enough for the system to cope with the influx, the migration of new students as well as the introduction of more students that are Alberta born into the system and whether or not that amount of money is going to make any kind of significant impact whatsoever on things like teacher/student ratio. As a former teacher myself, I know it was often the case that statistics would come out saying there's a certain maximum number of students at which optimum learning and optimum teaching can occur, and the last figure I have in my mind is somewhere around 20 to 25 students. Now, again it depends on the grade level, Mr. Chairman, but surely there has to be something we can do to not allow classes to get to be as large as 35, 38, 40, and 42 students, which I have documented cases of out of Calgary. I think that's far too many students for one teacher to handle and somehow maintain sanity.

In the session before this one I was alarmed to note that we had the highest rate of teacher burnout ever in the history of the Edmonton public school board occur here in our city. I don't know how much that's been aggravated or abated in the last little while, but again, it's another area to keep very close tabs on. We wouldn't want to penalize these teachers who are being unfairly treated as a result of pressures or pressure points, that are so often referred to by the hon. Premier.

I do welcome the additional first-time funding that the minister mentioned in the ESL programs, which in particular will help assist Canadian-born children who have a language requirement that is not being met elsewhere, and the \$3 million that he's putting in there I think is good. However, I would also ask the minister if he would take a look at the area of second languages, third languages, fourth languages that are taught in the so-called Saturday morning schools. We had an initiative in this province where we supported those students with a \$25 per capita grant.

The money was important and was very welcome, but it was more the message of support that the government was giving for language priorities that I would like the government to reinstate, at least to revisit, and tell me why they have not yet reinstated that money. It's not a huge amount of money, Mr. Chairman. It amounted to something like \$250,000. I mean, it's a large number, but when you look at it overall in comparison to other budgets of government departments, it's not a large amount of money, particularly given the fact that Alberta needs to encourage more second-language learning. It is truly what will give our students that additional key that will open additional doors.

So I want the minister to please respond to that comment on the so-called Saturday morning schools and whether or not there will be any assistance given back to them. Again, it's more a question of governmental support for all the volunteers, and there are hundreds of them. I know; I used to be one of them as well. I used to teach on Saturday mornings, and I recall in the late '60s and early '70s how difficult it was to get that particular program going. So any support the government might wish to give in that respect would be very, very welcome.

I see my time is running out, and perhaps if there is time at the end of the session this evening, I may have a chance to come back. But in the 30 seconds or so that I have left, I would close with a quick comment on student transportation. I know there's a new funding formula, Mr. Chairman, but I want to pose one question to the hon. minister, and that's with respect to whether or not he has done anything to help reduce the incidence of disruption on school bus rides. Would he consider installing video cameras where certain jurisdictions or certain parental groups might want them? Would he look at installing video cameras or something similar to that? We've got a couple of very critical circumstances, and I'd appreciate the minister's comments on that.

THE DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: I just want to mention to hon. members that the batteries in our timer are dead, so I'm just going to keep time. I'll give a warning about two minutes before a wrap-up. Okay?

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glengarry.

MR. BONNER: Mr. Chairman, I was very happy as well to see a reinvestment of \$380 million in education, but I was also a little discouraged to see that only \$187 million is new money. Approximately \$70 million was announced in Budget '97, and \$122 million is required to keep up the basic instructional grant at the 1997-98 level of \$3,686 per student, based on an increased enrollment of 33,000 students over the next three years.

In looking at this, I also would like to look at the key performance measures and particularly the provincial achievement tests at, first of all, the junior high level. I see particularly that for grade 9 mathematics we did drop by 3 percent, from 69 to 66 percent, and I did notice as well that the asterisk beside this decrease indicated that the new program was certainly in place. One of my questions to the minister would be: because this new program certainly has a greater emphasis on technology, how much of this budget is going into the technology? How many dollars are being spent to bring our grade 9 students up to a level where they can use this technology in the math program?

The second concern I have with provincial achievement tests is the amount of money that we have set forth in order to prepare these exams, to administer these exams, and of course to analyze them. The way the program is set up right now, Mr. Minister, I'm sure you're aware that particularly in math and science we are only able to replace one-third of the exam each year. There just are not adequate resources to have a new exam each year. So two-thirds of the exams that our grade 9 students are writing in math and science – they are using the same questions that have been used the previous year and the two years earlier. I would certainly like to have some answers to those questions as well.

