

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

Title: **Wednesday, April 28, 1999** 1:30 p.m.

Date: 99/04/28
[The Speaker in the chair]

head: Prayers

THE SPEAKER: Good afternoon. Let us pray.

Though we as legislators of this great province and its people are taken from the common people and selected by You to be architects of our history, give us wisdom and understanding to do Your will in all we do.

Amen.

Please be seated.

Hon. members, today is recognized as a day of mourning for persons killed or injured in the workplace. As a memorial to this day the flags on the Legislature Building are being flown at half-mast from sunrise until sunset.

head: Statement by the Speaker

Flag of Nunavut

THE SPEAKER: On April 1 the new territory of Nunavut came into being, and the Premier and the Leader of the Official Opposition commented in this House on the establishment of the new territory. At that time I noted that when we received the flag of Nunavut, it would join the flags of the other provinces and territories of Canada in our Assembly. I am pleased to advise members today that the flag of Nunavut now flies in this Chamber.

The colours blue and gold symbolize the richness of the land, sea, and sky. The red is a reference to Canada. The inuksuk symbolizes the stone monuments which guide the people on the land and mark sacred and other special places. The star is the niqirtsuitug, the north star and the traditional guide for navigation and more broadly forever remains unchanged as the leadership of the elders in the community.

head: Introduction of Visitors

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

MR. ZWOZDESKY: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm very pleased to again introduce to you and through you to all members of the House a very special guest who is seated in your gallery today. As both you and the hon. Minister of Community Development already know from an earlier meeting, Mr. John David Sterne is the new chief executive officer of the Edmonton Symphony Orchestra and the Winspear Centre, which was recently saluted in this House on the occasion of their winning the Canadian performing arts centre of the year award.

Mr. Speaker, in taking over the most progressive music centre in the country, Mr. Sterne is also taking over the administrative reins of one of Canada's very best orchestras, our very own ESO, and one which I might add I've had the great privilege of conducting on several occasions, including their inaugural performance here at the Legislature rotunda some 10 years ago.

Mr. Speaker, I know that you were the first elected official to lend your support to these two outstanding arts organizations, especially to the Winspear Centre, for which we are all grateful. I would ask that John David Sterne now rise and receive your and our very warm welcome and our very best wishes for added success in his new position here in Edmonton. Welcome.

head: Presenting Petitions

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods.

DR. MASSEY: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. With permission I present a petition from the SOS parents urging the Government to increase funding of children in public and separate schools to a level that covers increased costs due to contract settlements, curriculum changes, technology, and aging schools.

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

MS LEIBOVICI: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I, too, have a petition on behalf of the SOS group "to urge the Government to increase funding of children in public and separate schools."

Thank you.

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

MR. BONNER: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I beg leave to present a petition on behalf of the SOS group

to urge the Government to increase funding of children in public and separate schools to a level that covers increased costs due to contract settlements, curriculum changes, technology, and aging schools.

head: Tabling Returns and Reports

MR. DAY: Mr. Speaker, I'm pleased to table today the sale agreement and also the valuation report related to the province's shares in Payment Systems Corporation.

Mr. Speaker, when the opposition asks us for information to be tabled related to commercial agreements, our position always is that we have no problem with that, but sometimes the client has the right to decline. Though we get berated for that, it's up to the client. In this case we did as usual. I asked if the customer with whom we were involved had any problem with this being tabled. They said no. Here is the entire agreement showing a \$2.5 million gain to the Alberta government through this sale.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Calgary-Mountain View.

MR. HLADY: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm tabling five copies of answers to questions that were posed on Monday night by the members for Edmonton-Glenora and Calgary-Buffalo in regard to discussion around Bill 29 in Committee of the Whole.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Minister of Labour.

MR. SMITH: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm tabling today the response to the April 21 question by the Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

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

MS CARLSON: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Today I have three tablings. The first is a letter from Jan Carroll to the Premier urging him to withdraw Bill 15.

The second is a public announcement made on November 26, 1992, by this government in Aylmer, Quebec, where they made a statement of commitment to protect endangered spaces.

The third one is dated March 11, 1992, which is an announcement by the then minister of environment and current Premier where this government committed to protect 14 percent of Alberta, which is

greater than the 12 percent guideline adopted by the endangered spaces campaign and nowhere near where they're at today.

