

## Legislative Assembly of Alberta

**Title:** Thursday, March 5, 1998 1:30 p.m.

Date: 98/03/05

[The Speaker in the chair]

head: **Prayers**

THE SPEAKER: Good afternoon. Let us pray.

Our Father, we thank You for Your abundant blessings to our province and ourselves.

We ask You to ensure to us Your guidance and the will to follow it.

Amen.

Please be seated.

head: **Introduction of Visitors**

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Minister of Intergovernmental and Aboriginal Affairs.

MR. HANCOCK: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to introduce to you and through you to members of this Assembly Mr. John Weekes, the Canadian ambassador to the World Trade Organization in Geneva. I'd like to take this opportunity to officially welcome Mr. Weekes to Alberta and to wish him an enjoyable and productive stay in our province. Alberta has had the pleasure of working with Mr. Weekes on the NAFTA negotiations in the past and looks forward to future dealings concerning the World Trade Organization. The world trade negotiations over the next two years could affect Alberta's interests significantly. We look forward to receiving Mr. Weekes' support for Alberta interests. I'd ask the ambassador to please rise in the gallery and with Helmut Mach, who is accompanying him from our own Intergovernmental and Aboriginal Affairs department, receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

MR. DAY: Mr. Speaker, our province is well served in Ottawa by its MPs representing Her Majesty's Loyal Opposition on the federal scene, and I'm pleased to say that several of those MPs are with us today. I would ask them to stand, and I would ask members to hold their applause until all have been introduced. I would first like to acknowledge Mr. Cliff Breitreuz, MP for Yellowhead; Mr. Rick Casson, MP for Lethbridge; Mr. Eric Lowther, MP for Calgary Centre; Mr. Dale Johnston, MP for Wetaskiwin; Mr. Ken Epp, MP for Elk Island; Mr. Jack Ramsay, MP for Crowfoot; Mr. David Chatters, MP for Athabasca. Mr. Chatters is accompanied by his wife, Evie. We are delighted to have our MPs with us here today, and I would ask the Assembly to join in a warm Alberta welcome.

head: **Presenting Petitions**

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

MS BLAKEMAN: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have two petitions here today. The first one is signed by 109 members of the medical profession, and they are asking that legislation that was similar to that included in Bill 29 from the last sitting not be brought forward until there is further consultation and a very similar petition signed by 77 members of the medical profession, all being physicians, asking for the same thing, that there be further consultation around this issue.

Thank you.

head: **Tabling Returns and Reports**

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Minister of Justice and Attorney General.

MR. HAVELOCK: Yes. Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to table with the House today five copies of a letter dated March 5, 1998, addressed to you. I'm tabling it on behalf of the Premier. If you would give me just a moment, I'd like to read into the record the content of the letter.

Dear Mr. Speaker:

I wish to place on the record on March 5, 1998, my sincere apologies to the Honourable Member, Gene Zwozdesky, Edmonton-Mill Creek.

It was inappropriate for me to question his credibility during Question Period yesterday in the Legislature relative to the letter that he sent to me requesting that I ask the Auditor General to launch a special duty review of Alberta's financial involvement in the Alberta-Pacific Pulp Mill Project.

I wish to advise the Honourable Member that his letter has been forwarded to the Auditor General for consideration.

MRS. McCLELLAN: Mr. Speaker, today I have four filings. One is a copy of a letter sent to the Women's Inter-Church Council of Canada, recognizing the World Day of Prayer, which is observed tomorrow, March 6. Also an information bulletin about International Women's Day, which is celebrated around the world on March 8: this year's theme is The Evolution of Women's Rights: A Lifelong Commitment. Third is a news release on the very special occasion of the signing ceremony to twin our Alberta Provincial Museum with the historical museum of Hokkaido. Fourth is the function to kick off the Wild Rose Foundation International Conference of Volunteer Effort to be held in Edmonton in August. I am filing copies of all of those, Mr. Speaker.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Calgary-Buffalo.

MR. DICKSON: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to table this afternoon copies of a document entitled Shut the Door on Private for Profit Health Care. This is a document that was being distributed at the rally that took place just an hour ago at Edmonton City Hall for concerned Edmontonians worried about access to health care.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Provincial Treasurer.

MR. DAY: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Goepel Shields & Partners is a Canadian internationally known financial investment and advisory services corporation that was retained to do a fairness opinion on the recent transaction related to the Al-Pac venture and the province of Alberta. I'm happy to table copies today of their evaluation, which indicates concerns related to the province if it were to continue to hold on to this particular arrangement.

Concerns briefly, Mr. Speaker, were that "the rate of interest paid on the . . . Loans is less than a market rate;" number two, "in the event of Al-Pac encountering financial difficulty, the Banks . . . have security ranking in priority to the Alberta Loans"; and the analysis concludes that "a significant portion of the payments made by Al-Pac to the Province . . . will not be received until well into the future." They conclude by saying:

Based upon and subject to the foregoing, we are of the opinion that the terms of the Offer are fair, from a financial point of view, to the Province of Alberta.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Calder.

MR. WHITE: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd table today copies of the Alberta Forest Conservation Strategy. It's the outcome of some four years of the public consultation process. To my knowledge the product of their consultation has not been filed in this Legislature by anyone on the government side and in fact has been mentioned in the painfully small document called The Alberta Forest Legacy, which purports to be the framework for the implementation of this report. So I table this for those in the Legislature that wish to view same.

Thank you, sir.

head: **Introduction of Guests**

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Spruce Grove-Sturgeon-St. Albert.

MRS. SOETAERT: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's certainly my honour today to introduce to you and through you to the members of the Assembly 109 guests. [interjection] Yes. We're great out in my neck of the woods in St. Albert. They're from Bertha Kennedy school, in fact the first school I taught at. They are here with their teachers, Mr. and Mrs. Dolores and Brent Andressen, Mrs. Sonia Reid, Mrs. Sharon Prefontaine, Ms Shauna Petrone. Mr. Bob Charchun is a student teacher with them, and Ms Patty Yachimec is the TA. They're here with parents Mrs. Nora Ward, Mr. Charles Tutty, Mrs. Lodja Sloan, and Mr. Lance Primmer. The tour guides tell me that these are just such smart students, and they ask the best questions. They're very knowledgeable, and it is a credit to their teachers, not their MLA. I would ask them to please rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly. They're in both galleries.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Government House Leader.

MR. HAVELOCK: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It gives me a great deal of pleasure to introduce to you and through you to members of the Assembly a young man who has gained national prominence. In fact he's better known for having burritos delivered to the Senate. He's also established himself as a prominent Canadian flag-waver right across this country, and he has his proud father, the Provincial Treasurer, sitting in the House today. I'd like to have Mr. Logan Day stand and receive the warm welcome of the House.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Clover Bar-Fort Saskatchewan.

MR. LOUGHEED: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to introduce to you and through you to the members of this Assembly 33 students from Holy Redeemer school. They are accompanied by their teacher for the day, Glenn Johnston, and parents Colleen Papenbrock, Anna Tchir, and Shelley Lothian, a former student of mine from Ardrossan. Will they rise, please, and be greeted by the Assembly.

Thank you.

**1:40**

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Redwater.

MR. BRODA: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It gives me great pleasure to introduce to you and through you to this Assembly a former neighbour and a good friend of mine from my former

hometown of Legal. He is also the former Conservative Member of Parliament, Mr. Walter Van De Walle. Also accompanying him is his son George. They are seated in the members' gallery. I would ask them to please rise and receive the warm welcome of this Assembly.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Minister of Labour.

MR. SMITH: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It gives me great pleasure today to introduce to you and through you to members of the Assembly the vice-president for youth in the Calgary-Varsity constituency. I would ask that Jill Leese please stand and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

head: **Ministerial Statements**

### **Paralympic Games**

MRS. McCLELLAN: Mr. Speaker, today I'd like to talk about some of Canada's finest and most dedicated athletes who will be competing in the 1998 Paralympic Games in Nagano. Following the glitter and excitement of the world Olympics is not easy, but for these Canadians the Paralympic Games will be their chance to make their athletic dreams come true.

From March 5 to 14 Nagano will host more than 1,000 athletes with disabilities from 32 countries around the world. Thirty-two Canadian athletes including nine Albertans will compete in four of the five sports featured at the games: alpine skiing, biathlon, cross-country skiing, and sledge hockey.

While not an official Olympic event, the Paralympics give these athletes an opportunity to get a little of the Olympic experience. The games are held in the Olympic host community. Participants stay in the same Olympic villages and use the Olympic event venues. The theme of the 1998 Paralympics is very appropriate: friendship and warmth. I can think of no better way to sum up an event such as this. The people of Nagano will continue in their role as the gracious host to the world. The games will also allow athletes to make new friends with athletes from all around the world.

Most importantly, Mr. Speaker, the games will continue to promote understanding and respect for people with disabilities. These people are athletes like any other. They have all worked very hard to earn a spot on the Paralympic team. They are all proud to represent their country, and they all dream of wearing a gold medal around their neck. These Canadian athletes have chosen to lead by example and not let their disabilities stand in the way of their dreams. While some people may choose to focus on what they can't do, these individuals are ready to show the world what they can do.

Much like our Olympic team, I suspect that our Paralympic team may also break some records in Nagano. Regardless of the outcome, I am very proud of these athletes. Their quest to be the best in the world makes them excellent role models for all Canadian athletes. I call on all members of this Assembly to join me in wishing the very best to these Alberta athletes and all of our country's competitors and coaches on the Canadian Paralympic team.

Thank you.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

MS BLAKEMAN: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On behalf of the Liberal opposition I'd like to join with the minister in wishing the very best to all of Canada's athletes and coaches on the Canadian

Paralympic team, especially those from Alberta. A tip of the hat to the athletes' families and friends as well. Despite incredible obstacles, including sometimes societal prejudice, these athletes have reached the pinnacle of excellence in their respective sports. Not only have they taken these challenges head-on, but they have also strived and achieved a level of athletic success that many can only imagine. At times any one of us may find ourselves facing difficulties and challenges that seem impossible to overcome. However, during those times we need look no further than these athletes for our inspiration.

Once again, on behalf of the Liberal caucus I would like to extend our best wishes to these athletes in Nagano, and in keeping with this year's theme, we wish you friendship and warmth.

Thank you.

head: **Oral Question Period**

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Leader of the Official Opposition.

#### **Doctors' Fee Negotiations**

MR. MITCHELL: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have here a copy of a letter from what must be a very frustrated president of the Alberta Medical Association to his members outlining a detailed process by which doctors can directly bill their patients. This is called opting out. Albertans literally face the prospect of having to use their Visa cards for medical services which are insured everywhere else in Canada. To the Minister of Health: why won't he begin to negotiate with the Alberta Medical Association in good faith so that doctors aren't forced by their frustration with this process to opt out en masse?

MR. JONSON: Mr. Speaker, I think it is very important to indicate, first of all, that we have an agreement with the Alberta Medical Association which does not expire until March 31 of this year. The second thing is that we have been negotiating with the Alberta Medical Association in good faith for a number of weeks; actually it stretches to months. We do not regard the negotiations as being stalled or in any way inhibited. We are quite prepared through our negotiating committee to meet with the Alberta Medical Association to further discuss and negotiate another agreement which would reach into the years ahead. This particular letter with some reference to job action I think is really not applicable at this time because from our point of view we want to continue negotiations with the AMA.

MR. MITCHELL: This letter isn't in the context of job action. It's quite a different letter, Mr. Speaker.

What are the minister's contingency plans to deal with the problems that will arise, surely, when doctors across Alberta begin to direct bill their patients because they no longer trust that this government is prepared to negotiate in good faith?

MR. JONSON: Well, Mr. Speaker, I think it should be emphasized first of all that through Alberta Health we continue to pay doctors. I think it's a very effective and speedy system of remuneration for the claims that they submit. We certainly do not intend to discontinue that. As I've indicated here, we do not look at the current state of negotiations from the point of view of there being any justification for doctors to suggest or to threaten to in any way inhibit the delivery of their services across the province by this type of approach.

As I've indicated, I'd like to emphasize that we have endeavoured to be reasonable in our negotiations. We have, Mr.

Speaker, made progress on a number of points. We want to sit down and continue that process.

MR. MITCHELL: Mr. Speaker, could the minister tell us what steps he's going to take right now, specific steps, to ensure that Albertans are not reduced to using their Visa card to cover their health care instead of their Alberta health care card? [interjections]

MR. JONSON: Mr. Speaker, I have to almost conclude from the comments across the way and the comments which are somewhat of an interruption right now that the member across the way really does not want to see the successful and constructive conclusion of these negotiations and, on the other hand, wants to get into these other types of activities. That's not the point of view from which we are working. Certainly we want to conclude negotiations successfully. We do not want to see any disruptions that certainly would be caused by this type of action.

**1:50**

In terms of contingencies and plans in the eventuality of some very unfortunate developments that might involve some kind of action on the part of the AMA that is not in keeping with the interests of the health care system, we will consult with the College of Physicians and Surgeons. We will certainly endeavour to plan for that, but that is not our focus. Our focus is getting an agreement with the Alberta Medical Association.

THE SPEAKER: Second Official Opposition main question. The hon. Member for Calgary-Buffalo.

#### **Mental Health Services**

MR. DICKSON: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In the Calgary health region children and adults who need psychiatric treatment are currently waiting for as long as 10 months for an appointment. The only alternative is the emergency at an acute care hospital. But there is a problem there. The six beds in the mental health unit at the Alberta Children's hospital are routinely full. As a result, adolescents who are suicidal are now put into a regular acute care bed but with a uniformed security guard standing or sitting beside the bed. My question is to the Minister of Health. Is this the province's response to the growing need for psychiatric care, to treat our sick children as if they were prisoners?

MR. JONSON: Mr. Speaker, our response as a government, which the hon. member across the way is well aware of, is to increase mental health funding, as previously announced, at a percentage rate beyond that of other levels of funding. It is to work with the regional health authorities in terms of strengthening community services and, in terms of the specific references being made, yes, to work with the regional health authorities and through the mental health board to provide better community care for young adolescents.

The reference, however, at the end of the member's question is something that I think – sadly perhaps there are cases where security is necessary. There do sometimes have to be contained units for psychiatric care. In terms of ensuring security, I think that given the circumstances, the regional health authority is acting responsibly.

MR. DICKSON: Mr. Speaker, the follow-up to the minister would be this: why not simply provide the appropriate services for

these sick children instead of spending money on uniformed security guards with absolutely no medical training?

MR. JONSON: Well, Mr. Speaker, acute care mental health services are offered through the regional health authority. This has been the case in this province for a long period of time. I think that the regional health authority in Calgary is working at improving their overall mental health services to patients. I would just like to indicate that this is a priority in terms of Alberta Health's overall business plan, and the authorities in Calgary are working on the particular problem.

MR. DICKSON: Mr. Speaker, my final question to the same minister would be this: since the government is only providing a fraction of the dollars that the minister's own advisers have told him is necessary for mental health services, how, realistically, does he plan on avoiding more of these kinds of problems in the immediate future and the foreseeable future?

MR. JONSON: Well, Mr. Speaker, it is a very important matter, but the whole point the member seems to skirt around is basically that we are putting additional funds into mental health. We are working on improving these types of services in conjunction with the regional health authority, and that is the plan to address this overall need.

THE SPEAKER: Third Official Opposition main question. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenora. You really did try hard. This is good.

MR. SAPERS: It's not over yet, Mr. Speaker.

### Head Start Program

MR. SAPERS: The early Head Start program at Mayfield school is a model program of early intervention. It's family focused; it integrates health, education, and social services. In fact, it has everything that this government says it wants for children and for families at risk. But this program has been told that it's going to lose at least 15 percent of its funding. This means, Mr. Speaker, that families and children are going to be turned away. To the Minister of Family and Social Services. On the one hand the minister states that his department's goal is to support families at risk, but on the other hand he cuts programs that embody those goals of early intervention and prevention. How does the minister justify this contradiction?