9:01

As well, not too many years ago Edmonton public had in the paper their results, and it was incredibly interesting how the demographics of the city of Edmonton were shown in those particular results. Certainly the poorer areas did not do anywhere near as well as some of the wealthier areas. So I think from this standpoint I would have to question their effectiveness.

Again I'd like to single out mathematics at the grade 12 level, and of course it is the subject that students get the lowest percentage of acceptable marks on or pass the examination. I would have to once again say that math 30 is not a fair exam, that this is an exam being used at this time as something to weed out students, to stop them from moving out of high school and either into postsecondary or on with their lives.

I noticed as well that when we look at school completion at the bottom of the page – and particularly when I was looking in this book *Measuring Up*, the third annual report on the performance of the government of Alberta, the 1996-97 results, the targeted projection for the percentage of students completing their high school within six years of entering grade 9 was 75 percent. I do see here in our Government and Lottery Fund Estimates that this now has dropped to 69 percent. Why is there such a discrepancy, 6 percent, here?

In moving along to kindergarten, I know that both of my colleagues have certainly covered this area very well. One of the questions I would like to ask that I don't think I heard them ask was: are we going to be moving to a prekindergarten program? Now, this again is one of those areas where I think we can make

quite an impact particularly with younger students, particularly students who don't get the opportunity to prepare as many do. I had the opportunity to tour a Head Start school in my particular constituency, and this was a school for students who would be attending kindergarten who were ESL, or they might have been born in Canada, but certainly English was not spoken in the home. One of the statistics they gave me at this Head Start program was that for every hour they spend with those children, it is going to save seven remedial hours down the road. I would like to know, then, where we are with the Head Start programs and if in fact we are going to be moving to a prekindergarten program.

Another question I had on funding was: how much of the \$46 million in your 12-point plan for education between 1998-99 and 2000-2001 is being paid for through increases in local property taxes collected for educational purposes? This is despite the reduction in the provincial mill rate for residential and nonresidential properties announced in Budget '98. School property taxes are projected to increase from \$1.099 billion in 1998-99 to \$1.145 billion in 2000-2001, which is an increase of \$46 million, or \$26 per ratepayer.

I also want to look here at the class size, pupil/teacher ratio. In doing my research, I noticed that Alberta ranked 47th among North American jurisdictions in the classroom teacher to pupil ratio at 18.54 to 1. Now, of course once we mix in all the other school staff that are involved, that certainly increases. I would like to know if you could tell me: how much will this ratio decrease with the additional increase in funding to education?

As well, I noticed in my research that there is declining confidence in the parents and the public in general regarding the ability of the basic education system to provide our children with the necessary knowledge and skills upon the completion of high school. How are we going to reverse this lack of confidence and the declining confidence that is being shown? This is particularly disturbing since many of these people, when we look at it, talk about: do the students have the ability to get jobs? The public's perception of this in 1996: 46 percent of them felt they would. This declined to 38 percent in 1997. The percentage of parents who believed that high school graduates are prepared for post-secondary education declined from 70 percent in 1996 to 53 percent in 1997. The percent for the public declined from 68 percent in 1996 to 52 percent in 1997. It would seem to me that we have quite a bit of work to do in the area of restoring public confidence in public education.

In the areas of reading, writing, math content, math problem-solving, and science Alberta students aged 13 to 16 exceeded the Canadian standard in every category but math for the 16 year olds, where they were tied. At the grade 8 level Alberta students scored higher in math and science than their Canadian and international counterparts, yet Alberta teachers who have done such an outstanding job with these students continue to have bitter contract struggles in negotiating their contracts with their boards. Currently only 30 out of 63 boards have settled their contracts. Four presently have memorandums of agreement, and only 31 have achieved or exceeded the rollback. When is the minister going to reward these teachers for their sacrifices and dedication and put enough money back into education to repay the 5 percent rollback and reward them for outstanding performance in difficult times?