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

MS LEIBOVICI: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have one tabling this afternoon. It's the new personal health information bill that was tabled in the Saskatchewan Legislative Assembly last Friday. In that bill personal health information can only be collected or used with the consent of the patient, a consent that can be revoked at any time.

Thank you.

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

MR. GIBBONS: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to file with the Legislative Assembly copies of St. Dominic elementary school April 21, 1999, drug abuse resistance education graduation, better known as DARE.

MR. MAR: Mr. Speaker, I'm tabling the requisite number of copies of the response to the Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods on the issue of school board deficits, which he raised earlier in this house on 15 April 1999.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

MR. MacDONALD: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would like this afternoon to table five copies of a document that states: "Let us remember those who were killed and renew our common commitment to safer workplaces." It's also an alert for a candlelight ceremony at city hall in honour of the fourth International Day of Mourning for injured and dead workers.

Thank you.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Bonnyville-Cold Lake.

MR. DUCHARME: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It gives me great pleasure to rise today and table with the Legislative Assembly responses to questions posed by hon. members during second reading of Bill 16, the Maintenance Enforcement Amendment Act, 1999.

MS BARRETT: It gives me great pleasure, Mr. Speaker, to file five copies today of a letter I wrote just a few minutes ago to the Provincial Treasurer in response to his offer yesterday to consider widening the scope of Bill 35.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Whitecourt-St. Anne.

MR. TRYNCHY: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to table five copies of the Effective Representation Consultation material that all Members of the Legislative Assembly are receiving today. This all-party public consultation process is very valuable in that it will communicate in real terms what Albertans believe is important about effective representation to the Electoral Boundaries Commission for its next review.

Thank you.

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

DR. PANNU: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to table five copies of a letter received by me yesterday from a parent in Jasper who has two daughters, one in junior high school and one in elementary

school. The parent has worked for eight years on school councils and parent committees for schools. She expresses deep concern about the fact that her older daughter's junior high school will have to let three teachers go this year in order to cope with the deficit. Her younger daughter's elementary school has classes which are as large as 29 and 30 students and will also have to lose one or two teachers.

Thank you.

head: Introduction of Guests
1:40

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Bonnyville-Cold Lake.

MR. DUCHARME: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It gives me great pleasure to introduce to you and through you to all members of the Legislature 29 students including my nephew Brandon Hallwachs. They attend Ardmore school in the Bonnyville-Cold Lake constituency. They are accompanied by assistant principal Mr. Garry Kissel, teacher Mrs. Pat Doonanco, teacher assistant Mrs. Joyce Dodds, and parent Mrs. Wanda Vestby. I'd ask that they all rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

MR. MacDONALD: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would like to introduce to you and through you to all Members of the Legislative Assembly 41 students and six adults from the Hardisty elementary Logos alternate program in my constituency. The group leaders this afternoon are Miss Shelly Juhlin, Mr. Jim Higgs, and Mrs. Sharon Lougheed. The parents accompanying the 41 students are Mrs. Gail Hinton, Mrs. Marilyn Schulz, and Mrs. Theresa Russnak. They're seated in the public gallery, and I would ask them to please rise and receive the warm and traditional welcome of this Assembly.

Thank you.

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

MRS. BURGNER: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It gives me great pleasure to introduce to you and through you to the members of the Assembly two guests who are seated in the members' gallery. They are here today to listen to the recognition I'm going to do on the proclamation date for family violence legislation. They are Jane Holliday, executive director of the office for the prevention of family violence and chair of our interdepartmental committee team, and Geoff Ho, who has been my key adviser through the Department of Justice on this legislation. They are both sitting in the members' gallery. If they would please rise and receive the warm welcome of this Assembly.

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

MRS. SLOAN: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have the distinct pleasure today on behalf of the hon. Member for Calgary-Buffalo to introduce to you and through you a group of Calgary seniors who are visiting our Assembly today. In particular we would like to welcome the Westside seniors, who reside in the constituency of Calgary-Buffalo. I would ask them to rise and receive the warm welcome of this Assembly.