DR. OBERG: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. With regards to that particular Head Start program I'm not entirely sure where the hon. member is coming from. We cut early intervention funding from \$20 million initially down to \$13 million, and then we put it back up to \$17 million. What we explicitly told the organizations that had early intervention funding is that we would pay for what works. If the hon. member is saying that this is a good program, I really don't think they have anything to worry about.

MR. SAPERS: Will the Minister of Family and Social Services commit in the House that the Mayfield early intervention Head Start program will not lose one cent of its funding this fiscal year?

DR. OBERG: Mr. Speaker, no, I won't. What I will commit, though, is that if this is a good program, if this program is working well, it will not lose any funding. I do not know the exact program that he is talking about, but I will commit that if it

is a good program, if it is one that is helping children, if it is functioning and working well, it won't lose money.

MR. SAPERS: Given that the Minister of Family and Social Services won't guarantee to protect that program and given that the Department of Justice business plan promises to ensure the availability of early intervention for at-risk programs, will the Minister of Justice provide the money that's needed for this program that the Minister of Family and Social Services is threatening to take away?

MR. HAVELOCK: That's a good question, Mr. Speaker. Certainly the more that the Department of Justice can do with respect to early intervention the better, because quite frankly by the time young people reach the justice system it's often too late to change their behaviour.

I won't make the commitment that from my budget I will be directing dollars to the Family and Social Services budget. Nevertheless, I think the minister answered the budget question.

What I'd like to do is just take a moment to point out to the House what we in Justice are doing in conjunction with the Department of Family and Social Services and the minister responsible for children's services. We are working with them, and we are also in conjunction with that aggressively pursuing, for example, the establishment of youth justice committees throughout the province, which are working very effectively. We have put into place some new incarceration options such as young offender camps, which have a very successful rate of recidivism. We have some joint initiatives which we're developing with the department of community services regarding after-release programs. We have also been pushing for changes to the Young Offenders Act with respect to those young people who commit serious and/or violent crimes or chronically reoffend, because they need to know that there will be consequences for their actions.

### Senate Election

MS BARRETT: Mr. Speaker, let me get this straight. The Premier wants to spend millions of taxpayers' dollars on a popularity contest, a senatorial beauty pageant, for a Senate vacancy that doesn't exist and that might not exist for another three years. Then the Premier's going to take even more taxpayers' money to pay this person to sit in the gallery watching the sleepy Senators below. Meanwhile, back at home health and education are in a crisis and sick people are being turned away. My question to the minister of federal and intergovernmental affairs is this: how can this government justify using this diversionary tactic of a Senate popularity contest to divert attention from the serious crisis in health care?

MR. HANCOCK: Well, Mr. Speaker, first I would like to remind the hon. member that the name of the department has been changed to Intergovernmental and Aboriginal Affairs to reflect the true nature of the department and the work that we do.

Mr. Speaker, the whole question of senatorial election is obviously not to divert attention from some of the urgent and pressing issues of the day in Alberta but rather to respond to the wishes of the Alberta people expressed over the last 10 years at least and perhaps longer that we want to have an effective and elected and equal Senate in Ottawa. It's time to get on with that job.

2:00

MS BARRETT: Mr. Speaker, maybe the Provincial Treasurer can

tell us how the government can justify the spending of \$3 million to \$4 million on an election to nowhere and then additional costs of \$80,000 plus who knows how much more in expenses just to have a Senate chaperon taking up space on Parliament Hill?

MR. DAY: Mr. Speaker, I understand that socialists have difficulty understanding issues that would be of importance to a provincial government especially, because by nature they are strong central planners and they like large bureaucracies. She seemed to be concerned about health and education. Maybe if we had had equal representation in the Senate when the federal Liberals slashed our health and social transfers by 38 percent – 38 percent. Down it went.

THE SPEAKER: Somehow I knew it was too good to be true.

AN HON. MEMBER: You mean there's more?

MS BARRETT: Yes. If you gave me 10 questions a day, I'd use them.

Given that the Premier's Senate election will do nothing to change the fact that the Senate is a useless, archaic institution that exists solely to reward Tory and Liberal cronies like Ron Ghitter and Nick Taylor, will the acting Premier . . . [interjections] Don't you want me to ask my question? Come on; yell "question." [interjections] I do have a question.

THE SPEAKER: Okay. You were at, "Will the acting Premier" dot, dot, dot.

MS BARRETT: I'll fill in the dots for you; I'll connect them.

Will the acting Premier commit to providing an option on this potential ballot for Albertans to vote for an AAA Senate: abolish, abolish, abolish?

MR. DAY: Mr. Speaker, I'll agree with one interesting portion of the NDP position here. There was a fascinating transformation. We heard years ago from across the way from a Liberal that the Senate was just an awful place and needed to be abolished and everything else. As soon as he was gone from here, he got an invitation to join that august body, and psst he was gone, as the song says. But I'll go on.

Mr. Speaker, this is not a trivial item. In other countries – and pardon me for reflecting on the U.S. We know that usually that results in a tirade of accusations about some other kind of a system, but I can tell you that in that country and in a number of other civilized western democracies we have a balance; we have a bicameral House whereby regional representation is not thwarted. I'm surprised that somebody who was elected by Albertans would fail to recognize the fact that abolishing the Senate accomplishes nothing. We still become the subjects of colonial rule by central planning governments. It is only an elected Senate that is going to fix that, and I congratulate the Premier for being very excited about the fact that we can be seen here as starting a process which will reverse that inequity, and one day true democracy will rule in this country.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Calgary-Fort, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Manning. [interjections]

Okay. Okay. I know it's Thursday, full moon coming and all of that, but . . .

The hon. Member for Calgary-Fort.

### Intergovernmental Affairs

MR. CAO: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am very pleased to join the lively questioning from the hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands. Alberta has achieved a leadership role at the national level such as our current economic and social model for the country, the Calgary declaration on unity, and the federal loyal opposition with grass roots in Alberta. I also see that the Premier is not available this afternoon, so my questions are to the minister of intergovernmental affairs. Reflecting the questions from my constituents on the subject of national unity, constitutional reform, and senatorial reform, could the minister tell Albertans the position of our provincial government on the election of our Senate?

MR. HANCOCK: Mr. Speaker, I'd be pleased to add to my earlier comments that we continue to support, reaffirm the support for a triple E elected Senate. I have been directed by government and by our caucus to look at potential changes to the Senatorial Selection Act so that we might proceed to pursue that agenda and try to see whether it would be possible to have Senators elected, given that as we've seen in the last few years, when there is a vacancy in the Senate, there hasn't been sufficient time left by the Prime Minister between the vacancy and the new appointment to use our Senatorial Selection Act.

MR. CAO: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My second question is also to the same minister. Will the government proceed with an election of Senate nominees in conjunction with the municipal elections in the fall?

MR. HANCOCK: Well, Mr. Speaker, I can advise the House that I have been asked to bring forward amendments to the Senatorial Selection Act to allow for that possibility. The government will make a decision shortly, after we look into the requirements of an election, the cost, and whether it will help to achieve our objectives. We'll make a decision in the next month or so as to that possibility.

MR. CAO: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My last question is to the same minister. Can the minister update Albertans on the progress of the Calgary declaration?

MR. HANCOCK: Yes, Mr. Speaker. The Calgary declaration, the fundamental principles of which were approved unanimously in this House in December, has proceeded across the country. Legislatures across the country have been addressing it. All but five have addressed it so far. B.C. has a report in from their committee and will be taking it to their House this spring. Manitoba, as well, has a report from their committee and will be taking it to their House this spring. In fact, probably the last jurisdiction to deal with the Calgary declaration and the principles from the Calgary declaration will be Nova Scotia because they've gone to an election, but we hope that they will be back in session in the spring as well and will deal with it. I'm given to understand that the federal government might take the lead from what the provinces have accomplished in this discussion across the country and perhaps will consider introducing a resolution in their House as well.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Manning, followed by the hon. Member for Clover Bar-Fort Saskatchewan.

### VLT Plebiscites

MR. GIBBONS: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. At the drop of a hat the government is ready to hold a vote on the Senate seat, but the problems that directly impact families and communities are ignored. The Election Act clearly says that we can have a provincewide plebiscite on VLTs anytime. To the Minister of Municipal Affairs: how many polls, letters, or petitions does the minister have asking for a Senate vote during the municipal elections?

MS EVANS: Mr. Speaker, I would have to research that information. I don't have that available.

MR. GIBBONS: My first supplementary, Mr. Speaker, is to the same minister. Why not have a VLT vote this year when it's clearly needed and wait to have a Senate vote when the seat actually becomes available?

MS EVANS: Mr. Speaker, in this House the Premier has discussed and announced the summit on VLTs, on the whole of gambling. There has been discussion in the past from ministers. There has been discussion from municipalities that they have provided me, documented evidence that they prefer to have those votes taken at a local, municipal level. I think that is the way the whole thrust of the Municipal Government Act directs. I don't think the municipalities want our direction on when they should hold a vote on any issue in this province. I think they really would like to think that they had some kind of opportunity to be a part of the process and consultation.

2:10

MR. GIBBONS: Then why does the government defend democracy at the federal level but support dictatorship at the provincial level?

THE SPEAKER: Hon. member, that question wasn't directed to any member of Executive Council.

The hon. Member for Clover Bar-Fort Saskatchewan, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

### Newspaper Carriers

MR. LOUGHEED: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In June of 1997 the Workers' Compensation Board announced that newspaper carriers are workers under the Workers' Compensation Act. This decision means that Alberta daily and weekly newspapers must pay compensation insurance premiums on behalf of newspaper carriers. Alberta's weekly newspapers contend that the people who deliver their papers are private contractors and not newspaper employees and as such those contractors should be responsible for their own WCB coverage. My question to the Minister of Labour: can the minister please explain how the WCB can justify this added payroll tax on Alberta weekly newspapers?

MR. SMITH: There's much interest in the answer to this question, Mr. Speaker. Self-employed individuals who do not work for a principal employer and have no employees are not subject to the act. The WCB has determined, as the member's preamble clearly stated, that there is a change in relationship with the way that newspaper carriers are compensated. In the past, certainly when I was a newspaper carrier and I'm sure you were probably yourself, carriers purchased newspapers from the publisher to be sold to the subscribers at a markup. Today in

most cases the publisher collects payment for the newspaper and directly pays the carrier for the work. So under the act the majority of Alberta employers are required to carry workers' compensation coverage for their employees.

MR. LOUGHEED: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given that there appear to be weekly newspapers that continue to use contracted newspaper carriers, can the minister explain why these small businesses should now have to submit WCB premiums on their behalf?

MR. SMITH: Well, Mr. Speaker, the situation differs from one workplace to another. They can be reviewed on a one-on-one basis to determine the relationship between the carrier and the publisher, and if the newspaper carrier is an independent contractor, WCB coverage may indeed not be mandatory.

MR. LOUGHEED: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. But given that some Alberta publishers feel the WCB has made an arbitrary decision about this issue with no consultation or discussion, the final question to the minister would be: what can he do to ensure that these Alberta weekly newspapers are not unfairly dealt with by the WCB?

MR. SMITH: It's a good question, Mr. Speaker. What I would do is advise them that as any employer or employee can do, they can go to the Workers' Compensation Board to appeal the decisions of the board. They can do that through an appeal committee, an assessment appeal, through the Appeals Commission, and finally through the Ombudsman. It is also possible for the WCB to ask the government to make an exemption, to exempt an industry sector from the Workers' Compensation Act, which has been done in the past for other industries as well.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar, followed by the hon. Member for St. Albert.

### Pine Shake Roofing

MR. MacDONALD: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. There are still more problems in the Department of Labour. Now it appears that the minister doesn't even know what's going on. Yesterday the minister stood right there and told this House not once but twice that his department neither approves nor disapproves the use of any products, including the shoddy pine shakes that were installed on many Alberta homes in the last five years. My first question today is to the Minister of Labour. How could you stand here yesterday and deny responsibility . . .

MR. SMITH: Mr. Speaker, I'm not denying any responsibility at all.

MR. MacDONALD: . . . when this letter signed by your department's research and approvals officer and these product listings are on your department's . . .

### Speaker's Ruling Brevity

THE SPEAKER: An interesting thing has transpired, hon. member. The minister got up and responded to your question. [interjections]

The flow of this question period has always been with minimal

interjections by the Speaker. The Speaker has always followed the tradition of allowing a member to raise the question and to allow the thing to flow without having an interruption every time.

Now, I know there has been a quick Minister of Labour on his feet, always it seems when the quick question comes from the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar. It was very quick action here. This is good. This is good.

Would you please proceed with your second question.

### **Pine Shake Roofing**

*(continued)*

MR. MacDONALD: Thank you. My second question is to the Provincial Treasurer, Mr. Speaker. Due to the problems in the Department of Labour, is your department willing to compensate the homeowners where the Minister of Labour will not stand up and be responsible for his department's actions? I want you to tell this House if you will be responsible financially for the mistakes that have been made by that department.

MR. DAY: Mr. Speaker, the Minister of Labour is entirely competent in the execution of his duties, and we will continue to see that takes place because that's the type of person he is and we appreciate that.

MR. MacDONALD: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My third question is to the Minister of Labour. In order to comply with the new standards set by the Canadian Construction Materials Centre, is your department conducting monthly inspections on the production of pine shakes in Millar Western in Whitecourt?

MR. SMITH: As a matter of fact, Mr. Speaker, we are conducting inspections. We have the problem in the hand, and we anticipate bringing the Building Code forward. I would remind the member, after he insults Alberta businesses about shoddy equipment, shoddy manufacturing practices, that it is the Building Technical Council that makes recommendations for changes in the code.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for St. Albert, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Calder.

### **Capital Region Hospital Services**

MRS. O'NEILL: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Over the past few months and in particular during the last couple of weeks the residents of the Capital region have read and heard about and some have experienced both the strengths and the pressures of our health care system. My question is to the Minister of Health. Would the minister please tell us what he has ascertained to be the real cause or causes of the situation as it unfolded last week?

MR. JONSON: Mr. Speaker, certainly the emergency wards in the Capital health region, as I indicated earlier this week, were extremely busy, backed up if you will, over the weekend. There are certainly a number of factors involved, but as the Premier indicated and I later indicated, the primary factor, the very unusual factor which affected emergency wards all across western Canada was a particularly virulent flu virus.

The other specific thing I think should be realized is that, yes, there are sufferers of the flu that enter the emergency wards directly. Where this type of epidemic affects a system, any health care system in western Canada – but it certainly affected the

Capital region – is that through our public health system, for the safety of all involved, long-term care centres that have this flu virus spreading through the residents were quarantined in, I think, a very responsible public health approach. However, Mr. Speaker, this prevents any further admissions out of the acute care system of the region. Therefore a normal flow of individuals and their treatment was stopped because of that quarantine in 14 out of the 20 long-term care centres in the Capital region.

MRS. O'NEILL: Thank you. Mr. Speaker, given the fact that our government does not address problems by indelicately isolating individual cases in the public forum, would the minister please tell us if there is a plan to deal with the situation and, if so, what is the plan?

MR. JONSON: Well, certainly, Mr. Speaker, the Capital region – we've been working with them – has advised us and I have advised this Assembly that they are expanding their emergency and acute care capacity through their planning, which is moving ahead as quickly as possible for the upgrading and reopening of emergency services at the Grey Nuns hospital in this city. They have already expanded – and I've shared the numbers with the Assembly before – their overall bed capacity. The significant amount of additional funding that has already been announced I have outlined in considerable detail for the Assembly. They are working towards increasing their capacity in this particular area.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Calder, followed by the hon. Member for Innisfail-Sylvan Lake.

### **2:20 Energy Department Reorganization**

MR. WHITE: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Minister of Energy is infamous for downsizing and nakedizing government departments and agencies. I think he's quite proud of the fact quite frankly. We now learn that part of the Minister of Energy's restructuring initiative is that that Minister of Energy is considering the transfer of Edmonton-based operations of the Alberta Geological Survey and the EUBs utility division to Calgary, affecting some 60 Edmonton-based staff members. The question is to the minister. Why is the minister considering moving these Edmonton-based operations to Calgary?