I also noticed in my reading that a recent Environics poll indicated that 34 percent of Albertans felt that the greatest problem for public education was funding. Class size, per student funding, support staff and services have been addressed but not

substantially. Many of these areas had to be attacked during the lean years, and I would like to know: when are these problems that are facing teachers going to be resolved? We cannot expect these teachers to be in the classroom and run a track meet every day they're there. Even with a modest projection for inflation over the next few years, the basic instruction grant will only increase 6.8 percent between 1994-95 and 2000-2001 as against a 10.4 percent increase in inflation. Public education, Mr. Minister, does still need an influx of dollars in order that we can maintain our high position not only in Canada but also internationally when it comes to education.

9:11

Moving on to privatization. Would it be possible to get a complete list of how many charter schools there are? How well are they working? How are they being overseen by the minister or his department? How are the school boards making out? We'd heard that they were having some difficulty with their abilities to run these particular schools.

Private school funding. Private schools currently receive about 75 percent of the funding public schools receive. They have no capital funds, no property tax proceeds. We would certainly favour the status quo in this regard.

I think at this point, Mr. Chairman, I will stop with my questions and give some others – I will come back with some later. Thank you.

THE DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

DR. PANNU: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I would like to start by making a brief observation of what I saw at the Provincial Education Summit. I guess it was sometime in August or September in Calgary. I happened to spend a day there and sat through several workshops, subgroup discussions, and one thing that certainly struck me – and I'm sure the Minister of Education was there. I know he was there, and he must have noticed it, a very profound concern that people taking part in the education summit – and there were parents there, there were teachers, there were school superintendents and other citizens as well. One thing they all seemed to be unanimous about was of course the series of serious problems that schools in Alberta faced primarily due to policies of underfunding by this government over the last four or more years. This budget is clearly an attempt to take into account those concerns and to respond to those. Ultimately, Albertans will judge whether or not the response was adequate and whether the damage already done to our public education system, including its infrastructure, will be repaired by the three-year plan that's offered in this budget.

It's been I think repeatedly observed by hon. members who have spoken before me that certainly the figures, call them from \$350 million to \$389 million extra, over the next three years – the additional money over these three years is certainly in dispute as to exactly how much of this is new and how much is old. Certainly the budget gives the appearance that the minister is listening and that in fact he has been able to communicate the concerns of Albertans to his colleagues around the cabinet table. But when you really look at these numbers closely, taking into account inflation, taking into account growth in enrollments, taking into account the accumulated needs of the last five years for capital equipment, for maintenance and repair of buildings, and for new demands and needs for instructional technologies, the new amount of money available doesn't allow the education system to keep up with the increasing costs which result from

growth and inflation over the last five or six years. So in spite of some nominal increases based on every year – that is, the yearly increase – three years from now the system will have fallen behind in terms of its financial, fiscal capacity to address the very fundamental and central needs of education of our young people.

Having said that, since the numbers have been referred to several times, I will not spend too much time on that. The point has been made.

I would like to turn my attention to the business plans section of the budget and look at the key performance measures. I really want to focus on the appropriateness, adequacy of the measures included here and also note the absence of some that I think must be included if the intention of this government and of this minister is, indeed, to look at the functional capacities of this system and the ability of the system based on those functional capacities to serve the appropriate educational needs of our young people.

I want to just draw the attention of the minister and of colleagues sitting in the House to the tables that start on page 133. Provincial diploma examinations, for example, that table in the middle of that page, talks of “percentage of students writing grade 12 examinations who met or exceeded the acceptable standard.” The information that is contained in the table is useful, but in my view, it's incomplete. I think Albertans want to know from the minister as an accountability statement every year the percentage of those in grade 12 who write all these examinations. All we know is of those that write how many score at what level, but what's missing here is the information on what percentage of those enrolled in grade 12 every year sit for these exams. This is a report on the success, not on how many sit. I think to have that information would be very, very useful. That is: do 80 percent or 90 percent take math 30 or do only 50 percent take math 30 when they are in high school in grade 12? How many or what percentage take math 33? Similarly, you know, on various subjects I think that over a period of several years to find out this kind of rate of participation – undertaking studies in these areas will be a good bit of additional information.