MR. MAR: Mr. Speaker, I have the rare privilege to stand and introduce to you some of the guests that are accompanying the members of Westside seniors, and that is 30 guests from my own constituency, the Huntington Pioneers Association of Calgary-Nose

Creek. They are accompanied by Mrs. Else DeGroot, who is my constituency assistant and very capable in that role. She also serves in a double role by working with the organization involved with the seniors. I'd ask those seniors to please rise and receive the warm welcome of this Assembly.

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

MR. ZWOZDESKY: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to introduce two special guests, Mr. Laa Bhinder and Mr. Paul Sohi, who were here last night as special guests, and I believe are here again today. I can't see if they have arrived yet or not, but if they have, I would ask them to please rise and receive the warm welcome of this House.

MR. SMITH: Mr. Speaker, actually I just noticed that a colleague and a friend of mine and a person who participated in Tuxis Parliament many long years ago. He was much more accomplished there than I was, and it's interesting that I'm here and he's there. I would ask Gordon Porteous from Camrose to stand and receive the warm welcome of the House. It's good to see you.

head: Ministerial Statements

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Minister of Labour.

National Day of Mourning for Injured Workers

MR. SMITH: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It gives me both pleasure and a sense of appreciation for those in our workplace who are recognizing today the day of mourning, a day when all Albertans can recognize workers who have been hurt or fatally injured on the job.

The National Day of Mourning stands as a remembrance for, and a reflection on, those who have been injured or died as a result of workplace injuries. Let us learn from past accidents to prevent ones in the future. If we neglect to learn from, or recognize the reasons for past accidents, we will not advance or prevent similar accidents from occurring.

On June 4, 1994, our eldest son Keith Scott, age 26, was critically injured in a workplace accident south of Taber, Alberta. He passed away 13 hours later in a Calgary hospital.

Keith was unique, just as every person is unique; with different personalities, dreams, goals and plans for their lives. Keith was not, and never will be, a statistic!

We all make choices in life -- these moments in time -- that can alter the course of our life and our loved ones' lives forever. Keith was part of the decisions made that day. However, with no written procedures in place, the door was wide open for anything to happen and Keith paid the ultimate price.

He could have said "No." This word has to be taught to employees in Alberta. They have to have training to understand it's okay to say no to unsafe conditions.

Companies have a responsibility to their employees to provide the safest work environment possible. The employer's responsibility is to make the procedures and rules clear and to provide the training and equipment for working safely. The employee's responsibility is in their choices. But this responsibility is shared.

The standards put in place by the Government of Alberta regarding safety affect every person in our province. Safety in the workplace is an issue that knows no boundary, it encompasses all the people who live in Alberta.

There can be no compromise when it comes to safety in the workplace. Companies must put into place policies and procedures so there will be no question as to the proper way to handle any situation. Management must share in that commitment. A company that is safety conscious cares about its employees, its job ethics and the community it operates in.

Safety training is essential and must be provided at all levels.

"Without knowledge our people perish." Train people to say no, to look at the equipment being used and determine whether it is the right equipment for the job. In order for any employee to work safely, they must be trained.

There is a danger of dehumanizing people in our workplace. Everyone in the workplace deserves to be treated with dignity and respect and to expect safe working conditions.

Safety has a cost. It will cost up front on equipment and training or it will cost in the end in low morale, low productivity and injuries or loss of life.

People can look at something and say it has little or no value to them, then someone else will step forward and pay a very high price for it. The value is then set by the price that is paid.

The value of safety is set by the price paid by Keith, and by others injured or killed in the workplace. The choice of what you do with this valuable high-priced issue is yours. The decisions and choices you make have far reaching effects.

Mr. Speaker, that statement that I've just read was written specifically for this day by a fellow Albertan, Mrs. Marjorie Scott of Taber. As you heard, Marjorie lost her eldest son, Keith, to a workplace accident. She has spent much of her time since then speaking at work sites to workers and employers about losing a loved one and about preventing the loss of a loved one. I am honoured to be able to stand in the House today and deliver her words.

Mr. Speaker, I want to leave the members with one message today: workplace health and safety is not a once a year issue; it's an every day concern. Workplace injury and deaths are preventable and unacceptable, and it is only through those that are involved and affected -- employees, employers, families, government -- working together that we can achieve our goal to keep Alberta work sites the safest and healthiest in Canada.

Thank you.