DR. WEST: Mr. Speaker, there's been no decision made because there's an ongoing review at this present time.

MR. WHITE: Mr. Speaker, thank you. My second question is to the minister of intergovernmental affairs, or IGA, I believe, it is. [interjections] Sorry. It's Intergovernmental and Aboriginal Affairs. Quite frankly, as this minister is the representative of Edmonton in the cabinet, what is he doing to maintain these jobs in our city?

MR. HANCOCK: Well, Mr. Speaker, I think it's quite inappropriate for the hon. member to be asking me a question about the Minister of Energy's department. I would decline to answer it on that basis. But I would say this, that I have always played a part at the cabinet table, since I've been appointed, in making sure that Edmonton is well represented and that this government takes into account the needs of Edmonton.

MR. WHITE: Mr. Speaker, to the same minister. It's often been advertised, in fact, that you are Edmonton's representative. Yet

you were just asked a question as to how you are carrying out those responsibilities, and you don't answer.

MR. HANCOCK: Mr. Speaker, again I would indicate to the hon. member that the purpose of question period is to ask people for responses about their departmental responsibilities. The Department of Energy is not my particular responsibility. I did answer the question, and that is that I take every opportunity I can as a member of this caucus and this cabinet to promote the interests of Edmonton, to encourage the government of Alberta to take into account the interests of Edmonton citizens and to make sure that Edmonton is not unduly . . .

AN HON. MEMBER: What about the capital region?

MR. HANCOCK: The capital region as well.

### **Speaker's Ruling Questions outside Ministerial Responsibility**

THE SPEAKER: Hon. minister, you're absolutely correct. Such a question is not within the administrative competence of the Department of Intergovernmental and Aboriginal Affairs. The chair was listening very carefully to your response. If you had stopped when you said, "It's not within my administrative competence," that would have ended it. Then the hon. minister proceeded to provide some more information, at which point in time the chair was not going to interject if the hon. minister wanted to provide an answer.

The hon. Member for Innisfail-Sylvan Lake, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Glengarry.

### **Health Professions Legislation**

MR. SEVERTSON: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I've met with registered nurses and received calls from nurses in my constituency that have expressed serious concern about the proposed health profession act. One of their major concerns is based on their feeling that registered nurses retain their own professional legislation, legislation that is distinct from other health professions. My question today is to the Minister of Labour. Can the minister please tell me and my constituents why he feels it's necessary to have one piece of legislation covering all Alberta's health professions?

MR. SAPERS: Power and control.

MR. SMITH: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. The opposition members have put out their solution of power and control. It is not the reason the government is looking forward to this legislation. What this does is combine 29 health professions into one consistent piece of legislation. It talks about consistency, public hearings, governance, registration, continuing competency, certainly the work that the hon. Member for Medicine Hat has done over a wide period of time to create the environment where not only the nurses can participate, which they have done very well, but the other 28 professions, who are in varying stages of agreement with this legislation, for them to be able to come together in an ongoing consultation manner, to be able to talk about legislation that makes people more accountable, more transparent, and for the public to understand more easily and on a more facile basis what it is they do and how they do it.

MR. SEVERTSON: Mr. Speaker, if the intention is to have

consistency, can the Minister of Labour please tell the Legislature why the current proposals would result in nurses who teach or work in administration not having to be registered or being able to opt out of the act?

MR. SMITH: Mr. Speaker, a well-crafted question, if I may say so. Let me acknowledge that this is an issue of concern raised by registered nurses. We believe that continued consultation will result in acceptable compromise. We've talked about this in question period before. Consultation will continue. As a matter of fact, I'll table six copies from the AARN newsletter. The chair of the committee, Rob Renner, the Member for Medicine Hat, chair of the Health Workforce Rebalancing Committee, has done just an outstanding job of explaining in clear-cut fashion the intent of the legislation, the timing, and the need for careful, close, and complete consultation.

MR. SEVERTSON: Mr. Speaker, my final question is to the Minister of Labour and deals with the concerns related to me about the use of regulation versus statute. Can the minister indicate why it is proposed that the scope of practice and registered activities be defined in regulation and not in legislation?

MR. SMITH: Let me assure the hon. member, Mr. Speaker, that scope of practice will be included in the health professions act, not regulation, and restricted activities will be included in the Government Organization Act, not regulation. We have had an ongoing debate, as you well know: legislation versus regulation. We can commit at this time to those two key phrases in this particular piece of legislation being enshrined in the legislation itself.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glengarry, followed by the hon. Member for Bonnyville-Cold Lake.

### **Workers' Compensation Board**

MR. BONNER: Yes. Here we go. Mr. Speaker, a new era has begun at Alberta Workers' Compensation Board with the recent appointment of a new board chairman and a new president and CEO. It is hoped that this new era will be characterized as one of openness and accountability. In his 1997 report the Auditor General criticized the WCB as not being fully accountable to its stakeholders, for not including key accountability information in its annual report on objectives. To the Minister of Labour: will the WCB's adopting the Auditor General's recommendations give their stakeholders the same information that they send to the minister?

**2:30**

MR. SMITH: Again, a carefully crafted and properly worded question, Mr. Speaker. I compliment the member. In fact, it's my understanding that indeed there will be consistency of information with respect to the Auditor General, stakeholder compliance, and that of government. I think the key issue is that the WCB is an arm's-length, board-governed organization. It does not use taxpayers' money. It is employers' premium money that is now at the lowest rates in Canada, as you as well as I'm sure many others know. Also, it has paid out more per year this last year to claimants than ever before. So I see that really being a fundamental issue between the Auditor General and the WCB in terms of its compliance to AG requests and what needs to be disclosed in the marketplace to be consistent with generally accepted accounting principles.

MR. BONNER: Mr. Speaker, will any future editions of the board's report on objectives include information on the assets of the board, including its investments and the assumptions the board uses to calculate its claim benefit liabilities?

MR. SMITH: That's a pretty technical question, Mr. Speaker. I think what I would do is take that under advisement and suggest to the WCB board of directors to hopefully provide further information to this House.

MR. BONNER: Given that the past CEO had one of the highest salaries in the provincial government at over \$350,000, will salary and benefit information also be included in this report, as the Auditor General has recommended?

MR. SMITH: Mr. Speaker, as a correction has been noted in some of the local political newsletters, that is not a salary of the provincial government. That is a salary of the Workers' Compensation Board, which does not take one dollar of taxpayers' money. It is employer premium money, and I understand that in their annual report they have a disclosure program on salaries and benefits to executives.

#### English as a Second Language

MR. DUCHARME: Mr. Speaker, the English as a Second Language program will be expanded to provide instruction to Canadian-born students who require English-language assistance. My question is to the Minister of Education. Could you please explain how this program will be implemented?

MR. MAR: Mr. Speaker, as members of this Assembly are aware, this government recently announced a major reinvestment in the area of education in the amount of 380 million new dollars and a redirection of 60 million additional dollars towards the classroom. Of that, \$5 million has been reallocated to the area of English as a Second Language programs to ensure that not only foreign-born but also Canadian-born students are eligible for this programming.

Mr. Speaker, school boards have been asked to identify the numbers of ESL students, including those that are Canadian born, by the 9th of March of this year. Funding for those students will begin in the fall, in September of this year, the 1998-99 school year. Boards will be provided with . . .

THE SPEAKER: Thank you, hon. minister. In a few minutes from now the estimates for the Department of Education are coming up. They're designated.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Creek.

#### CIC Canola Industries Canada Inc.

MR. ZWOZDESKY: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In 1996 CIC Canola Industries owed Alberta Treasury Branches \$4.75 million. In exchange for that \$4.75 million debt, ATB accepted 780,000 shares in CIC Canola Industries. CIC is now owned by Canadian Agra Foods, whose 1997 financial statements report a \$34 million loss, unfortunately, and state that there is significant doubt that the company will be able to continue as a going concern. My questions are to the Provincial Treasurer since Alberta taxpayers ultimately backstop the ATB. Is it true that the Alberta Treasury Branches will receive only pennies on the dollar for their \$4.75 million investment in this company?

MR. DAY: Mr. Speaker, I'm a little surprised at the question. I don't want to respond too strenuously to the member to suggest any lack of credibility on his part. The relationship of this particular organization, both with government and then to ATB, goes back to about 1978. Of course the relationship now is strictly with the Alberta Treasury Branch.

Well, Mr. Speaker, only last week and the week before the member for Edmonton – Glengarry? Gold Bar? – two or three days in a row with some intensity, which I appreciated, pressed me on the question, saying: are you sure the government does not get involved with ATB loans and ATB arrangements with other companies? I said and made it very clear at that point that the government does not get involved in those loans or those relationships. That's something this member here has also pressed me on. I'm somewhat surprised by his question today.

MR. ZWOZDESKY: Mr. Treasurer, those shares are trading at around 64 cents today, so there's a potential for serious loss.

I want to ask the Treasurer, in light of his comments just now, if the quarterly reports he receives from Alberta Treasury Branches include something with respect to this company referred to?

MR. DAY: Mr. Speaker, last year by virtue of legislation here in this House the government took extra steps to make sure that there was a clear arm's-length relationship between government and ATB. As a matter of fact there was an independent board put in place. It was a year ago in June that the ATB for the first time ever since 1938, believe it or not, actually had an annual report put out and the board of directors present to answer questions.

As a matter of fact, since then they have been following what is normal business practice consistent with other financial institutions in terms of putting out quarterly reports. Those quarterly reports are done publicly, and, I might add, show that there's a considerable turnaround related to ATB. Once they took the severe loan loss provisions last year, those quarterly reports have been very positive and in fact have reported to the profit position of that organization. Again, when these quarterly reports are issued publicly and, as a matter of fact, with considerable media around them, why the member wouldn't have access to those reports I don't know. I'd be happy to send him the ones that I receive, which are available to all Alberta taxpayers.

MR. ZWOZDESKY: Thank you for that, hon. Treasurer. Will you at the same time provide me and other members of this House with a report that shows how many shares were redeemed by the Treasury Branches and at what price over the last year in this particular company?

MR. DAY: Absolutely not, Mr. Speaker. It's a bad week for the member opposite. I understand that. But why would I as Treasurer report on financial dealings between ATB and another corporate entity in this province? I don't know why I would do that. As a matter of fact, if I did, the member for Edmonton – Gold Bar? Glengarry? Somewhere – would jump up and say, "Mr. Treasurer, you just said last week that you don't get involved in this kind of stuff." So I totally fail to understand why these types of questions are coming.

THE SPEAKER: Hon. members and the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar, the hon. Minister of Labour has requested leave to supplement an answer.

### Pine Shake Roofing

(continued)

MR. SMITH: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. I'd just like to table this letter that I have in my possession addressed to the manufacturers of pine shakes from Alberta Labour. Key paragraph:

Although there have been no reports of roof assembly failure (i.e. water penetration into an attic space) and although neither the Alberta Building Code nor the C.S.A. Standard 0118.3 address product life span, Alberta Labour believes that a pine shake treated to provide durability, may be more appropriate to use in Alberta's climate.

MR. MacDONALD: Mr. Speaker, I also would like to table a document from the minister's department, and this is a document authorizing A1 Shakes to produce shakes and shingles in this province to sell. This is authorized by your department, and it comes from the safety and standards branch.

Now, if I could ask you this question: why has your department not yet issued a product warning so that homeowners and prospective buyers know about this serious problem?

MR. SMITH: The letter's been tabled, Mr. Speaker.

### head: Members' Statements

THE SPEAKER: Today three hon. members have indicated a desire to present a member's statement. We'll begin and proceed in this order: first of all, the hon. Member for Wetaskiwin-Camrose, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Currie.

### 2:40 Communities against Cancer

MR. JOHNSON: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would like to inform the members of this Assembly of the events taking place in my constituency by Communities against Cancer, a committee of people from Wetaskiwin, Camrose, Millet, and surrounding areas whose goal is to raise funds directly for the Cross Cancer Institute. The Cross Cancer Institute provides vital services and support to those residents of this part of Alberta for the diagnosis, treatment, and follow-up of cancer.

The main event will be a fund-raiser and gala dinner on March 6 in Wetaskiwin featuring the new film *The Gift*, based on the journey of Debbie McLean-Lentz, a cancer survivor and resident of Wetaskiwin. Twenty years ago Ms McLean-Lentz was diagnosed with cancer. Since that time, she has dedicated herself to providing hope to others whose lives are touched by the diagnosis of this disease. In recognition of her commitment to those who face living with cancer, Debbie has received a Terry Fox award from the Terry Fox Foundation. In addition to the screening of the film, this gala event will also include live and silent auctions. It has been sold out for several weeks.

Local schools have also been involved in fund-raising with penny drives, bake sales, and talent auctions. The organizers are sure that \$10,000 will be raised by the schools in Camrose and Wetaskiwin. The two cities are also having coffee for cancer days, where businesses donate their coffee sales to fight cancer. The Boston Pizzas in Camrose and Wetaskiwin are doing their part with a wing challenge, with local people raising pledges to see how many wings they can eat in 45 minutes. Local hairdressers are also donating some of their earnings on specified days.

Every year there are 4,000 new patients to the Cross Cancer Institute, and approximately 125,000 outpatient visits are made

annually. I would like to challenge other communities and schools in Alberta to join in the Communities against Cancer campaign. Let's see how much we can raise to help stamp out this dreadful disease.

Thank you.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

### International Women's Day

MS BLAKEMAN: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Three days from today, on Sunday, March 8, we recognize and celebrate International Women's Day and this year's theme: the evolution of women's rights, a lifelong commitment. For me this is a day both of celebration and rededication to the pursuit of equality for women.

What to celebrate? Well, I am 40 this year, and my grandmother is 97. What assistance from legislation and social change can my generation benefit from that my grandmother's could not? A Matrimonial Property Act to guarantee a share of the family's assets; a maintenance enforcement program to get support money for our children; shelters for battered women and their children to find safety; pay equity; human rights legislation which prohibits discrimination based on gender; the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms; access to education; the pill and other medically safe birth control; choices in reproductive health and childbearing; better access to elected positions; licensed day care for our children; almost equal access to bank loans and other business opportunities.

We've come a long way and we have a distance to go in achieving equality for women in Alberta. Some of the programs I mentioned before are in place, but it is still difficult for women to take full advantage of them. The feminization of poverty continues. We struggle for quality, affordable child care, for freedom from violence and harassment in the home, the workplace, and on the street, for employment equity, for value and respect in our work in the home and raising children as well as our contributions to the workforce and the community.

The female garment workers protested and worked to improve conditions for women on March 8, 1857 and 1908. So on March 8, 1998, and in keeping with this year's theme, please celebrate women's achievements and keep your lifelong commitment to the evolution of women's rights.

Thank you.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Calgary-Currie.

### Learning Disabilities Month

MRS. BURGNER: Thank you. Mr. Speaker, 1998 is the 27th anniversary of the Learning Disabilities Association of Canada, and March has been declared Learning Disabilities Month across this country. The goal of the Learning Disabilities Association of Alberta, Calgary chapter, is to increase Calgary's awareness of learning disabilities and the services available to assist people with these disabilities. In the comments I'm making, I would like to broaden the awareness to all members of the Assembly and their own communities.

A number of organizations in Calgary support this initiative: the Calgary Learning Centre, Dr. Oakley school with the CBE, and St. Charles school with the Catholic board, which are in my constituency, to name a few.

Mr. Speaker, I would like to take this opportunity to share

some of the issues about learning disabilities with my colleagues. Learning disabilities are a congenital neurological condition which impact the lives of children and adults and affect all facets of human functioning, including social functioning. Typically only three percent of school-age children with learning disabilities receive special services within their schools. The effects of learning disabilities can be long-term and far-reaching. Research shows that 30 to 70 percent of young offenders and inmates have experienced learning disability problems. Adults with learning disabilities who have not received appropriate education or training typically hold a job for only three months. Employers, when questioned about why these persons have left their employment, relate the fact that social skills are their deficit rather than any job-skill problems.