School completion, the last little table on page 133. The minister's pious hope, of course, is that by the year 2001 – that is, three years from today – 75 percent of students will have completed high school, which will enable them to enter either a postsecondary studies program or something else within a period of six years after having done grade 6. There's a pattern in that table that cannot be ignored, and the pattern tells me that between '91 and '97, over a period of seven years, there has been virtually no change in the rate of completion. What grounds does the minister have for this very arbitrary number that's picked from somewhere and plunked in there in that little cell? By 2001 what he hopes will happen is that that rate will go up to 75 percent with absolutely no evidence here based on the previous seven-year experience, unless there is some information the minister has which I don't have and Albertans don't have which shows that there will be a departure from that pattern all of a sudden.

9:21

Similarly, going on to the next page, Mr. Chairman, page 134, key performance measures, I look at the table at the top of page 134 and then the table at the bottom of page 134, two tables. The first one deals with parent and student satisfaction with education, and that's invariably very high regardless of which group is responding to that question. The response rate is more or less stable with few exceptions over these three years from '95 to '97, and then the projections are very similar to the pattern that is given to us by the experience of the last three years. Going from there to the last table – parent, student, and public satisfaction

with the graduates' preparation for work and further study – one finds that parents' scores and the public's scores are radically different from the scores for students.

Two sets of observations I think are appropriate here. One, is there any relationship or should one expect any relationship between the figures in table 1 on the top of that page and the very last table on that page? I would submit respectfully that, yes, if these data are valid – and there is a question of validity that in scientific measurement is a critical one – then there's got to be a relationship between, say, parental scores in the top table and parental scores in the bottom table. Since there is none, I question the validity of these numbers and the utility of having such numbers presented year after year after year. I think the minister and his officials need to pay attention to this question if they want to ensure some credibility in the numbers presented in these figures. At the moment in the present form I cannot give any credence to what's presented here as being valid.

The next one is parent and student satisfaction with teaching methods. There's a certain problem that I have with simply gathering opinions. Opinion surveys are quite fickle, particularly when they are based on two such different groups: parents, who are seldom in the classroom to make judgments about teaching methods, and students, who are not quite as knowledgeable about the adequacy or the efficacy of teaching methods. These are complex decisions that teachers have to make, both individually and collectively. Even when they use their received knowledge based on their prolonged education, their judgments do not necessarily always deliver as expected. So to ask students, who, for reasons obvious to all of us, are not as knowledgeable about what's adequate and what's not when it comes to talking about teaching methods, and parents, who have very limited knowledge and opportunity to make these judgments – again, the usefulness of such measures to me is very limited. I'm afraid it's a waste of scarce resources to engage in this.

Parent satisfaction with teachers, fairly high in '97, is apparently a new measure. Again the targets set are very, very ambitious, and we don't know what to make of the expectations as delineated under the 2001 column in that table. What's missing here – any good employer knows, any good set of managers would know that in order to increase productivity, in order to maintain high product quality, one ought to pay attention to the satisfaction of those who produce, those whose quality is of interest, those who seek high productivity, those who produce a product.

I'm intrigued by the fact that the minister and his department bother in the least to find out what teachers think of what's happening in the classroom, what teachers think of their own satisfaction. Any modern organization, any modern corporation would pay attention to the satisfaction levels of its own employees if it is, indeed, really interested in securing their full co-operation and in securing the very best performances they're capable of, but there is nothing of that sort that one finds in the key performance indicators here.

[Mrs. Gordon in the chair]

Computer skills learned, the next table, is again something fascinating. The figures from '95 to '97 range from 62 to 65 percent. The target is anywhere from 15 to 18 percentage points higher than what the pattern would suggest. Is there any virtue in making such statements without any basis in experience?

Another question that of course jumps up in one's mind is: does the minister really take these numbers seriously? If, indeed, he does, then he has to explain to me how he is expecting to depart

from the pattern of the most recent three years simply by an act of will, I suppose. I don't know how else he can expect an 18 percentage point change all of a sudden from '97 onwards. I suppose he doesn't have the figures for '98, otherwise he would have given them to us, I presume.

So the whole question of these key performance indicators it seems has been reduced to an exercise in futility. Unless these questions that I'm raising are addressed seriously by the minister, I think Albertans will have reason to assume that these things are done more for justification of internal expectation in their department and to observe department rituals or government rituals rather than to get at the real issue of performance or improvement of the system.