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

MR. BONNER: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Official Opposition joins with the government in recognizing today, April 28, as a day of mourning for those Albertans killed or injured as a result of workplace injuries.

I know many of my colleagues and many members of this Assembly have experienced the loss of a loved one or a friend who died on the job. These experiences should reinforce our commitment as legislators to make sure that we do all we can to investigate the circumstances of workplace accidents in order to prevent future tragedies from occurring.

1:50

I wish to share with members of the Assembly and all Albertans a few lines from a poem written in memory of a victim of one such workplace tragedy.

how could it happen
we stare and say
we practice safety
every day
we grieve with the family
and do our best
to help each other
through this test

suddenly emerged
from unseen forts
inspectors chastise
and make reports
where were they
before the day
a safety hazard
took a life away

the death of our brother
was tragic and wrong
but he cared and our memories
will be cherished and long
with his passing, our brother,
left something to do
the torch has been passed
to me and to you

I encourage the government to firmly grasp this torch that has been passed, to make a strong commitment to occupational health and safety by devoting the necessary resources to make all of us proud of this province's occupational safety record. Albertans expect nothing less than their government being a leader in Canada and the world when it comes to maintaining safe and healthy working conditions. Together with industry we can make it happen, but it will only happen when all stakeholders recognize that it must be made a priority. Our workers deserve no less, and it would be the best way to honour the memories of those that we are remembering today.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

head: Oral Question Period

THE SPEAKER: First Official Opposition main question. The hon. Leader of the Official Opposition.

Education Funding

MRS. MacBETH: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. The Premier and his Minister of Education met with the chairs of the Edmonton public and Edmonton separate school boards last evening. One report of the meeting says that money was put on the table by the Premier, and the other report says that there's none. All parts of the province are very interested in the answer, especially 100,000 students in Calgary along with their parents. My questions are to the Premier. Is there or is there not additional provincial funding available to resolve the crisis this government has created for Calgary public schools with its provincewide underfunding policy?

MR. KLEIN: There are some inaccuracies in the hon. member's statement, Mr. Speaker. I didn't meet with the public and Catholic school boards last evening.

AN HON. MEMBER: You were at the hockey game.

MR. KLEIN: I was at the hockey game. That's right; I was. Right. As a matter of fact I saw the hon. Member for Edmonton-Meadowlark at the TransAlta reception, then on to the hockey game. Unfortunately it didn't turn out the right way.

The night before last I met with the boards along with the Minister of Education, Mr. Speaker. It was a very good meeting.

AN HON. MEMBER: What did you talk about?

MR. KLEIN: What did we talk about? We talked about the state of education and how we make education better, and, yes, we did talk about funding. We talked about how we participate with the school boards and the teachers to develop plans for sustainable funding. We commended both school boards on their efforts to bring down their deficits and to eliminate their deficits, and, yes, we did have a broad, general discussion on sustainable funding, sustainable funding in terms of sustaining excellence in education.

MRS. MacBETH: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. My apologies for having

an error on the date of the meeting with the separate and public trustees.

Mr. Speaker, I'm assuming that the answer, then, to the question is that there's no additional money to be put on the table, so my question is: what is the Premier's plan, given that in the next three weeks trustees will still be given no additional resources in the Calgary school situation and teachers will be more committed, in fact even more committed to preserving the excellence they've built in Calgary public schools, if this province's underfunding policy provincewide is not corrected?

MR. KLEIN: Well, Mr. Speaker, are they thumping their desks in support of singling out Calgary and saying: give more money to Calgary; give more money to Calgary, not to Edmonton, not to all of the other school districts, not to those school districts that are generating surpluses that have managed their finances well; you know, give more money only to Calgary? Is that what they're saying? Stand up and say: just more money for Calgary. Right. Stand up and say that.

DR. TAYLOR: What about Medicine Hat?

MR. KLEIN: Yes, what about Medicine Hat?

MR. LUND: Rocky Mountain House.

MR. KLEIN: Or Rocky Mountain House. No more money for Rocky Mountain House, no more money for Medicine Hat, no more money for Edmonton, where all these MLAs come from, but only money for Calgary. That's what they're saying: only money for Calgary.