Mr. Speaker, very little if any attention is being paid to the correlation between school failure, including dropout, and children and youth who come into conflict with the law. In 1991 20 percent of 20 year olds had not completed high school. Leavers were most likely to come from single- or no-parent homes with low socioeconomic backgrounds, and 33 percent of leavers came from high-risk. That's shared with other family economic situations.

I'd like to take this opportunity to bring attention to the work that they do and to continue to promote their efforts.

THE SPEAKER: Before we call Orders of the Day, might we revert briefly to Introduction of Guests?

HON. MEMBERS: Agreed.

head: **Introduction of Guests**  
(*reversion*)

THE SPEAKER: The hon. minister responsible for children's services.

MS CALAHASEN: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's a privilege indeed to introduce to you and to Members of the Legislative Assembly 20 visitors; 19 of them actually are adult students who attend AVC Lesser Slave Lake at Grouard. I'm really pleased today to have their MP here also, to see that they do travel to Edmonton. They are currently enrolled in the social work program, and they're here today to see what occurrences are in the Legislative Assembly. With them is Reg Smith, their instructor. I'd appreciate it if they could rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

head: **Projected Government Business**

MR. SAPERS: Under Standing Order 7(5) I'd call upon the Deputy Government House Leader to state the government's order of business for next week.

MR. HANCOCK: Mr. Speaker, I'd be pleased to so advise. On Monday, March 9, under Government Bills and Orders we'd proceed first with Government Motion 22 with respect to the Chief Electoral Officer Search Committee, then second reading of bills 19, 20, 22, and 23 and as per the Order Paper. At 8 p.m. we would resolve into Committee of Supply with respect to reporting Public Works, Supply and Services, Labour, Economic Development, Agriculture, Food and Rural Development, Energy, and Education.

On Tuesday, March 10, under Government Bills and Orders we

would proceed with second reading on bills 19, 20, 22, and 23 and as per the Order Paper. At 8 p.m. on that date we would resolve into Committee of Supply, reporting Advanced Education and Career Development, Transportation, Treasury, science, research, and information technology; and then as per the Order Paper.

On Wednesday, March 11, at 8 p.m. we would be in Committee of Supply reporting Executive Council, designated supply subcommittees, Justice and Attorney General, Municipal Affairs, and Health; and then proceed to Government Bills and Orders as per the Order Paper.

On Thursday, March 12, in Committee of Supply the designated estimates for Community Development; and then under Government Bills and Orders, as per the Order Paper.

2:50

head:

### Orders of the Day

head:

### Committee of Supply

[Mr. Tannas in the chair]

THE CHAIRMAN: I'd call the Committee of Supply to order.

head:

### Main Estimates 1998-99

#### Education

THE CHAIRMAN: We'll invite the hon. Minister of Education to make his opening comments, and then we'll invite Edmonton-Mill Woods to ask questions, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands and others as the afternoon proceeds.

Hon. minister.

MR. MAR: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Colleagues, today I want to look at the questions that were raised on Monday night, when I first presented the main estimates for the Department of Education for fiscal 1998-99. At the outset I'd like to say that I found the questions to be constructive and to be valuable, and this afternoon I will be responding to all of the questions with the exception of one question from the hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods that will require a little bit more detail. I will provide him that response in written format. Several MLAs did ask when we would get to the answers, and they'll get them right now, again, in the order in which they were asked.

Mr. Chairman, first of all, the Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods noted changes in our performance measures from year to year and asked how we can show annual improvements if the measurements change. The simple answer is that the three-year plan is a living document, and it reflects changes in priority year by year. As we achieve our goals in one year, the measure for that goal can be dropped and replaced with a measure that relates to a new goal or strategy. As we gain experience from results reporting, we learn which measures will provide value and which do not. Also, we dropped some of the measures because the Auditor General asked us to rely less on satisfaction measures when measuring performance.

However, Mr. Chairman, there is a core set of measures that remains the same from year to year to provide continuity; for example, public satisfaction with quality of education. The member asked why my department and not an independent agency identifies the measures and tracks performance, and the fact is that national and international tests are conducted and reported by third-party agencies. A third of the satisfaction data comes from surveys conducted by independent research firms. Interprovincial

comparisons of expenditures come from Statistics Canada. Our results reports are reviewed by the Auditor General and, starting this year, will be subject to a full audit.

As to the kinds of measures that would be appropriate, the member asked about class size, a request to waive regulations, and our fiscal effort. Recent reports of the Canadian Education Association show that, again, class size is not connected to results unless you make dramatic changes to classroom size, and I quote from their report: class sizes of 17 or fewer do improve achievement but by amounts which seem modest in relation to their costs and in relation to other alternatives. Small-group, intensive instruction like our early literacy initiative is a more viable alternative and cost-effective.

The number of requests to waive regulations does not seem to me to be an appropriate measure. However, if a regulation interferes with school boards doing their job, we are certainly interested in looking at it and possibly changing it. I would be most interested in boards telling me which regulations they want to waive, and next year I will report on the number of requests my department receives.

As to the relative fiscal effort of the Department of Education, the Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods is asking about expenditures in Education and in a range of government departments relative to gross domestic product. This is the question that will require a little more work, and I will get back to the member on this matter in writing because of the detail involved.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods asked a number of questions. The member started by comparing our spending to that of other provinces and states, and as I have said before, Mr. Chairman, it is not where we rank in spending but where we rank in results that really counts. The most recent international results again show that our students are outperforming those in the rest of Canada and in the United States, and that, in my opinion, is the real measure of success.

Regarding the \$380 million reinvestment, this government does not believe in a minimum funding for education. Rather, we believe that the reinvestment provides an appropriate level of funding for school boards to meet all the basic instructional needs of their students, including teachers and learning resources. The measures that show if this funding is appropriate are in our three-year plan; for example, student achievement measures and satisfaction with value for money spent.

Measures for new areas like the early literacy initiative are being developed in consultation with teachers and school boards. If the member wants to see a plan for sustained growth in education funding, I would refer him to First Things First: Our Children and also the document contained in our three-year plan. Both of these plans outline three years of funding growth and identify where those dollars are going, and yes, some measures rely on data collected over time. There are many short-term measures that show student outcomes on an annual basis. We will act on the short-term results to improve student learning while we track other results over the longer term.

Now, an hon. member did ask questions and make comments about language learning in Saturday morning schools, as they are sometimes referred to. Many heritage language schools are private schools, and the ones that are accredited offer an approved program and employ certificated teachers. These schools receive credit enrollment unit funding at the same rate as other accredited private schools.

On student behaviour on school buses, the School Act requires that every school board have a policy on student conduct and

discipline and enact those policies to ensure the safety of staff and students.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glengarry asked a number of questions that covered a great deal of territory. To answer some of the questions by the member about money for technology to support the new math program, funding for learning resources is included in the basic instruction grant, which is going up by \$174 per student beginning this September. Additional funds for technology are available through the \$20 million annual technology integration fund.

The hon. member asked several questions about provincial achievement tests; first of all, the cost. The budget for the entire provincial achievement testing program is \$3.85 million a year. That works out to \$9.58 per test written, which is the lowest cost in the nation.

Next were questions about the validity of these examinations using reused test questions. Some of the questions are reused. To ensure that the tests are valid, we consult extensively with educators and involve teachers in the test design. We go through a thorough statistical review at the end of the test, and we report on the repeated questions as well as the new questions. So what do these tests measure? They are based on the approved program of studies for that subject area at that grade level. Finally, Mr. Chairman, the tests improve student learning by identifying where any problems may lie so those problems can be addressed through changes in teaching a program or in curriculum.

First, by putting enough money back into education to return the teachers' 5 percent, a look at the 1997-98 school year shows that in the school jurisdictions that have settled with their teachers, the average increase is 3.4 percent, bringing the average salary increase since 1995-96 to over 6 percent.

Charter schools are working, and they're working well. Both students and parents are satisfied. These schools are monitored annually for compliance to provincial legislation, to regulation and policy, and also to their charter. Charter schools must also meet the same accountability requirements as other public schools. With experience and in-service, charter school boards are becoming more knowledgeable and sophisticated. A list of charter schools is available from the Alberta Education web site.

Looking at high school completion rates, first I must correct a misunderstanding. Our targets have not changed. They have been and still are 75 percent. The actual achievement in 1996-97 is 69 percent, and this figure demonstrates that we have more work to do in this area.

The member had asked about prekindergarten. My department provides funding for prekindergarten students with mild and moderate disabilities at three years and six months and with severe disabilities, including the hearing impaired, at two years and six months.

### 3:00

Looking at property taxes, this government has lowered the provincial mill rate for education purposes five years in a row. However, municipalities are assessing taxes on real market value, and accordingly, as real market value for the property goes up, so does the average tax bill. That is where the \$46 million increase in property taxes comes from. I must note that property taxes are contributing less to public education funding than they used to. In 1996-97 property taxes contributed 55.6 percent of the operating support for public and separate school boards for grades 1 through 12. In 1998-99 that is down to 48.1 percent.

As to what kind of effect the reinvestment will have on the pupil/teacher ratio, that is for local school boards to determine.

I fully expect that programs like career and technology studies, other work skills options, and technology-based learning will improve parent confidence that their children will be prepared for life after graduation.

Turning to the questions from the Member for Edmonton-Strathcona, improving high school completion is a priority area for improvement in our three-year plan. We expect a combination of strategies to help us achieve the 2000-2001 target of a 75 percent completion rate. Looking at the tables on page 134, in the first table we are looking at parents of all students K to 12 and a measure of their general satisfaction with education. The second table measures only parents of high school students and looks specifically at satisfaction with preparation of their children for work or further study. As I already said, we look to work skills options and technology-based learning to improve parent confidence in this last area.

Still looking at our targets in our estimates, yes, in some places our targets do not reflect historical trends. That is because we have taken steps and developed strategies that will make a difference, for example in technology. With more computers in our schools, learning outcomes now identified for students, new industry training partnerships, and teacher training, including the Telus Learning Connection, we expect to achieve the new targets.

As to the member's last question on Monday, looking at the estimates for 1998-99, I cannot understand how the member can call miserly a \$221 million increase in education funding in the first of three years.

Turning to the Member for St. Albert, the first answer is: yes, the funding in the basic instruction grant for mild and moderate special needs does include students who are gifted and talented. I welcome the hon. member's interest in children's services. Financially my department is targeting funding for native education initiatives jointly with Family and Social Services and is working with Alberta Health to improve speech and language assistance in our schools. We are still working with other departments to identify further opportunities to jointly serve students in difficult circumstances.

In technology, Mr. Chairman, we expect most technology learning to be integrated into the curriculum. The department is working on a draft curriculum integration guide. Where appropriate, students may need to learn technology skills in a dedicated class. Student achievement will be measured against learning outcomes we identified for technology.

With respect to the cut in federal transfer payments for official languages, we rolled the Alberta commitment for official languages into the basic instruction grant when we developed our new funding framework. That funding remains in place.

On the member's tax question, school boards may levy a special school tax to raise up to 3 percent of their budget but only after a successful plebiscite, and the funds must be used as stated on their resolution. To answer the member's question, these funds go directly to the school boards. The only cost to the government would be a very small amount for monitoring expenditures and revenues.

Turning to the hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenora on, first of all, technology, the 80 percent target for satisfaction with schools helping students improve their computer skills is realistic. Teachers are developing their technology skills. The Telus Learning Connection is a valuable resource for teachers learning to use technology. Students can further their knowledge and skills through certain courses in the career and technology studies program.

We have now defined learner outcomes for our students. The department is working on a curriculum integration plan for technology. I believe that if two-thirds of our high school students currently are satisfied that school is improving their computer skills, that is realistic. After all, we only have had a few years of integrating technology into our schools so far.

Turning to high school completion rates, I believe that the target of completing high school within six years of entering grade 9 is appropriate, given the range of work skills programs and other options that are now available to our students. I also believe that a 75 percent completion rate in six years is appropriate. The other 25 percent, I must note, is not a failure rate. Some students stay in school but take longer to complete, and many of those who drop out initially go back later and complete their schooling as adults. Some students have such severe disabilities that achieving a high school diploma is not possible.

About dividing taxpayers into parents and public. Actually we do not have a measure for taxpayers. In fact, we do not use the word "taxpayer" in any of our measures. We do measure differences in satisfaction levels for parents and the public because the results show that people who are closer to the education system tend to rate a higher satisfaction level than those who are less involved. I must respond strongly to the member's comments about the target for satisfaction. It is never all right for someone to not be satisfied; however, targets must also be achievable. As much as we would wish it, it is not possible to satisfy everyone. For example, I note that some targets are being questioned as being too ambitious while those same targets are being criticized for not being high enough.

Looking at the member's questions about special needs, I'm confident that the 30 percent increase in funding for students with severe physical and mental disabilities will provide the programs and resources these students need and will lead to greater parent satisfaction with these services.

The action plan is in our three-year plan and is in First Things First. The reinvestment plan will provide appropriate resources. I expect that the new math curriculum for high school will improve student achievement in this area. Improving high school achievement in math is one of our priorities for improvement in our three-year plan.

School boards and teachers have a three-year notice before a new curriculum is introduced, so they have time to get the resources in place and become familiar with the material. Postsecondary institutions are included on the curriculum development committees so that they also know how changes in the curriculum will affect students coming to their institutions.

Looking at the value for money spent, our current target is a satisfaction rate of three out of four Albertans. I, too, would like to see a satisfaction rate of 99 percent, but as I said before, laudable as this would be, it is not realistically attainable. As to whether or not the satisfaction levels would create pressure for private schools, I believe that parents base those decisions first on which school offers the learning programs that are best for their sons and daughters, their children. If they do choose a private school on the basis of value, it is value measured by what kind of education their child receives, not how much money is spent.

Finally, to address the member's question about privatization. Since we posted our first three-year plan in 1995-96, we have evaluated our activities according to the core business for Alberta Education. Providing direct service to our students is not a core business of government. We have divested and will divest any direct services that could be provided by an organization or

industry outside government, especially a public education entity such as a school board.

Mr. Chairman, I believe that covers the questions from Monday of this week, and I certainly am happy to entertain further questions today. Thank you.

THE CHAIRMAN: The hon. Member for Spruce Grove-Sturgeon-St. Albert, followed by Edmonton-Highlands.

MRS. SOETAERT: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. I appreciate the answers that the minister has given us. The minister knows quite well that I feel very strongly about education, and that's no secret. I used to teach. I have children in school, and I am married to a teacher. So maybe it's a biased presentation that I sometimes make on behalf of education, but I would venture to say that maybe it's an informed presentation and questions that I ask to the minister today, with no bias but certainly with a sincere caring about what is happening and some very real concerns.

The minister mentioned in his reply to one of the questions today that he would venture to ask school boards which regulations they would like waived. Then my question on that would be: can the Leduc school board on behalf of Thorsby school ask the minister to waive the regulations for the school building regulations? Would you honour their request that they be waived so they can build the facility according to what their community has asked for instead of what your bureaucrats have insisted upon? So I sincerely ask that question to the minister.

3:10

I want to mention for a while in my role as Transportation critic that I'm very concerned about the situation with buses. I know the minister finds it difficult to respond to all of these, but I want to express my concern about the funding for school buses. If we don't fund that properly, our equipment across this province will be too old – that comes under the Transportation budget to schools – and it doesn't pay for our owner/operators to deliver the service. I'm sure that many of you have heard that concern across the province.