Madam Chairman, I'm glad I noticed that there's a change in the chair. There was a Mr. Chairman sitting there a while ago. So I'm glad I noticed it.

9:31

While on the one hand, Madam Chairman, the minister has made a great deal about additional funds – 300 some million dollars, he claims – others claim it's no more than \$155 million over three years and so on and so forth.

I just simply want to close by drawing attention to the fact that the Energy department's revenue statement on page 157 indicates that that department has given away close to \$484 million in royalties on synthetic oil and bitumen. Whereas on one side this government is giving away huge amounts of money to companies that are already in billions of dollars and doing well, on the side of reinvesting in education and in health and so forth, this government simply continues to act in a very miserly and, in my view, shortsighted way.

Thank you.

THE CHAIRMAN: The hon. Member for St. Albert.

MRS. O'NEILL: Thank you, Madam Chairman. I'd like to speak to the Education budget this evening. I'm compelled to do so because I have listened at length to the gloom and doom that I have heard from across the floor of this House. I'd like to speak to the satisfaction factor that is in the business plan for Education, and therefore I have some questions to ask of the minister. I know that he'll be able to give me the answers.

Before I ask them, I also want to speak to the reality that happens in the classrooms right across this province every day. There are thousands and thousands of students who go in the morning, return home in the afternoon, who are very happy with what they receive by way of education in our formal school setting. There are a number of things that we don't hear about in this House that I feel should be mentioned.

The fact that our students do extremely well on international and national testing. These are students who are trained by very competent teachers, who are educated and schooled by the best, and I think we should recognize that whenever we speak of education. We sell our teachers short if we continue to say that education is being treated in a miserly fashion by this government, because it is not. In fact, it is being treated well, and this budget reflects it.

This budget recognizes our investment in education, and it gives more than the appearance that our dedication to the future of our province is through education. This particular budget mentioned areas with regard to capital investments, and those are areas that have been identified around the province as investment that needs to be put into the structures, into the bricks and mortar of the school system. We also have program investments, so this leads

me to the question that I would raise with regard to the increase we have in this year's budget for the mild and moderate special-needs allowance for students in the particular instructional grant or as attached to the instructional grant. There is an increase. However, my understanding was that when that amount was \$250, it also included the expenditures for special programs for mild and moderate special-needs students as well as gifted and talented students. My question is: does this still include that emphasis on those programs for mild and moderate, gifted and talented, for students with those needs?

I would also like to ask: in what way will the Health and Social Services departments be working with Education to put together the funding services for students? We are looking at the integration of those particular departments as they service children in this province, so my question is: what would be the direction that will be taken in specific cases in order to reconcile those three departments' attention to one student or to individual students?

I'd also like to speak to the technology in the classroom venture, something where I know that the expectations of the schools, the school boards, the teachers, and certainly the parents around this province are that the children in this province will receive whatever they need by way of training and technology in order to meet their future education needs. With regard to this particular budget, I would ask how the curriculum for computer programs or technology programs, if you will, will be delivered in the classroom. Will it be isolated, or will it be integrated with other curricula? Furthermore, with regard to that technology, I'd ask too if there is a program that is being set out throughout the province whereby it can be measured, whether the performance measures of the students can be tabulated or monitored.

On another front, my question is with regard to the federal government's transfer payments for the programs for second language learning. We used to call it the protocol agreement; I think they've changed the name of it. But I would ask how we are going to make up that shortfall that I know the federal government has left us with from previous years in their funding for that program.

Further to that, with regard to the budget as well, I'd like to ask about school boards who opt to raise money by implementing a local requisition if they may, if they choose to do so. Could the department tell us whether this is an in-house opportunity that comes back directly to the local school board or whether the government benefits by this, whether it incurs expenses as a result, and whether we have any idea as to whether there are some school boards across this province that will be implementing that or at least effecting that in this coming year? Those are some questions that I have as a result of this budget and the business planning that has been done by the department.

I'd like to conclude by saying that I feel we very seldom recognize in this House the excellent work that is being done in the classroom. We tend to focus instead – at least I hear a lot of focusing – on this fear mongering that our children are not going to get the education they expect or they deserve. Quite frankly, I think they get the education that is truly measurable: that they achieve well and are functioning from the education that they are delivered in the classroom. I think we have indicators of strong support from families for our school system, and I'd just like answers to a few of these questions that are here in light of the fact that I think our budget really does recognize the importance of education in the lives of this province and the health of this province.