Well, Mr. Speaker, we talk about equal opportunities for all students throughout the province, and, yes, if there is a problem with a school board, the Minister of Education said that we will work with those school boards to try to determine what those problems are and to help them manage their finances. I would remind the opposition that we have committed 600 million extra, additional dollars over the next three years, and that applies to all school districts, not just Calgary.

I'm surprised, I'm absolutely amazed that this hon. member would stand up and single out and say: give more money to Calgary, no other school district, just Calgary.

MRS. MacBETH: Mr. Speaker, I am proud to stand up for public education in this province.

Mr. Speaker, how crowded and rundown do schools have to get? How obsolete do textbooks and equipment have to become before this government will stop ignoring Albertans and properly fund children in Alberta's public and separate schools?

MR. KLEIN: Well, Mr. Speaker, I dispute every comment that the hon. member has made.

She didn't ask a question, but in response to her rhetoric, I'll have the hon. minister reply.

MR. MAR: Mr. Speaker, I wouldn't want hon. members in this Assembly to be led into thinking, if they believe the hon. Leader of the Opposition, that money is not being invested in education at an adequate level. For example, this year in response to what school boards were saying was a greater need in the area of special needs, we responded this September by increasing special-needs funding by 30 percent.

Mr. Speaker, we've also looked at the needs of school boards

when they talked about English as a Second Language, and we doubled the funding in that area. Where they talked about the need for more aides, we responded with \$10 million for the teacher aide program. Student health: in the current budget the hon. leader knows that \$26 million is being set aside in that area. Perhaps most importantly the basic instructional grant rate is going up by 3 percent this fall, 2 percent the fall after, and 2 percent the fall after that. In aggregate the \$600 million represents a 19 percent increase over a three-year period, a significant amount of money.

Mr. Speaker, with respect to the issue in Calgary raised by the Leader of the Opposition, I wish to supplement by saying this: the real pith and substance of the issue in contract negotiations in Calgary right now is not about money, because even the union in that city says that 10 percent over a three-year period is a generous offer, which would bring an 11-year teacher to roughly \$63,000.

MRS. SOETAERT: It's about kids.

MR. MAR: Well, I hear the hon. member saying that it's about kids. That's true, but the pupil/teacher ratio, which is what the union is attempting to preserve, is about protecting the union. It has nothing to do with classroom sizes.

2:00

Mr. Speaker, the school board is placing in its offer a protection on classroom sizes: 26 at the elementary level, 28 at the junior high level, and 30 at the senior high level. Protecting classroom sizes is in response to what parents are asking for. Very responsibly, the board is offering that.

Speaker's Ruling Provoking Debate

THE SPEAKER: Hon. members, seven minutes was spent on that last set of questions, and it would appear that there's some degree of debate going on, which is not really one of the fundamental purposes of question period.

So let's move forward with the second Official Opposition main question. The hon. Leader of the Official Opposition.

Education Funding (continued)

MRS. MacBETH: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. When advocates for private schools called for more funding, the government responded. When advocates for public and separate schools, in fact those people demonstrating at McDougall Centre in Calgary and l'école Chinook Park today, cry out for more funding, the government says there's no more. For the government's funding period of 1994 to 2001 private school funding adjusted for inflation will increase by over 50 percent, but public education for the same period doesn't even keep pace with inflation. My questions are to the Premier. Why the double standard: all ears when it comes to private school funding and a deaf ear when it comes to children in public schools?

MR. KLEIN: Well, again I'm sort of curious as to why this hon. member would be asking that question. She was, when she was the Minister of Education, a great protector of private education, Mr. Speaker. There are numerous quotes in *Hansard* where the hon. member, when she was Minister of Education, stood up for and protected the concept that there should be an alternative and was a great protector of private education, as she was of the public education system as well.

So, Mr. Speaker, relative to her questions today, as opposed to her answers of many years ago, I will have the hon. minister reply.

MR. MAR: Mr. Speaker, in the province of Alberta there are many choices with respect to education. One of those choices is with respect to private education. The hon. member knows and the people in this Assembly know that parents are very supportive of choice. We have many different types of choices. They may be charter schools. They may be private schools. They may be Catholic schools. They may be public schools. There is an element of choice that people support.