I have here a letter that was sent to the minister, and I think it speaks very well. It's from the school council chair at Camilla school in my riding, and his question is about the Rural Transportation Task Force, which I would like to speak to for a few minutes. I notice that within that, some areas will get more funding and some will get less. This creates a dilemma on two counts. For example, Parkland school division, which is part of my riding, will lose money. I know from discussions with them that they have talked about having to charge bus fees across the whole county. They haven't had to do that yet. I don't find that to be an equitable issue when some people's children do pay bus fees across the province and some don't. So I would ask the minister if he is addressing that anywhere in the budget. I don't see it, but I would certainly hope that he would look at that.

I notice, on the flip side, that some will get more funding. However, it will be phased in over such a period of time that they don't know if they can survive while they're waiting for the funding to catch up to them. To put it in a nutshell, if I may quote a paragraph here from this letter from Mr. Joe Dwyer:

Our School Division has operated an efficient and effective transportation system and made every effort to put all of our instructional funds into the classroom. However, years of frozen funding and increased costs to our bus contractors have taken their toll. Some bus rides are excessively long and contractors

are operating at a "break even" level if they are fortunate. Our local bus contractors have provided safe and caring service to our students and we wish to continue to have them provide transportation services rather than some large contractor to whom our children are just numbers.

Now, I'm referring to a rural riding, and I know that many here understand that those are often single owner/operators, people who know the families around them and who really are concerned about children's safety.

To continue with the letter:

Our children's safety is of paramount concern to us. Recent news coverage has shown that some of the larger contractors' buses have not met safety standards. We strongly urge you to eliminate the phased in increase of transportation funding and to provide the required funds immediately to school systems who are in need as evidenced by the study done and the recommendations. We trust that you will consider our request to the benefit of Alberta's greatest resource, our children.

I am sure the minister will respond, hopefully favourably, to them.

I want to mention a few things that have been discussed in this Legislature before, and I'm wondering if they're being addressed by the minister. Will the Famous Five be included in the curriculum and at what age level? If it will, it's going to need some funding. I think that would be an interesting project for people to work on, and I'm sure that many in the department would be interested in doing it.

A second thing that I and others in this caucus feel: maybe in the curriculum some education programs about violence against women and domestic violence. Maybe we will make it so that we won't need shelters. Wouldn't it be nice if we didn't need them? It's a sad state that we do and it's reality that we do, but if we started educating our young people about the realities of domestic violence, then maybe we wouldn't need them later on.

I have a request from Edmonton-Centre that asks: how about equal funding for sports activities and teams as compared to sports for boys? It would be interesting to do an analogy on that to see if more money is spent in that neck of the woods, a little more than the others.

I want to address class size. The minister, I think, found some archaic report that said that class size doesn't mean anything. I would venture to say that smaller classes – and no one can deny that – are better for our children. So I would encourage the minister to make that one of his goals, that we have a smaller class size.

First thing this morning, Mr. Chairman, I stopped by a school in my riding and just had coffee with the teachers. I said: "This afternoon I'm going to be able to ask the Minister of Education anything about how he has spent money. Do you want to ask him any questions?" Naturally, they did. So this is directly from that group of teachers, and here are their requests and their questions.

One concern was that there was no renovation money sent to any of the St. Albert schools. They were wondering why they didn't qualify and why they were not on the renovation list for schools.

One teacher expressed that she didn't feel that the minister was taking the money problems seriously enough, and I would venture to say that he isn't. She said, "We spend more time talking about money and how we can cut corners here and there than we do about the quality of education for our children."

A 20 percent increase in private school funding was the rumour yesterday, and they were very concerned about that rumour and wanted to know if it was true. If the report hasn't been made public yet, why does the press have it? So I would respectfully

ask for an answer on the private school funding issue.

A number felt that this competition that the government always says is healthy is creating an adversarial role between schools, that instead of wanting to share and co-operate, people turn inward to protect what is their own. They feel that that adversarial role between schools is very unhealthy and that the minister's squeeze on money for these schools and students is creating not the best of climates in schools.

A huge concern for proper funding for moderate-needs children. A man was giving me an example of a foster child that he and his wife take care of. Last year that child was in a class of 15 students with an aide, and this year that student is in a regular class with 30 other students. The teacher is feeling very frustrated that she cannot meet that child's needs, and certainly the child is feeling lost. So I would certainly like the minister to address the issue of moderate needs. It is not being met.

Another person expressed a real concern over money spent on advertising and marketing. I've got to say that when I open the paper and I see "Come to our school; it's the greatest school in the county or in the city," I can't help but know that the price of that ad is 50 or 100 bucks. Couldn't that money be better spent? Because of these cuts and the lobbying for students and the competitive edge, we're now wasting dollars. I would say that education dollars should not be spent on advertising. They should be spent on our children. Because of that inequity and the competitiveness between schools we're now spending money on advertising. Now, I would venture to say that that's a waste, and I know hon. members have to agree with me on that one. So I have grave concerns over that.

3:20

Another one said: "You know, teachers are holding it together. The system would fail, but teachers are holding it together. But the money crunch just cannot continue." I agree with them. I see them dealing more and more with money issues and budget issues than professional development, than new programs for children, than being able to give individual time to children, and that's a pity. They are now working at fund-raising, at advertising and marketing, at lobbying for students. Being a competitive school in a business world is not what a school is about. A school is not about the competitive business edge. A school is about our children and about delivering the best possible publicly funded education that we possibly can. I would venture to say that because of this government's lack of commitment to education, we're ending up in a very sad and sorry state of affairs in our schools.

I was speaking to a principal this morning at another school, and he said: "You know what? We meet as principals and we never talk about programs or students. We talk about: will your budget balance?" I'm finding that many school boards are unable to balance their budgets, because they just possibly can't. Now, I don't know if that's the minister's secret plan to get more money for school boards, that if they're all in the red, he'll be able to say they can't possibly do it, and he'll get some emergency funding for them. I've heard that that could be a rumour, that his plan is that if everybody runs in the red, we'll be able to give them more money because that's the squeeze they're in. I think that's a terrible situation to put school board members and principals in, where they have a choice of: can this child get the program he needs, or do I run in the red? That's what's happening.

I would venture to say that it is time the minister seriously committed to giving back the 5 percent cut that teachers quite willingly took so that this government could get out of its own

Conservative debt. I'd venture to say that they took that 5 percent cut when everybody was biting the bullet, and they have not received it back. Some have; many have not. In fact, one gentleman told me about his pay stub in 1986; his take-home pay was only \$40 less than it is now, in 1998. Now, that's a pretty sad statement on the progress that teachers have made with regard to pay equity. I think that if the minister truly cares about his employees – he employs teachers, and it is part of his responsibility to deliver the best program we possibly can for our children – I would venture to say that he has to treat them with more respect. [interjection] The Member for Little Bow says a teacher isn't worth 40 bucks a day. Is that what you said, Little Bow? That's appalling.

MR. McFARLAND: No. I said 40 will make him a better teacher.

MRS. SOETAERT: So I would venture to say that the minister should show a little more respect to his own employees.

I think that the morale is very low. I would ask the minister this: how many teachers are on stress leave? How many principals are on stress leave? Has there been any opportunity to provide professional development? I am very concerned about what is happening in our schools and in our classrooms. I think the morale is down because of the attitude of the minister, who keeps saying: I've put more money into it. In reality, the money is barely meeting the rise in the number of students.

If the MLAs haven't talked to their own schools and their own teachers, then it is time they did. Walk through those schools, talk to those teachers, and honestly try to get a feel of where they're coming from. They will tell you that the quality of education is in jeopardy because classrooms are crowded – we all know classes should be smaller, that education is served far better from smaller classrooms – that the children with moderate needs are not being served, and the demand in our classroom, the class sizes, is astronomical.

Mr. Chairman, I know there are many other people who want to take the opportunity to speak today, but just to recap so that the minister gets this clearly. I'm very concerned about transportation funding; it's insufficient. We're going to be running with old buses across this province, and bus owner/operators will not be able to keep afloat. It doesn't make sense for them to keep running a business for nothing. I am very concerned about class size. Any study that shows class size does not mean anything is absolute hogwash. I'm very concerned about the autonomy of local schools and school boards, especially in the area of Thorsby. I want teachers and principals to be able to spend time on education concerns, on children and programs, not wondering if they're ever going to see a decent dollar for their children.

One final thing. I'm wondering if the minister can explain his trip and what that meant to the students. Did that have anything to do with his Education portfolio? What was spent on that trip? What educational meetings were set up? Or was it a trip with regard to education? I have no idea. If maybe the minister could table his agenda: who he met, what was spent, and who went with him? We'd hate to pay for any extras who were just along for the ride. I'm certain that money could be wisely spent in classrooms. So I would just respectfully request the information on that trip.

I am very concerned about school boards. They are working very hard to keep things afloat, but they just don't know where else they're going to squeeze the money from. We're going to end up with more user fees, especially with transportation.

With those few concerns, I hope the minister has seriously listened or will, respectfully, read *Hansard* so that he can get the full impact of my very sincere and very concerned thoughts regarding the budget allotted for Education.

Thank you.

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

MS BARRETT: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'll thank the minister for coming across and sharing with me a report that he made public this afternoon after question period. The report is on the recommendations of the Private Schools Funding Task Force.

Sure enough, the speculation that Steve Chase of the *Calgary Herald* had was correct. The recommendation is that the private, unaccountable schools get a 20 percent increase in their basic instruction grants, which will mean that it will come up to 60 percent of the basic instruction grant provided to public schools. I must condemn this immediately. First of all, it means another \$8 million. That's a total of \$48 million that isn't going into the public system – is not going into the public system. I will get to some graphs in a few minutes that will demonstrate just how badly the public system needs those dollars. I'm absolutely appalled.

Another recommendation that the government has accepted just moments ago, number 7: "Private schools should continue to have the right to select students." That's the very reason we shouldn't be funding them, because of their exclusivity. "Select students:" they want to pick and choose who can come to their schools. Well, the public system doesn't do it that way, Mr. Chairman. In fact, the public system is incredibly inclusive, more inclusive now than it was when I was in school. That's the way it should be.

Now, here is an utterly, utterly astonishing recommendation, number 15: "Each funded private school should be required to designate a principal who has an approved teaching certificate." Holy Dinah. Are they ever moving fast out of the 16th century. They're going at rocket speed. The government has actually said that, yes, they will agree to this recommendation. "A principal who has an approved teaching certificate." Where in the public system would you find a principal who doesn't have an approved teaching certificate? I condemn this report from page 1 to page – what is it? – 44, with the sole exception of one recommendation, number 14, which the government has not accepted but which it will do because it's going to apply it to all schools. I will read that into the record.

A new requirement should be introduced which specifically states that all private schools must not offer programs that in theory or in practice will promote or foster doctrines of racial or ethnic superiority or persecution, religious intolerance or persecution, social change through violent action, or disobedience of laws.

As if we couldn't have had that in the School Act a few decades or more ago.

3:30

Eight million dollars more is a requisition that's going to have to come in front of this Assembly. Guess how I'm voting, Mr. Chairman? I'm voting no on that question. I vote no on the question right now in front of us under line item 2 dot 2 dot 2 – gee, I'm using computer language – which asks for \$40,810,000 for public schools. I vote no. If I had been here – well, I was here last year. I did vote no. You know, three and a half years out of this place was such bliss. I forget that I had that period of time in my life when I worked in the real world. I just got to criticize you from TV shows, and if I didn't want to, I didn't have

to let you respond. I loved it. The Minister of Community Development will know that, but we actually had a good show when she was Health minister. We had a very positive show.

Anyway, what was in front of us in this main estimates book was a requisition for nearly \$41 million. That constitutes more than a \$2 million increase compared to last year, and now we're going to get a supplementary requisition for an extra \$8 million. Shame on this government. Shame on any government that won't stop schools that promote exclusivity, that want to handpick based very often upon religious orientation. They have the ability to go under the public education umbrella system. No problem. The only problem is that they want the right to discriminate. Shame. Wrong.

Now, to the real issue here; well, not the real issue. Let's get back to public schools. I'll get this photocopied for the minister prior to his response on Monday. I went to a meeting with the Edmonton public school board this morning. They provided me with a graph. It shows in constant dollars that in 1987 their budget was hovering just under \$300 million. They showed me the graph that again shows in constant dollars where they were in 1997. Guess what? Just barely over \$300 million.

Now, you take into account inflation, increased enrollment, not to mention trying to settle with their workers who acquiesced to the government's demand that they take a 5 percent pay decrease, and the school board, now trying to settle with their workers, has agreed. Those people paid an extra tax for far too long just because they were public-sector employees. And it turns out of course we had multibillion dollar surpluses each and every one of those years when the government was saying, "We may have a deficit," or "We've got a balanced budget." Don't tell me they didn't know they'd have multibillion dollar surpluses; \$14.9 billion in surpluses over a five-year period. That's no mistake. Once, a mistake. Twice, a heck of a coincidence. Five times? It was a lie – a lie.

On pages 134 and 135 of the estimates the performance measures are there. I know that the minister responded a little while ago to previous questions about those performance measures. Mr. Chairman, do you know what's missing? The real obvious one, folks. Yoo-hoo. Wakey-wakey. It's 1998. The teacher/pupil ratios are not mentioned. Now, is that an accident? A coincidence? I don't think so. I think the government will do anything to spin away from the fact that their underfunding since 1993 of the public education system has been detrimental to all involved in the school system.

Again, one more time, a pox on both sides of the House that voted for that crippling, strangling legislation that said that if there are any surplus dollars, they must go exclusively to the debt. Honest to God, I must have spent half my time on air criticizing that bill. I should have been back in here. I should have run in a by-election. That's what I should have done. I would have had that legislation undone.

Now, it is also pointed out to me that interns in the classroom are no substitute for smaller classes. Study after study has shown that. I'll tell you what all the school boards would like, having been on that hideous roller-coaster that they were on between 1993 and 1996. They would like a legislative requirement for kindergarten. I think they have the right to that. Let's put it in legislation. Let's put it in the statutes and see how easy it would be to undo after the fact.

[Mrs. Gordon in the chair]

I know of a school board that, because of its having incurred a deficit, is now effectively reducing its per pupil grant to the schools in its district. That points out again the problem of underfunding, just as the parents having to pay now between \$30 and \$230 per student for things like books, pencils, sports. Now, the Edmonton public school board, Madam Chairman, used to supply all materials for elementary school, all materials. We're talking crayons, scribblers, the whole thing. They no longer can; they don't have the money.

I noticed that in his response the Education minister talked about the new math curriculum. Yeah, real exciting, sure. Did the budget reflect the cost of the \$25 per textbook needed to conform to the new math curriculum? No. No school in the province, no high school is getting that money, that 25 bucks per textbook that they're being told they must acquire but not getting any money for.

If you look at the Edmonton public school board's figures, it would appear that they got with the current budget somewhere between 1 and a half and 2 and a half percent increase in actual funding. However, if you don't allow for the giving back of the 5 percent for the school staff, including the teachers, which by the way the government is doing – government is settling; the Labour minister is settling contracts with AUPE members. They're getting their 5 percent back plus a couple of percent. Ah, but the schools: no. They're expected to swallow that themselves, either that or have fewer teachers, which means larger class sizes. I mean, talk about a vicious circle here.

In fact, if all is taken into account; that is, population increases, inflation, plus partly paying the teachers back – remember, for over two years the Edmonton public school employees have only gotten 3.35 percent of that 5 percent cut returned to their pockets or to their paycheques, and they lost over 300 teachers in the system during the era of severe cuts. So what we've got is really no increase at all in net funding for the Edmonton public school board. I know that that's going to be the case throughout the province.

I will conclude by observing that the estimates do reflect the phasing out of the machinery and equipment tax. I know I did a show on this one as well; right? I did a TV show on this one. I did them five days a week, and I was always doing provincial stuff. The phasing out of the machinery and equipment tax was supposed to be replaced by another tax. That hasn't happened. Where is the other corporate tax that the report recommended replace the M and E tax? It ain't there. As a result, if you live in Edmonton, 52 percent of your property taxes are going to pay for education.