Thank you, Madam Chairman.

THE CHAIRMAN: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenora.

9:41

MR. SAPERS: Thanks. I can see that the minister is anxious to begin to respond, so I'll try to keep my comments brief. But then, we're really in no particular hurry; are we, Madam Chairman?

The world is certainly different in Edmonton-Glenora than it is in St. Albert, I can say, and it's not that the world is all doom and gloom. It's just that there's a certain reality that has hit public education over the last couple of years. It's summed up, I think, somewhat in the minister's own business plan. I want to focus my questions really on the business plan and ask a question or two about school facilities as well. We'll end with a brief discussion, I think, about funding.

First of all, in the business plan one of the key measures that I was particularly interested in, Mr. Minister, is the measure that says that by the year 2001, 75 percent of Alberta students will "receive a high school diploma . . . or enter post-secondary studies within six years of entering grade 9." That, I'm going to suppose, is a good and worthwhile target. The problem is that I don't know where that puts us in the context of the national pool. I can tell you that I am very, very dismayed that for Alberta we would accept a 25 percent failure rate.

What that performance measure suggests is that 1 in 4 Alberta students won't be able to complete four years of high school education in six years, that they won't be able to go through grades 9, 10, 11, and 12 and then enter postsecondary or receive their diploma or certificate within six years. I don't know about you, Mr. Minister, but I can't think of many other programs where we would take 50 percent longer to do the work and then accept a 75 percent success rate as a worthwhile target. Now, if you can set me straight and tell me that that puts us at the leading edge of the national experience, I'd be interested to hear that, but if you can't set me straight in that regard, I'd like to know what you're doing about this particular target.

Another one that I'm interested in. Actually there's a pair of targets that talk about taxpayers, parents versus the public, and I was interested in that breakdown, that you would have in your business plan a category of taxpayers known as the public and a category of taxpayers known as parents. I'm not sure what the difference is; I'm not sure who's who. One of the key performance measures that I was interested in in your comments was the percentage of parents and the public satisfied with their opportunities for involvement in decisions affecting education in their local schools.

For the parents and public, if you aggregate that and take an average, in 1996 the level of satisfaction is about 71 percent. I don't accept that there's a difference where you can justify saying parents and public. If these people are taxpayers, Mr. Minister, I think you'll appreciate that whether or not you have a child in school shouldn't determine whether or not you have a legitimate opinion on public education. So we've got about 71 percent in 1996 who are satisfied, and that's an average of the parents and public figure. But your target for the year 2001 would be that about 82 percent should be satisfied. So you're saying that it's okay if about 1 in 5 Albertans are not satisfied, but even more interesting than that, I was looking for how you're going to achieve, I was looking for the plan of action that goes with this performance measure, for how you're going to see the 10 percent growth or the 11 percent growth between the measure in 1996 and the target for the year 2001.

I'm also interested, Mr. Minister, in the key performance measure: "percentage of parents of students with severe special needs who are satisfied with services for their child." That was at 75 percent in 1996, got better in 1997 by 4 percent, and the

target by 2001 is 85 percent. Again, I was looking for the specific action plans. Certainly there are many, many situations that I'm familiar with where parents of students with special needs are not finding their lot in life aided by recent policies. Of course, many of those policies have actually been decisions of local school boards, but the local school boards will tell you it's because their hands have been tied because of what's happened with provincial funding.

In Calgary just this week there have been several stories that have come to public attention regarding children with mental health problems, children with attention deficit disorder, et cetera, and I daresay the prognosis for their treatment in the system is not to see dramatic improvement in the short term because of a lack of resources. So I'd like to know what your action plan is there.