The hon. Leader of the Opposition knows that the increase for private education was the consequence of a number of recommendations, 26 in total, that have come as a result of an extensive consultation with the public headed up by the hon. Member for Calgary-Glenmore. Mr. Speaker, one of the recommendations set out in that report was an increase of the support to private education that would see education for private school students go from 50 percent of the instructional grant rate that is enjoyed by public, charter, and Catholic school students to 60 percent. That is a difference of 10 percent, going from 50 to 60 percent, staged over a two-year period commencing this year. So as a consequence . . .

MRS. MacBETH: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given that the funding framework committee is already in place and the Minister of Education has refused to expand its mandate to look at the inadequacy of the funding levels provincially, will the Premier show some leadership, expand the mandate of the committee, and show the same respect for public school supporters as he showed for private school supporters?

MR. MAR: Again, Mr. Speaker, the announcements that we've made over the period of the last three years have amounted to roughly \$400 million and for the next three years an additional \$600 million. I wouldn't want members of the public or members of this Assembly to be misled into thinking that we are not responding to the concerns of people who talk about the importance of public education, because it is important. Many people have indicated on both sides of this Assembly as well as in the public the importance of our public education system.

Mr. Speaker, a billion dollars being invested and reinvested in education over a six-year period, a 36 percent increase: one cannot look at that and say that there is not a great deal of support for public education in this province. That 36 percent increase over a six-year period is far greater than the rate of inflation and the rate of the growth of the number of students put together.

Mr. Speaker, it is not just about the amount of money that you spend. It is also where you spend it. We are focusing those dollars on classrooms and classroom resources, where they will result in the most benefit.

MRS. MacBETH: Mr. Speaker, my final question is to the Premier. What will it take for those students and parents demonstrating at McDougall Centre, at l'école Chinook Park today, at towns and cities all across this province to stop being ignored by this Premier?

MR. KLEIN: Mr. Speaker, as the hon. Minister of Education pointed out, we will have invested up to the year 2001 something close to a billion dollars in education. As the minister pointed out, that's an average of just a little bit over 6 percent per year. That is substantial.

I take strong exception to the implied assertion that people are striking and protesting throughout this province. That is not happening. It is not happening. Yes, I understand that there was a protest. There were a number of teachers outside McDougall Centre in Calgary. There is a job action going on. We're doing our very, very best through the Department of Labour to find the resolution to

that particular dispute, which is between the Calgary teachers, the public board of education, and their elected board.

To suggest that we are ignoring education is absolutely wrong, false, irresponsible, reprehensible, because we have identified education as our number one priority. I reiterate what I said in this Legislative Assembly a few days ago: that our long-term goal relative to education is to achieve excellence, Mr. Speaker, excellence.

THE SPEAKER: Hon. members, we've now been 15 minutes into this question period, and we've had two sets of questions. I have a large list of other members who want to participate.

Third Official Opposition main question. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Rutherford.

VLT Plebiscites

MR. WICKMAN: Mr. Speaker, recently the Premier mused about the elimination of the role of the opposition. Now this government appears to be closing the door to plebiscites. Maybe I should be addressing the Premier as chairman. Maybe I'm witnessing democracy by a stopwatch. My question is to the Premier. Does the Premier really endorse this silly motion of the minister of lotteries to eliminate any future VLT petitions?

MR. KLEIN: Well, Mr. Speaker, I would hope that the hon. Member for Edmonton-Rutherford would support the legislation, because basically it includes retroactivity to remove VLTs from those communities that voted to have them removed and also prevents those communities like Rocky Mountain House and Sylvan Lake from reintroducing those machines. Yes, it could be by plebiscite. We're not saying that it has to be by plebiscite. Or it could . . . [interjection] Mr. Speaker, would you keep your . . . [interjections] I mean, Mr. Speaker, would you please . . . You are very patient, sir.

Mr. Speaker, the hon. member was on a city council, and he knows full well the rules of planning. There's a number of things within the Municipal Government Act that can be used to trigger a decision, one of which is a plebiscite. There is the process of land use redesignation, which results in a public hearing before a city council. There is the whole issue of applying for a development permit, which is appealable to the development appeal board. What the hon. minister is saying is: let the local process prevail. That indeed is democracy by duly elected town and city and municipal district and county councils.

2:10

MR. WICKMAN: Mr. Speaker, let me be a little more specific. Will the Premier recognize and act upon future plebiscites that are submitted by municipalities to rid their communities of VLTs? Yes or no?