Now, I've got to ask myself: how many times do I have to pay for things around here? I pay my taxes for health care. I pay my health care premiums, and now the government is saying: oh, we'd like to open the door wide to private, for-profit hospitals and other related facilities, so you can pay one more time. Well, I pay my income taxes. I pay my property taxes. You know what I get for my property taxes? I get snow that's not cleared in the winter because the city of Edmonton took a 70 percent cut in its funding in the last five years. I pay my taxes, and I can't get my garbage picked up once a week because the city took a 70 percent cut. The city ideologically said: well, we can't raise taxes. Well, even if they could, they amount to flat taxes.

Most people in this city who own a home are paying somewhere between \$800 and \$1,600 a year in property taxes. That's a flat tax by any other name, as far as I'm concerned. If I owned a multibillion dollar house – or million I should say.

You'd have to stretch your mansion a long way around the world to come up with a multibillion dollar home; wouldn't you? A multimillion, with an M, dollar home: yeah, I'd be paying a lot more than that. Most of us don't have multimillion dollar homes. So what we have is taxpayers paying taxes and paying more taxes and getting reduced services.

To add insult to injury, the \$40 million that this government was prepared to steal out of the public education system, which is crippling – they're now going to give not just that \$40 million but another \$8 million to private schools, who boast about their ability to discriminate, who boast about their ability to exclude people. Shame on them.

3:40

THE DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods.

DR. MASSEY: Thank you, Madam Chairman. I would like to make some further comments with regard to the estimates, and I would break them into two parts. First, I'd like to ask some questions of the department based on a response I received from the minister last year. I had asked a question about site-based management. Part of the reply I received talked about administration costs and instructional costs, the governance of the system, and how those caps have been set: a 4 percent cap for boards with more than 6,000 students and 6 percent for boards with less than 2,000 students and between 4 and 6 percent on a sliding scale for those boards in between.

I'd like to quote what it goes on to say. It says: the costs associated with system instruction support will include support staff, certificated and uncertificated, and associated activities provided across the entire school jurisdiction. Well, Madam Chairman, clearly that is not the case. These regulations that came in in 1995 are being challenged. There's been a recent submission by the College of Alberta School Superintendents in a document entitled: Statement of Concern for the Failure of Restrictions Upon System Wide Instructional Support Services for Schools. The superintendents, who are, I think, in a fairly good position to know what is going on, take the government to task for the effect that those caps have had on their school districts and, in particular, individual schools. They indicate that the capping has had a negative impact on individual students, and it's resulting in a diminishment of systemwide instructional support services.

At the root of their argument is that there are a number of things that a large unit like a school system or a school district can carry out that individual schools can't, or if individual schools try to carry on those activities, there is a duplication of service and a wasting of money and a wasting of resources. They also indicate that using the school unit in many cases does not provide enough dollars for an individual school to provide a required or an additional service.

They have some other complaints about the impact of the caps along with moving to site-based management. They make the statement that schools are becoming "isolated islands." I think that that's anything but what we had hoped would happen with site-based management and the kinds of caps that were put in place to try to divert dollars to the classroom. They also indicate that the whole notion of long-term planning has been thrown into confusion and that it's really very difficult to do the kind of long-term planning that's required by school districts if schools are to be served the way they should be and if students and parents are to have the programs that we want in place.

They also indicate that the smaller schools, in particular, are

having a difficult time because, again, they don't have the resources to pay for specialists. They don't have the resources to buy the kinds of instructional resources that students need. I guess the bottom line is that they make a statement that "the viability of student learning" is being threatened and the move, in their words, "is hurting kids."

So I'd like to ask if there is money in the department's budget to evaluate site-based management and the impact that it's having, particularly on small schools in the province. What is happening to those schools? Are the kinds of charges levied by the College of Alberta School Superintendents valid causes? Are the kinds of concerns that they had widespread? Are they shared by a number of boards?

They indicate, of course, that in terms of the instructional program, there are other concerns that have arisen. Economies of scale are threatened. Where school districts could buy on a districtwide basis for schools, that's been destroyed by some of the caps and the move to site-based management. They list a series of other items that they indicate this loss of economy of scale has imposed on school systems and that this is detrimental to the task that school districts are trying to carry out.

So I would like some information from the government about the move to site-based management, how effective the caps are. Is the rhetoric about local control with site-based management an actuality in the schools of the province, or is it in the minds of the people in the Department of Education?

I'm not that well prepared, Madam Chairman, but I would like to, if I could, refer to and ask some questions about the Private Schools Funding Task Force, whose report was released this afternoon. I've only had a chance to skim the text and to look at the background provided by the Alberta government, the Department of Education. You can't help but feel saddened, feel greatly disappointed at the kind of recommendations that were made by the task force, and even further disappointed by the government's response to those recommendations, which for the most part has been to almost accept them as they are. I think it's a blow for public education, and it must be a banner day for the supporters of private schools.

I'd like to refer to a number of the recommendations that have been accepted by the government. The leak that we heard from the media yesterday has been confirmed. The private schools' funding will move to 60 percent of the basic instruction grant provided to the public schools. This is a 20 percent increase. In terms of the figures given, it's going to result in an additional cost of \$1.9 million in 1999-2000, and it's going to make an additional cost of \$5.3 million in 2000-2001. This is in addition to the funding that the government already has in its three-year plans. For the life of me, I cannot understand how a government that has pleaded poverty and has indicated that there is no money for special-needs children, that there's no money for the increase in kindergarten instruction, can endorse a recommendation that diverts more public funds to private schools. It just seems somewhat incredible. It's even more incredible when you think of the thousands and thousands of Albertans who have signed petitions, that have been tabled in this Assembly, who have objected to any increase in funding for private schools and the even more thousands who have objected to any funding for private schools. I think it's a recommendation that is going to stir some action on the part of public school supporters, because it's certainly against the belief of what I think the majority of Albertans support. That is that we need a strong public school system, and if private schools want to operate, they do so and

they pay their way. Private schools serve private interests and should be paid from private sources. That's recommendation 4 in the report we have been given this afternoon.

**3:50**

Recommendation 6 is equally disturbing because it sets in place the automatic gain for private schools of anything that the public system gets. If the public system is given special funding for any project, recommendation 6 automatically passes similar money on to the private schools. That has to be an incredible gain for private schools, that they automatically get any money the public school systems receive.

Item 7 is the item that has really been at the heart of many of the arguments against private schools these last number of months. It seems so indefensible. How can the government continue to support the notion that private schools should continue to have the right to select students? That just seems to be so antidemocratic, that an institution receiving public funds can exclude members of the public from participating in the activities of that institution. Just incredibly antidemocratic.

I'd like to mention recommendation 12. It says it's accepted, and it says:

We will require . . .

And this is the government.

. . . greater reporting of funded private schools and the requirement to develop and maintain policies consistent with those of the Minister.

Well, just how is that going to happen? There are hundreds of private schools in this province. How are they going to be monitored? The Department of Education now is running one of the largest school districts, the private school system, in the province. The assurance that these schools are going to be monitored in the way that public schools are monitored, through elected school boards, is just not here in this kind of a recommendation. I'll be interested in the days ahead to see how the Minister of Education proposes that this monitoring take place.

I look at recommendation 21. I think public school boards are going to have, again, a great deal of difficulty with this. If I could paraphrase what it says: when school boards have determined that a youngster needs a special education program, then the parent is given the choice of sending their youngster to an appropriate private school. Again, that's a dramatic change, and it's going to mean great growth, I would predict, in the private schools that focus on accommodating youngsters with special needs. It's something that school boards have fought against. It's something that has been a source of great contention for boards, when parents come with a youngster and insist that the board pay for their youngster's education at another institution. This number 21, if I'm reading it correctly, is now going to give those parents that option. They'll be able to go to Edmonton public and say: I want to send my youngster, who needs a special program, to private school X, and please pass me the money. It's quite incredible.

I'd like to look at item 17, and again it's one where private schools will have no restraint on the kind of tuition that they levy. They're going to be able to accept all the public dollars that are contained in the report, a 20 percent increase, and they are still going to have no cap on the kinds of tuitions they charge. If we wonder why there might be some attraction to private schools, then this is the root of the problem here. What draws people to private schools? High on the list of any survey of parents are small classes. And how do you get small classes? You get small classes by having lots of teachers, and that way you'll be able to

keep the class size down. So here private schools will have no ceiling on the kinds of funds they can put into instructional programs, while public schools again are going to be constrained. It's just not fair.

If you look at recommendations 23 and 24, an additional \$1.2 million is going to be added to the three-year plan for special education needs for youngsters attending private schools. Again, a government that pleaded poverty and argued against every request for additional funding all of a sudden can find an extra \$1.2 million, effective September 1999, for private schools and private school programs. The other requirement in recommendation 24, that if a parent chooses to send a child to a private school the funding then automatically follows that youngster, again is a retrograde step.

Taken in total, Madam Chairman, these recommendations weaken the public school system and strengthen the private school system. I think it's unfortunate, given the kinds of presentations that I know were made to that Private Schools Funding Task Force, that the kinds of recommendations here were not only laid out but that they were the recommendations that came out of those consultations. I think many of the presenters are going to find it very difficult to understand how their presentations to that task force resulted in these kinds of recommendations. I think it's even more unfortunate that the government found they could accept almost entirely the recommendations. I think it's even astounding, given the kind of talk, as I've said before, we've had about the inadequacy of funds, how difficult it is to get money, and that we're not going to throw money at problems. We've been lectured and lectured on how tight the budget is and how responsible we must be before any additional dollars are added to school programs, but suddenly there's \$8 million, close to \$10 million, available to beef up the programs and the accessibility to private school programs. I think, again, it's quite astounding.

We'll hear more of the report in the future I'm sure, Madam Chairman. I do predict there's going to be some swift and some rather negative reaction by public school supporters across the province. I guess I still remain quite astounded that this is what has come out of what was supposed to be a provincewide consultation on private schools. The impact on the estimates that we're debating today I guess is not included in those calculations. Again, it's unfortunate, with the timing of the announcement and the fact that the estimates were before the House, that the costs that are foreseen in this document, that are being dedicated to the recommendations in this document were not included in the estimates and could have been debated as part of our current estimates.

I think I'll conclude with that, Madam Chairman, and thank you very much.

4:00

THE DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: Thank you.

The Leader of the Official Opposition.

MR. MITCHELL: Thank you, Madam Chairman. I would like to focus my comments to the minister on the Education estimates first on a discussion of a recent householder prepared and distributed by the Calgary board of education, the board of trustees. This document is a well-thought-out, well-analyzed paper on what the implications of this budget are for the school board and school boards like it, I'm sure.

If I could summarize at the outset what I believe to be the consistent theme throughout this document, it is that what the government has said it is giving does not achieve or approach the

impression it is trying to leave about what this money and these resources will achieve at the school board level. There is profound credibility amongst the Calgary board of education, the board of trustees. You look at the quality of the backgrounds of the people who are involved. These are people who are committed and dedicated and work daily at the front lines of education delivery, as it were, certainly much closer to it than the provincial government and the Minister of Education. I think they speak with a great deal of credibility. Their opening comment is the most revealing and perhaps startling feature of this paper.

The provincial government is on the right track in promising to reinvest in public education. But after careful analysis Trustees have concluded that so far, it is an empty promise.

Then they go on to analyze the facts as they have been presented, these facts in their budget. "The reality is," they say, "that the newly announced funding is inadequate and sets expectations that cannot be fulfilled." It's almost, Madam Chairman, as though they are adding insult to injury. Not they but the provincial government is adding insult to injury in billing and proclaiming this budget in Education as being something that will right the wrongs, whereas in fact it simply puts more pressure on the public school boards and this public school board to fulfill expectations which they simply do not have the resources to fulfill.

We can appreciate that the Calgary board of education is sensitive to this because they have really been singled out by the Minister of Education in a way that I think is unacceptable, that any reasonable person, fair person would think was unacceptable. Somehow the government is trying to pick on them. The minister is trying to pick on them and say they are the problems, they are the fault. Ironically, when the government did an audit of the school board, they found not what the government wanted to find or was basing its assumptions about budgeting on. They found, in fact, that the Calgary board of education is extremely effective, has a track record of administrative management efficiency that is excellent, and that they have been seriously hurt by what the government euphemistically called equalization through its centralization of the property tax process.

The trustees of the board of education make a strong point – and it's a welcome point – that they

will continue to work closely with the provincial government to help it better understand the realities faced by [Calgary board of education] students and to advocate for improved funding.

So when the Premier says he wants people to stop fighting with him – rather, he would like them to co-operate with him – I can see that he would be sensitive to that, since he's now fighting with the mayor of Calgary, he's fighting with the regional health authority of Calgary, he's fighting with the Calgary Catholic bishop, and he's also, of course, fighting with the Calgary public school board, the board of education. The fact is that they are willing to work – they state it here – and they have demonstrated a willingness to work, but working together doesn't mean capitulating to something that is wrong, to either misunderstanding or a consciously misconstrued analysis by a provincial government. You cannot expect dedicated, committed people to capitulate to what is at best a purposeful naiveté and at worst far more unacceptable than that.

What they highlight here to begin with is, one, the problem of salary pressures. Salaries are 85 percent of the Calgary board of education's budget. There is not a lot of room elsewhere to make serious cuts. If, for example, the 5 percent rollback was restored to Calgary board of education teachers – which is at the very least reasonable, given the sacrifices they made, and they did so voluntarily – that would increase new costs by as much as \$17

million. The most recent settlement has cost \$14 million alone, and this doesn't include any cost of borrowing money to pay for the early retirement incentive plan that is a critical part of the settlement with the teachers or of the cost of the 1998 contract settlements.

The obvious question is: where is this money supposed to come from? School boards don't get to raise money in any way. So on the one hand they have no recourse; on the other hand, they are told what to do. Under new provincial funding the Calgary board of education will receive \$99 per person in the basic per pupil grant over the next year. That amounts to \$8.9 million in total, leaving an \$8.1 million shortfall. This is a huge restraint in meeting the demands of education in Calgary and certainly will contribute to the continued escalation of class sizes. I don't know whether the Minister of Education needs to be reminded, but he should be, that all indications are that the lower the class size – 22, 23 is an optimum level – the better the chance that a child will have a quality education that works for them.

Services where the shortfalls will continue to have an impact are these: kindergarten, early childhood services. The Calgary board of education transferred \$730,000 from grade 1 to grade 12 funding, transferred from that to support its ECS program for '97-98. To sustain a strong ECS program, the total cost to the Calgary board of education was \$8.4 million. Let's remember that while the government says it reinstated kindergarten funding, it is being quite careful and somewhat surreptitious about those facts or those factoids, if I can use that word, because it's not a fact. What they did is they restored funding to the same absolute levels as they were before they cut kindergarten in half, but they have not restored funding to a per capita level that's equal to what it was before. And because there are more children taking kindergarten due to population growth in Calgary, there is not sufficient money to deliver 400 hours of early childhood services at the same level of quality as was the case before the government cut.

What the province will give is about \$200,000 extra to ECS, but because this is a new program initiative, the CBE is still facing the same \$730,000 shortfall in the funding of its basic ECS program. So what choice will they have? Only to cut grade 1 to grade 12 education further. That's the choice that they will have.

#### 4:10

Two, classroom technology. "Technology is a high priority." In 1997-98 the CBE could have received \$4 million under the technology matching grant program, but the question would be: where would they find the extra \$4 million, having lost millions of dollars in the government's unilateral takeover of school taxation? So they didn't get the money. It was unrealistic. Fortunately, the province has now eliminated the matching requirement, but it has reduced its funding maximum to \$3.6 million.

Let's put that in perspective. If the Calgary school board is to meet the provincial objective of a ratio of 5 to 1 of students to computers, then at an estimated cost of \$3,500 per computer station achieving this objective established by the provincial minister would cost \$52 million extra. What is the point of establishing that kind of ratio unless it is only to put undue and unrealistic pressure on the Calgary board of education, to raise expectations amongst parents that cannot under any scenario, certainly not this scenario, be remotely reasonably anticipated to be achievable? Even based on prudent industry standards the CBE will need \$15 million in its annual operating budget simply for the maintenance of its technology plan.