Another key performance measure, under goal 5, that has to do with information technology, is the "percentage of high school students who report that school helps them improve their computer skills." Data for 1995, 1996, and 1997 presents that 62 to 65 percent of students believe that schooling actually helped them improve their skills. The target by 2001 is 80 percent. Certainly in comparison to current levels of satisfaction I guess 80 percent is a pretty ambitious and lofty goal. What's the problem? Why is it that right now, this year, not even two-thirds of students believe that the system is improving their computer skills? Is it because students in Alberta already have a certain degree of computer literacy that's underestimated by the system, by the curriculum as it's been approved by Alberta Education, or is it because there is not enough availability of current hardware and software in schools to meet student demand and student need? Is it because teachers haven't been given the time to improve their own skills and to learn how to take advantage of the latest technology themselves? What exactly is the problem there, Mr. Minister? You've made quite a number of public statements about investment in technology and the importance of technology in education, and it seems to me this performance measure should concern you.

Goal 6, "the education funding system is fair, equitable and appropriate." This is another one of those key performance measures where again you make the distinction between parents and the public, as if their tax dollars should somehow be counted differently. I note that the percentage of parents and public who are satisfied with the value received from public funds spent in their local school in 1997 was a pretty dismal average of about 63 percent. It's targeted to grow a whole 10 percent by the year 2001. So again your own performance measures would indicate that you expect at least if not more than one in four Albertans to be unsatisfied with the value that they receive from public spending on public education.

This worries me, Mr. Minister. If one in four Albertans are going to be upset with the value of money spent, is that going to create some pressure or some movement towards more private education? As Minister of Education I guess I would be heartened to see you put in your business plan a 99 percent satisfaction rate of value for money spent, and I would be very gladdened to see the specific plan of action that you are going to take to get there. You know, Mr. Minister, if you had a vision that said, "We are going to do everything we can to give the public the best possible value in public education," then I can tell you that I would not be standing in this House criticizing you for only getting that satisfaction level up to, let's say, 94 percent if you set it at 98 or 99. It seems to me that you're setting yourself up a little bit here to accept a rather mediocre performance, and I think our children deserve better than that.

There's another measure here as well that has to do with the percentage of students "who met or exceeded the acceptable standard on provincial achievement tests." I'm not particularly concerned about the numbers that are presented on these tables in the business plans. Other members have already questioned you about those. But I am interested in what you perceive to be the impact of changing the curriculum for the grade 10, 11, 12 math and science courses to meet with the western Canadian protocol.

I've had teachers make representations to me that there are no resources in place for them, no learning material put together for them, nothing that has been translated from English into French for the French immersion programs. The reason why none of that's happened is because there's been a shortage of resources and a lack of co-ordination between the province and the public school boards, yet the plan is still to implement this curriculum this fall in some cases. Even more troubling for some of these teachers that have talked to me is, they say, that the students themselves may be making some fairly poor choices based on what they're being told from postsecondary institutions because there hasn't been a lot of co-ordination between the postsecondary institutions and the K to 12 system to determine sort of the best fit for these students if they're planning one particular course of postsecondary instruction or another. So I would be interested in your comments on the western Canadian protocol and the change in the science and math curriculum.

9:51

Under goal 8 there is a strategy that I would like you to expand on a little: "Alberta Education is managed effectively and efficiently to achieve government goals." That's the goal statement. Selected department strategy 8.26 is to "privatize or eliminate department functions that are not suitable or essential for government." A whole bunch of questions flow out of that, Mr. Minister. Number one, according to whom? Who decides? Is that your decision? Is there going to be a discussion paper? Is there going to be any kind of public debate about this, or have you got a little vest-pocket list of those things that should be privatized or eliminated within your department because they're "not suitable or essential for government"?

I guess "essential" is as troubling a word as any other word in that statement. We could have a robust debate around what is suitable to be privatized. I am not saying that there may be nothing suitable in your department to be privatized. In fact, Canadian social programs have a wonderful, rich history of a mixed economy of public and private provision. So this is not a question about privatization per se, but it's a question about who decides what's suitable, and who decides, as well, what's essential and at what point in time that decision is made. Just exactly how do you know what's suitable and what's essential, Mr. Minister?

A couple of other things. This, I suppose, you could plug into my comments about funding. Mr. Minister, I've heard you say that money doesn't make a lot of difference. We have had some very good success with our students on their provincial exams, and I'm very proud of those students and their teachers. But I would like to point out to you and I would appreciate knowing whether or not you're aware of this research. In the *Harvard Journal on Legislation*, volume 28, there's an article by Ronald Ferguson titled Paying for Public Education: New Evidence on How and Why Money Matters. In the conclusion section, which begins on page 488 of that journal, it says some very interesting things, and I want to quote very briefly from the conclusion section.