Alberta prides itself on being a leader in the country and in the world. This government prides itself on its particularly strong economic objective – I would say obsession – yet it will not realize the direct relationship between a successful economy and successful employees and entrepreneurs within that economy and the need for technological understanding and computer knowledge on the part of our children. It is extremely shortsighted, Madam Chairman. The fact is that often politicians and governments are criticized for not having a long-term view; they're criticized for just focusing on the next election. In this case that criticism would be absolutely appropriate. In fact, I think I'll make it. This government is just focusing on the short-term view. The longer term view would be that our children had better have a long-term educational career – an acquaintance, association, understanding, if you will – with computer technology and other forms of technology.

The \$3.6 million grant to the school boards for technology will buy about a thousand computer stations for the Calgary board of education. That is quite literally a drop in the bucket, just as this government was unable to see what the consequences to kindergarten cuts were going to be. They had no foresight. Now they understand, because they put more money into literacy for kids in grades 2 and 3. And I can stand in this Legislature and on behalf of my colleagues say: we told you so. You didn't listen then. Will you please listen now? Will you just listen now? In five and 10 and 15 years the strongest economies in the world, the successful economies in the world will be economies that are driven by innovation and ideas and research and technology, particularly economies that are based upon nonrenewing renewable resources. Those economies will be particularly vulnerable to the changes in economic circumstances and particularly dependent upon technology and innovation and research and development.

What we are creating in this budget, Madam Chairman, is a vacuum that will have economic consequences, and far, far more important than even economic consequences will be the vacuum it will create in people's ability to have fulfilling economic lives and to fulfill their potential in the range of ways beyond the economic that are important to fulfilling significant lives.

English as a Second Language encounters the same kinds of difficulties and shortfalls. The Calgary board of education in '97-98 planned to spend \$2.6 million to support all students in their system whose first language is not English. This was a commitment beyond the government's limited definition of English as a Second Language, which excluded any children who were born in Canada and in fact, however, hadn't learned English as a first language. Now this new funding broadens that, but the CBE will still be faced with a \$950,000 ESL shortfall.

MR. MAR: That's because they take it over. It applies to K and 1.

MR. MITCHELL: In fact, if it applies to more than just K and 1, perhaps the minister could answer that, elaborate on the implications, specify in the Legislature or in writing how much extra money they will actually receive, and then determine that it's sufficient to meet the overall ESL budgetary shortfall, which will in the final analysis be \$710,000. I see the minister nodding. I am certain that he will be able to clarify that then, and I look forward to that answer.

Finally, they do make the point that the early literacy program that has been announced will help. They say that this is where

CBE services will be enhanced in a significant way. There was no specific program for this before, and now there will be some money. It looks to me like they're grateful, and that's good. I will say that early literacy is something that needs adequate attention, and we should be sensitive to it.

I was particularly impressed by the Minister of Justice today, who stood up forthrightly in this Legislative Assembly and, albeit in another context, said that he was absolutely in favour of early intervention. The minister responsible for that particular early intervention program was unaware of that program and didn't distinguish himself by way of a strong commitment to early intervention. But this Justice minister did, and I would only hope that the Minister of Education will do that not just here but in other ways as well; for example, school lunch programs, which are very important; Head Start programs, which are very important. The Minister of Justice said very clearly today that if we don't get problems dealt with early in a child's life, they can become problems which simply can't be dealt with successfully at all later in a person's life. I think that a particular responsibility falls on the shoulders of the Minister of Education to listen to the Minister of Justice, take heed of what he said, and act upon it appropriately and accordingly.

Classroom support will to some extent be assisted by the ability to hire teacher aide positions, but let's not allow this to become an excuse for full-fledged, properly paid teachers in sufficient numbers to keep class sizes down. Let's not get to a point where we are exploiting full-time teacher aides at a lesser rate, probably filled often by fully qualified teachers, when in fact their teaching expertise and training would more appropriately justify that they should be paid as teachers.

There are other concerns. The question of student transportation. There are no specific details about that, yet it's a huge problem, and we can see its effects in the problems we're seeing with school bus repair and serviceability.

The question of mild to moderate disabilities and gifted students. Gifted and intelligent students we are still unclear about. The province is requiring better tracking, but there's no new money to allow for that tracking to be done reasonably without taking from some other budget item. Much of the increase here, of course, is just because the government is understanding that there are more children miscalculated, the number of children who would be eligible for this funding. It's really just straight-line formula increases.

They remind us that there's nothing particularly clear in here about whether the ongoing capital funding support will continue, and the CBE is still waiting for further government announcements about approval for specific capital projects.

I have other comments, Madam Chairman, and should it be that there's more time, I will get up and talk about those. In particular, I want to talk about private versus public school funding. We believe very strongly in public schools, and we want to defend them from further erosion.

4:20

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

MR. WHITE: Oh, she remembers well. Thank you, Madam Chairman. It's a great deal of pleasure to speak to this particular item in the budget because this one is very near and dear to my heart. In fact, this is one of the reasons that I moved from one level of government to the other. This level actually does have some influence on the education of my children and the children of this great province.

[Mr. Clegg in the chair]

One of the things that particularly strikes me odd is this government's tendency to err on the side of fiscal responsibility as opposed to erring on the side of responsibility to children and therefore to the future of this province. This province seems to think that teachers are able to carry the load by themselves at the classroom level to all extents. I will be speaking a little later of performance indicators or the lack thereof. It appears to me that there isn't any really proper gauge for that. You cannot go out and test, for example, grade 10 or grade 11 or grade 12s and say, "Yes, our education system is working," because that test in fact is a test at one point in time. That's that particular day.

As the minister and others here will know, any particular day, depending on the time of year, the time of day, the sunshine – there are so many things that can occur in a testing that day, so it's going to be plus or minus 5 percent. Even given that plus or minus 5 percent, that tests what happened that day. It does not test what happened in the last year. It may test what happened from the beginning of time, depending on how the test is constructed, but there's no real determination of that. And education in fact is the accumulation of that.

There are those today who say that studies indicate – and I tend to believe them – that learning occurs much, much earlier. The commencement of learning starts much, much earlier than we ever, ever thought it did, not just at kindergarten and certainly not at grade 1. In some cases you'd think that I started learning well after that, because I don't remember learning a whole lot until about grade 7 or grade 8. I'm still not sure that I have, but I'm sure it did occur in those early years, those formative years.

Now, I don't see how one can say: "Okay. Boom. There. We've tested. We've done it. We know that our education system is working." We cut back 90 percent in the past year. If it did occur that we turned all our kids out on the street or with their parents and said, "Okay; there's no more school," and we tested them a year from now, those kids would still do pretty darn well internationally, not because of any short-term education but from this accumulation of it.

Now, I'm sitting looking at the very first of the vision: Alberta's young people are the best educated in the country. Either the system here, the administration, which I understand is being targeted to shrink considerably, is the best, the absolute best in this country – absolutely, unequivocally the best – or the education for the last X years of a child's life, from very early childhood prior to speaking to this point in time, is the absolute best and has been the best, or genetics has taken over to the extent that we have the brightest pool of genes in order to draw from, or something magic has happened to make these kids the best in the world or the best in the province or in Canada. How could that be? Any one of those can occur. Because this province spends considerably less. Here is a province where it costs more to live than it does in P.E.I. I can tell you that. It costs about the same overall, in the entire province, as it does to live in peripheral Toronto, and it certainly costs about the same or more than it does to live in southern Manitoba. We all understand that.

Somehow or other we have come to think that we happen to have this best system here without the proper inputs. I would like to think that genetics has something to do with it because I have a couple of children in high school, but I'm sure that's not the case. I would like to think that the teachers here are much better than anywhere else, and I can't quite believe that. Somehow or other my view is that this province is cheating the children of this

province, cheating them very badly, by telling them that they are getting the best education possible, and they're not. We're erring on the side of just that, the financial bottom line.

I was a long time in this province before I was a parent, and then I was quite willing and I'm still quite willing to err on the side of overexpenditure in this particular area. This is not a road. This is not a physical structure that I normally deal with in my career outside this House, that I can see, that I can do an evaluation on and say: yes, I can give you a 90 percent chance that that beam is going to last another 50 years. I can say that because it's a physical structure. I cannot say that with education, with a child in kindergarten or in grade 6 or grade 7 that is forgotten about. Because, quite frankly, with 27, 28, 29 children in a class one teacher, regardless of how well motivated and how well educated, simply cannot deal with every individual child. It may be that child is of perfect behaviour, does not cause a problem, is shuffled along all the time because it does not have a behaviour problem, is not a problem on the high end, where you have to spend a lot of time keeping up with this child. It's one of those in the middle that just sort of fumbles along. Can this minister or this government say that we're doing the best for that child? I think not. And I am one that would say: err on the side of spending more money.

I would say to this minister – and I hope he does this; I can't say. I hope in his caucus and in his cabinet he is the advocate, the very strong advocate, for considerably more money and more emphasis from this government for this particular department. I would hope that occurs, and I would like to have that assurance privately sometime, because publicly it's not the kind of thing that can be done easily.

I'd like to move on to the goals of this department, all very lofty and, yes, fairly well described quite frankly. But I'd like to point out one particular one: "Students have access to the support services they require." I can remember over the last three and a half, perhaps four years in this House members standing up time and time and time again, sometimes catcalling, saying: we're taking everything out of all the administration, and we're putting it right to the classroom; yes, it's the classroom. The Premier has said this many, many times. I can recall hearing it in many a press interview: where the student is taught is where the emphasis is. All these kinds of statements.

Well, this statement – I'll read it again: "Students have access to the support services they require." Those are services outside the classroom. These are beyond the class. These are the special classes. This is a class for a child in grade 3 that finds they simply can't read. Why? They have dyslexia. This is a special class that's required. This statement says that it is to be done, yet there's a performance standard that says: we're taking as much as we possibly can. This is a goal. Well, the two are mutually exclusive. You can't achieve one without damaging the other, and that is simply not the way it should be. I mean, it should be consistent.

Now, I'm not an expert in education – nor should I be – by training, but I do know when a child is dyslexic. It's not difficult to figure that out. I do know when a child is having difficulty. These services should be provided, and you can't tell me that you're doing a good job by cutting these services out, the administration, all that group that's outside, and saying that the classroom is being served and being served well. I do not believe it for a moment.

#### 4:30

Another line in here that particularly interests me and is a very, very good statement – I really think it deserves mention again –

is in the goals: "The education funding system is fair, equitable and appropriate." Let's deal with the fairness right now. How can this minister or anyone in this House for that matter say that, when the funding is squeezed so tight on a school that each and every one of the schools has to be into fund-raising for either extra-curricular activities, which I thought was kind of standard, that being the sports activities or club activities, the science club or the photography club, or simply for road trips, trips for some kids into the city to the Space and Science Centre – those kinds of things are extra funding – and then find out that the schools actually raised funds for some things like library books and computers, things that really should be standard equipment in an education system?

Now, I take two schools. Take one that's inner city. In an area such as my constituency it's a place called Prince Charles. There's some special funding in that area, and it's very low socioeconomic. Wonderful people, but they just don't make a lot of money. They are not particularly good at joining in and raising funds together. Now, you take that school versus a school in Glenora, not very far from it, and what does occur? That particular school raises all kinds of money. What happens when you go to the school? You see that one school has, just by way of example, one computer for 25 children, and it's an Apple IIA. I mean, that's the equivalent of a . . .

AN HON. MEMBER: A 1959 Beetle.

MR. WHITE: Yeah. A 1959 Beetle or some of the old half-ton trucks that are hanging around some of the farms. Yeah, the '57 Ford you have still parked out there, Mr. Chairman. [interjections] Agreed. Some of those half-ton trucks are worth a lot.

But the point is that this is simply not fair to that child. It is not a fair system, and it certainly isn't equitable for that child in that school that cannot raise the funds versus the other that can. Now, that's not the way to run the system, I believe.

The last word of that particular line is "appropriate." Now, I dealt with that quite extensively a little earlier, but I don't believe it is appropriate for a province that has the magnitude of the funds incoming to this province that you would err, err in a major way by not making sure that you have covered the future of your children, your grandchildren, and their children on expenditures on education. There's nothing – nothing – more important that you can give to a child than that knowledge of how to get by in this world. Each and every one of us knows that. In our heart of hearts we know that. There's no question about it, none whatsoever, yet we continue to err, this collective errs on the other side. Wrong. Wrong. Wrong again. We cannot be more wrong.

In the same area called the business plan, which is laid out fairly well and concisely – of course, it can't be as wordy as we'd like and describe all the things we'd like described in it, but there's one special program called new classroom initiatives starting in '98-99, and my colleagues have dealt with that in some respect too. Here's a classic case in point, to err on the wrong side.

Not this Legislature but the former Legislature erred in a major way by chopping, not just cutting but chopping, kindergarten education. The mothers of this province rose up and said: don't you do that. They marched on this Legislature; they delivered the message in a major way from across the entire province. This side of the House kept telling you: we told you so; we told you so; we told you so. But it did no good whatever. It fell on absolutely the deafest ears you possibly could have. Fortunately,

it wasn't this minister that was dealing with it at the time. And what do we have now? We have the results of that error, and those mothers told you that was going to happen.

Now, is this government going to collectively say "I'm sorry" to those children that lost that education? Do you go back and correct the education that they missed? I don't think so. It can't possibly be done now. That is what I'm talking about, the error on that side.

This is a rich province, and we've cheated some children of their heritage in this province. You can argue all you want and you can tell me as many times as you want: oh, we don't want to pass on a debt to those children. You have. We collectively have passed the debt on to them. We cheated them at a time when it was most important that they have that assistance and early learning. It's proven time and time and time again throughout this world that the earlier you can get a head start with those children – and most of the people here, I'm sure, through their children and/or their grandchildren have done that, given these children an early start. But we're not here just for your children and my children and his children and his grandchildren. We're here for all of the children.

In your heart of hearts each and every one of you knows some child down the block, around the corner, the child of the local service station guy, whoever, that does not have the benefit of a bedtime story and never has, has not had the benefit of someone that cares about the work they bring home, the little pictures they bring home from grades 2 and 3. Does not care about that. That's what the education system has to deal with, and that's what the heritage is about. That's part of what brings me here to stand in this place and to speak in this Legislature. It is important. It is very, very, very important. This minister has a very, very grave responsibility – and I know he's aware of that – and he has to make representations to his cabinet to have this money put away to do just this job.

Now, I want to move on to something here that's called provincial achievement tests. For one, the provincial achievement tests are measured against ourselves, which is a little hard to deal with. I dealt with earlier about how the international test at one point in time doesn't really say that we have done a good job in education, and I hear that time and time again. Every time from this side of the House I say, "You've made an error, and you're not funding education," I get back, "Oh, but we've had these wonderful test results." Well, okay. How about your test results sometime in the future? You can't measure it today. You don't measure tomorrow what education is today. This is a much broader thing, and we understand that. At least this member understands that.

The diploma examinations: I'd like to come back to that for a minute.

Here's a good one. It's school completions. Here we are; this government is doing all it can to ratchet down and to work on the side of fiscal overresponsibility, if you will, and the goal in 2001 to have students going on to postsecondary education is 75 percent from a current rate of 69 percent. Now, how in the world do you think you're going to manage that? You're spending less money. There are more students. There's less money for whatever reasons. There are those who say it's my federal cousins that ratcheted down, and they're not paying federally for education. Perhaps so, but I'm equally on their case too. [interjections] There are interjections that say that I denied – those members opposite certainly aren't at the place that I'm at when I'm making those representations. I make the same ones there that I do here.

Sometimes they listen. Sometimes I get the same responses that I do in this House; there is a listening but not a whole lot of hearing going on. Nonetheless, it's done.