The research that this Article describes strongly supports the conventional wisdom that higher-quality schooling produces better

reading skills among public school students and that when targeted and managed wisely, increased funding can improve the quality of public education.

Further on it reads as follows.

The results of this analysis have three strong implications for school finance reform. First, equal salaries will not attract equally qualified teachers to dissimilar school districts: for any given salary, teachers prefer school districts with higher socioeconomic status and judge the attractiveness of teaching in a given district against the allure of other opportunities. This suggests that a state policy of salary differentials – where districts with lower socioeconomic status pay higher salaries – will be necessary if each district is to get its proportionate share of the best teachers.

I'm still quoting, Mr. Minister.

Second, large classes hurt scores but many classes may be unnecessarily small. A ratio of eighteen teachers per student at the district level appears to be a threshold.

I'll emphasize: a ratio of 18 teachers per student at a district level.

Quoting once again, Mr. Minister:

Third, forcing all districts to comply with any uniform set of spending rules or spending levels would be very risky business – probably impossible to administer successfully.

Three pretty dramatic findings, I would suggest, and published in a journal that I think has some merit. Again, I would like to know what you think about that research and whether or not it had any bearing on your business plan.

Mr. Minister, I heard the Member for St. Albert talking about all the doom and gloom coming from this side of the House. You know, I'm disappointed that it would boil down to one member who supports the government saying to the opposition bench: you guys just talk about doom and gloom. In the last Angus Reid survey that was published, based on a survey of 800 Albertans done in January, education was the second most dramatic concern to Albertans. The only thing that was more troubling in the minds of Albertans was the state of our health care system. But fully 34 percent of Albertans ranked education as their biggest concern, so there is a problem and it does need to be addressed. I know that you're not naive about that. I know that you recognize there's a problem.

A couple of other quick comments before I take my seat, and hopefully you will take some time to answer. I noticed in your introductory comments you mentioned the School Facilities Task Force, and I believe you said that it was released today. That's great. I have been anxiously awaiting that. I know there are several schools in my own constituency that are on the list, waiting for some much needed capital money to come their way. But I guess I wanted to ask you a timing question. On Friday I happened to be in Calgary, and I was listening to you on one of the talk shows talking about the school capital spending that was announced. Then I note that in the *Calgary Sun* on February 28 there's an article that talks about a number of schools in Calgary

where this capital had been moved up: new construction. Similar articles were in the Edmonton newspaper. So of course this all happened before today's report, and I was curious about the timing.

We had a whole series of prebudget announcements. Then we had the budget. Now this Assembly is supposed to be approving the budget, not rubber-stamping but approving the budget. Then there was this task force report, and in the middle of all that consultation and reporting and waiting for all the Legislative authority that comes with the debate in this Assembly on the government's estimates, you're going about the countryside announcing spending. So maybe you can just tell me what you think the proper sequence is. Should these things all be announced before the budget? Should we wait for the budget before the minister announces these things? Should the budget announcement itself be taken as a signal that the spending has been approved? Should we wait for public consultation task force reports to be published and debated? Or should we wait for the estimates to be finally approved by the Assembly? I'd be curious to know your view on that.

Mr. Minister, before I take my seat, I will just ask that you do pay some attention to these questions. I do take my job in reviewing budget estimates seriously. When I last had a chance to quiz you regarding your budget, it was in April of 1997, and I did not receive a response until August of '97. I would appreciate a little quicker turnaround this time.

Thanks.

MR. MAR: Madam Chairman, I've listened carefully to the questions and comments made by colleagues on both sides of the House. I found both the questions and the comments to be constructive and to be helpful to our budget deliberations. I propose that I will undertake to review *Hansard* and provide answers in written form to the various members, and I will attempt to do so in a manner that is a little more speedy than has been the practice in the past.

MRS. BLACK: Madam Chairman, I move that the committee rise and report.

THE CHAIRMAN: Having heard the motion by the hon. Deputy Government House Leader to rise and report progress, does the subcommittee agree with the motion?

HON. MEMBERS: Agreed.

THE CHAIRMAN: Opposed? Carried.

[The subcommittee adjourned at 10:01 p.m.]