4:40

Seventy-five percent of those students moving on to graduation is absolutely ludicrous. How can you possibly say that you're going to head for that? I would dearly love to set a time definite in that year to say: okay; let's sit down and have the same measurement. This is an empirical measurement; it's not a judgment call. This one is actually pure numbers with plus or minus 2 percent for the errors in starting and not completing a program. I would like to do that and see how well it has actually done.

I'd also like to go to the key performance measurements. I'm going to have to do that a little later by the sound of it, because I've just simply run out of time. We do have some more time here, Mr. Chairman. I'd like to come back to them.

Thank you.

THE ACTING CHAIRMAN: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Castle Downs.

MS PAUL: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'm just going to make a couple of comments here. I'm not going to go into a lengthy rendition on the merits of education. I think everybody in this Assembly knows how important education is and students and school boards and on and on and on.

As a former school trustee – and I wouldn't want to say in what year, but it's quite a few years ago. The complexion of education I feel has really changed. In the 1970s, when I was on the school board, there didn't seem to be quite the emphasis put on fund-raising and parent involvement in helping to sustain and to help fund extra needs that schools incur throughout the year. Actually, the hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods has brought out some very, very good and strong points with respect to the budget and the need for more teachers, teacher aides, and more focus put on bringing in, let's say, extra equipment that's needed in schools, extra parent involvement, and so on.

Actually, what I really wanted to address were the special needs, and this I'm bringing to the House and to the Minister of Education because constituents of mine have called and indicated that they do have concern with the mild to moderately disabled. The \$75 per enrollment per student is actually very welcomed, and we're glad the government has seen fit to put that initiative in place and that amount of money. I'm just wondering if the government or the minister has decided how to ensure that the money goes directly to the children for whom it's intended.

My son's mother-in-law is a teacher in St. Albert. She actually is involved with the moderately disabled program, and there are a lot of concerns with respect to the deletion of some aspects of the program, deletion of teacher aide time and help with children in that classroom.

Also I would like to note that the Auditor General has already been critical that there is no measurement of the money intended for special needs, that there is no assurance that it's going to where it is supposed to, that the money could disappear without a safeguard. That, Mr. Chairman, is a concern of mine, that when we do allocate moneys, especially for children, our wonderful resources, we do make sure they are the recipients of moneys that are allocated for them and for their specific needs.

Also, the classroom size and resources for special-needs learners. I've heard that teachers feel that they are forced to

teach – well, in fact they are – larger and more diverse classes without aides. I'm finding from the calls I've had from my constituents that they spend more time controlling the classroom setting than in fact doing the teaching. They find that the student/teacher ratio is far-reaching their ability to teach and not to control.

So that, Mr. Chairman, is a big concern. Constituents have phoned and voiced their strong objection to classroom sizes. Classroom sizes have increased. We all know that. There seem to be more students. Teachers are stressed. With respect to the special needs, you can just appreciate that the need for a teacher's aide to help with these students would be paramount.

I also would like to just make a few comments with respect to privatization, also in that area with respect to the chartered schools. What I would ask the minister: could we have a complete list? How many chartered schools are there, and how are they working? How is the minister overseeing these schools, which are not overseen by school boards? How are they functioning? Who's teaching whom? What performance measures are in place? Accountability, all facets of running a school, moneys that are being delivered for special programs, special services.

Mr. Chairman, there has been concern raised by my constituents and I'm sure by other Albertans about the parents that are involved in running these chartered schools. What are their abilities? How well are they informed? How capable are they to monitor the events or the curriculums that are introduced in schools? What basic philosophies? We all know that with chartered schools they can dictate who will attend. They can agree to have a child attend that school, or they can disagree to accept the child. So what criteria would be in place for that evaluation? I think that is very, very important to be noted, that perhaps in the chartered school sector or situation we do have to have accountability. We do have to have a mandate set out for them. We do have to have in place parents that are capable and willing, and the capacity of these parents is paramount.

With respect, Mr. Chairman, I'm just going to talk about student transportation. Due to the tighter regulations regarding school bus safety, I was wondering if the minister can tell us how much higher the total provincial bill for school bus transportation will be this year. That affects a lot of schools. In my riding a lot of the students are bused out to different schools. I would be interested in hearing from the minister – maybe he mentioned it earlier, and I was not privy to it – how much higher the bill is going to be. Can the minister tell us what percentage of increased busing costs of the \$13 million is supported to cover that? Will this money be evenly distributed between school boards? There seems to be a real competition between school boards not only for money for transportation, but I've heard from schools that there's a competition on who's going to get the most books, who's going to get the most supplies to run their schools. How is that going to be distributed, and what's the criteria for it? It's kind of a crisis situation, I think, that some of the schools are facing. On a per board basis, how much more or less will each board be receiving toward student transportation? I think that is a good question for the minister to answer.

My last question with respect to the estimates on Education for 1998-99. Can the minister tell us how much is spent on school transportation by all parties: school boards, the province, and parents? I would be really, really interested in knowing what the real total is.

4:50

THE ACTING CHAIRMAN: The hon. Leader of the Official Opposition.

MR. MITCHELL: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I would like to now comment on the question of public versus private school boards and indicate my grave concerns, in fact, with the government's ready acceptance of each of the recommendations of the Private Schools Funding Task Force report. It's not surprising that this occurred. A task force of this nature wasn't set up to say no to the pressure for more funding to private schools. It was set up, clearly, to come to a conclusion that "yes" would be appropriate.

I have nothing against private schools at all. In fact, I attended one. It was called St. John's Cathedral boys school, and it has an affiliate here now at Genesee. There were reasons why it was a good idea that I go there for a year, and I was very grateful for the experience.

MR. MAR: Were you a bad boy?

MR. MITCHELL: No, actually I wasn't. My father was away for a year with the Canadian Armed Forces promoting world peace. I was at an age when it would be useful to be in a disciplined environment. [interjection] My mother missed me. My mother missed me.

I should tell you a funny story about that. I may be the only politician who graduated from that school, which was founded by none other than Ted Byfield, and much to his profound dismay I'm not some right-wing, hard-nosed, mean-minded Alberta Tory. I'm actually a Liberal. One of the great failings, I'm sure he believes.

MR. MAR: Did you pass?

MR. MITCHELL: I bet he wishes now I didn't.

In any event, I have respect for them and for their place in our society and for the need to be met for parents who feel there is some other course of education that they believe is best for their children.

However, I believe profoundly in the public school system, because it is essential to a decent and civil society. It's not to say that private schools don't produce decent and civil members of our society. They do. But if we don't have a strong public education system, if that system is eroded more and more and more, then we begin to run the risk of great disparities occurring in the quality of education for the members of our society. What will inevitably occur, as has for example occurred very clearly in the United States, is that those people who are more vulnerable, those people with fewer resources begin to be isolated in the public school system. As wealthier, more privileged people begin to pay more and more of their children's education directly, they begin to withdraw their consent, tacitly or implicitly or explicitly, to be taxed for the public education system, and when that happens, it becomes grossly underfunded.

Now, there are those who could say: "Well, so what? I can pay for my own children. I'm going to do that and I have a right to do that, to choose for my children." Yes, but there are broad social consequences, and that is that even the wealthiest people can begin to live in a society where crime increases and where social breakdown occurs more and more, which begins to detract from everybody's quality of life, because we don't have a proper, strong, broadly based public education system. That's one of the balances that has to be found in a decent, civil society. It's been proven over and over again that strong public education and, I

would argue, strong public health care are profoundly important components to that kind of society.

It may run in some senses and perhaps quite a few senses contrary to the basic underlying assumption of this government's approach, which is every I'll say person for themselves, sharing means less for me, the survival of the fittest, all of which are not, I think, very becoming values and very becoming assumptions for the way the government should operate. That's why we defend so aggressively the public school system. That's why I admire and support the Minister of Education for being so outspoken in his defence of the public education system. In the midst of this debate over the last several months he has been, I think, explicit in his determination, in his statements that public education shouldn't be eroded more by private school funding and that private school funding shouldn't go up. Now, given that his government has accepted this, clearly he's been overruled, but I would like to hear him at least in here repeat his personal views, which are not new but need to be reconfirmed, certainly in the context of these recommendations.

The recommendation is that private schools should receive 60 percent of the basic educational grants instead of what they receive now. This is a significant increase. They receive now just under 50 percent of the basic per student instruction grant. That in itself raises some interesting questions. For example, what criteria are you using to determine 60 percent versus 50 percent? If it was 50 percent yesterday and it's going to be 60 percent tomorrow, why isn't it going to be 61 percent the next day and 65 percent the day after that and 100 percent the day after that? Eventually 100 percent of transportation grants and 100 percent of operating grants – pretty soon it's equal, and more significant, all of a sudden we have had significant erosion of the public education system. If we could be convinced that there was some criteria that stopped it at 60 percent, that might assist in our understanding at least of why the government has decided to increase and to increase it that much, but there is no indication of that. Not only that, but they're not really going to leave it at 60 percent, because now in another recommendation they are saying that

if special funding is provided to public schools for implementing changes or other initiatives related to the Alberta Program of Studies, the Minister of Education should [extend] that special funding to funded private schools in the same proportion [as for basic grants].

There is a direct contradiction in these recommendations. If funded private schools should receive 60 percent of the basic instructional grants provided to the public schools and that is some kind of limit, then that limit has just been broken by saying they will also receive 60 percent of other levels of funding. So it's more than a 20 percent increase. It will be a much more significant increase than a 20 percent increase in their funding.

The fact is that the task force on page 33 of this document says:

In our view, funding for private schools should be tied directly to the education of students and to the basic instruction grant provided to public schools.

Well, it isn't being tied to that, because there are other recommendations that say it's going to be tied to special granting as well. It's at best a very arbitrary line that they are drawing between the funding directly related to education of students, because ultimately they'll be making the argument that if schools are inadequately built and maintained, then clearly that's going to affect education directly, and they'll be starting to use that as an argument to provide for capital grants.

We want it limited. We don't want it to increase. We're uncomfortable with it generally, but absolutely it should not be increased beyond what it is today.

[Mrs. Gordon in the chair]

One of the things that distinguishes private schools in a way that I think diminishes their argument for public funding is reflected in recommendation 7 of the task force: "Private schools should continue to have the right to select students." Public schools can't select students. They have to take all of the students. They have to take the students who have particularly severe handicaps, physical disabilities and mental disabilities. They have to take the students who have come from backgrounds where there is great difficulty evidenced in their behaviour. They have to take students who come from places and homes where parents aren't committed to their children's education and simply will not provide the kind of commitment that parents of private schools are required to commit to in writing before their children can attend. If parents don't fulfill that, the student is removed.

5:00

So what that does is begin to limit the kinds of pressures the private schools feel from the eclectic mix of student needs the public schools feel. It begins to make those schools look far more palatable to parents because they don't have to deal with certain kinds of problems that can arise in public schools. It begins, therefore, to give parents a reason to support private schools and erode the public school system even further, contributing to the spiral or the rolling snowball of erosion that I talked about earlier.

When you analyze that point, a private school doesn't have to take a child whose parents won't help; a public school does. If parents won't help in the private school case, the child doesn't go or the child is removed from the school. If parents won't help in the public school case, then that child stays. So, quote, unquote, if I can put it this way, euphemistically: the private school can solve its problems in ways that dump the problems on the public school system. Again, the public school system not only needs more money, but it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy because it inevitably has more problems by the nature of our society than a private school that can be selective or, as this recommendation says, that has the right to select students.

If they're going to receive public money, they should be held to the test of being publicly driven in at least that significant way, that they just can't turn students away because their parents won't help. So, Madam Chairman, I find that to be a particularly glaring example of how the task force hasn't, I think, addressed the issue adequately and how the government has embraced that very, very quickly.

The other thing is that ironically the government, by accepting recommendation 17, has extended the taxation power and emphasized or supported once again the taxation power for private schools while taking away and sustaining the removal of taxation powers to public schools. So private schools do have a way to raise money to supplement lower government funding. Public schools do not have a way to supplement lowered government funding because they no longer have any taxation power. So they squeeze them at the top end by telling them what to do, and they squeeze them at the other side by not giving them any money other than what they deign to give them with which to do it. So that is not a parallel circumstance with respect to private schools. Private schools have the ability to tax, and there is a certain irony

that the government would actually support private schools with that important power but wouldn't support public schools with that important power.

I will close my remarks at this point, Madam Chairman, and I will offer the floor to whomever would like to speak after me.

THE DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: The hon. Member for Medicine Hat.

MR. RENNER: Thanks, Madam Chairman. I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the discussion on education and the estimates for Education. There are just a few comments and observations that I would like to make. First of all, I think that in the last few months as an MLA I've certainly been in discussion with a number of Albertans, people in Medicine Hat in particular, that have raised some concerns about education. I think that to a very large extent those concerns have been recognized within this minister's and the department's estimates.

Madam Chairman, I would like to particularly address the issue of mild to moderate learning disabilities, because that seems to be an area that has been drawn to my attention as requiring the most attention. I think that while, like anything, unlimited dollars would certainly be consumed if offered, in this particular case the fact that there was a significant increase in the funding in that particular area from \$250 to \$375 – I don't know what the specific ratio is, but I'm led to believe through anecdotal, if nothing better, information that in most cases in an average student population the mild to moderate needs child would occur at a factor of about 1 in 10. So that means that this \$375 on a per student basis can be used and that that 1 in 10 ratio would then be about \$3,700 for a student. I think that that really is a significant amount of money and is something that the school jurisdictions, if they put their mind to it, can be creative with, can in fact provide programs, can provide support that some of these students require.

That is an area that since the release of the provincial budget I have heard on numerous occasions responses from both teachers and parents and interested citizens that they see this as being extremely positive, and I would like to applaud the minister in that regard. I think that this is significant and that the minister needs to watch this very carefully. I think it's also important and I would like to emphasize on behalf of the people that have spoken to me that the minister monitor very carefully that these dollars are in fact going to be used in an appropriate manner, that when we identify that these dollars are to be used for mild to moderate needs learning disability problems, the school jurisdictions in fact monitor very closely and ensure that those dollars that have been designated for that area are in fact designated.

The other area that I would like to comment on, although it's not a huge impact in my constituency, certainly in other constituencies in the province and to some extent in Medicine Hat, is the attention and the changes that have been made to funding for ESL. There are a significant number of students of immigrant

families that come to Medicine Hat, and the problem has been raised in my particular case and certainly in other constituencies with a much higher concentration of populations that don't have English or French as the spoken language within the family that the way the program was structured before, if you had a family that immigrated and settled in Alberta and they had school-age children, those children would be covered under the ESL funding, but if they had children who were born in this country but essentially lived in the environment of speaking a language other than English in all but their school life, those children, when they arrived at school for ECS or even for grade 1, were at a significant disadvantage. Although they were born in this province, they did not speak English in a proficient manner and in a manner that would allow them to fully participate in programs at school, yet the school board was not in a position to be able to deal with that through a funded ESL program.

5:10

So I again commend the minister. I think those are two critical areas that I saw in my constituency.

Of course there is constant pressure with respect to the overall per student grant, and I think this budget and these estimates are addressing that. Again, I think the comment can be made that I made earlier, that there are never sufficient dollars for demand. I think you could double the amount of dollars that would be made available, and there would still be people around the province that would find fault and say that it's not enough. So it's our job, I think, as legislators to determine what is reasonable, what is an amount of money that will serve the children and serve the education system and help us to achieve the results we're all aiming for, and that is highly educated children and young adults that are prepared to move into the workforce and carry on with their lives.

Madam Chairman, at this point I would like to move that the committee rise and report.

[Motion carried]

[Mr. Clegg in the chair]

MRS. GORDON: Mr. Speaker, the Committee of Supply has had under consideration certain resolutions of the Department of Education, reports progress thereon, and requests leave to sit again.

THE ACTING SPEAKER: Thank you, hon. member. All those in favour of the report, please say aye.

HON. MEMBERS: Aye.

THE ACTING SPEAKER: Opposed, if any, say no. Carried.

[At 5:13 p.m. the Assembly adjourned to Monday at 1:30 p.m.]