MR. KLEIN: First of all we can't make that a policy statement right now because the courts have ruled that unless we pass legislation, we can't make any policies. What the intent of the legislation is, Mr. Speaker, is to let local decisions prevail, local decisions, no matter how those decisions come about. Let the local policymaking process prevail.

MR. WICKMAN: Mr. Speaker, is the Premier saying that his commitment to remove VLTs within seven days upon a successful future plebiscite is now out the window?

MR. KLEIN: Mr. Speaker, I'm going to have the hon. minister responsible for lotteries supplement, but as we sit here today in this

Legislative Assembly, we do not have a policy, according to the courts, that is binding on the Alberta Gaming and Liquor Commission, so we have to get the legislation through. Certainly the intent of the legislation is to let the local policy decision-making process prevail.

I'll have the hon. minister supplement.

MRS. NELSON: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. If the hon. member would read the bill, it clearly identifies in the bill that "the Commission must remove all video lottery terminals from establishments located in the municipalities referred to in subsection (1)." That direction comes into force upon this piece of legislation passing, because until this piece of legislation passes, we do not have the ability to make policy that the commission must follow. It's very clear in this bill, and hopefully the hon. member opposite will be supportive of this piece of legislation so that in fact down the road policy directions can be made by government that the commission and the board must follow.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona on behalf of the ND opposition.

Employment Standards and Workplace Safety

DR. PANNU: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On this National Day of Mourning as Canadians honour the memory of their fellows who have been killed, injured, or diseased on the job, Albertans have every reason to be deeply upset at this government's poor track record in the area of work-related health and safety. An Alberta worker is injured on the job every seven minutes. This is a government that during a period of rapid economic expansion has gutted its own Department of Labour and has overseen the Workers' Compensation Board turning itself into a latter-day Scrooge. To the Premier: how can the government justify cutting by one-half the number of employees in the Department of Labour while the number of workers injured on the job continues to go up?

MR. KLEIN: Mr. Speaker, first of all I really take exception, again, to all of the assertions put forward by the hon. member. In fact benefits generally to injured workers, those who are truly injured on the work site or at the workplace, have gone up.

What has happened with the WCB over the years is that, yes, there has been a shift and a change, and the focus has been on those who are injured in the workplace. The focus has also been on getting those who might abuse the system off WCB rolls and back into the workplace.

I'll have the hon. minister supplement.

MR. SMITH: Thank you, Mr. Premier. Mr. Speaker, I would refer the member to page 73 of the business plan, goal 11: "Alberta will have a fair and safe work environment." In there, in a graph, in terms of injury and disease in 1996 he will see that Alberta has the lowest provincial ranking of person-days lost per 10,000 person-days worked. What that translates into is that this province has the number one record in the dominion for injuries that are . . . [interjection] We're the best. We're the best. That's what they're trying to say.

I would also have the member look at the number of fatality claims accepted by the WCB: in 1988, 124; 1994, 74; 1995, 93; 1996, 91; 1997, 119; and last year, Mr. Speaker, 105.

MS BARRETT: The trend is going back up.

DR. PANNU: The trend is certainly going back up, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, how can this government justify ignoring the plight

of a growing group of workers who are employed on an ever increasing number of corporate farms but aren't covered by provincial employment standards and lack workers' compensation protection? When will farm workers get justice from this government? My question is to the Premier.

MR. SMITH: Mr. Speaker, that question has been asked by the member outside the House as well. There is an employment standards review that goes on that is not addressing this issue per se. I would point out to the member, though, as he represents a party of workers and a party of people that generally make their living through an hourly wage in a collective agreement, not to be so pessimistic about the people that he works with and that are members of his party. They're safe workers. They're smarter workers. They're better workers than ever before. Have a little confidence that these people are going to deliver the goods, which they are, which is a safer work site than ever before in this province.

DR. PANNU: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the Minister of Labour again: how can the minister justify further reductions in personnel in the Department of Labour when the number of employment standard complaints has gone up 34 percent in the last four years and 28 percent last year alone?

MR. SMITH: An excellent question, Mr. Speaker. We were at a meeting this morning, and as a matter of fact we found out that employment standards complaints this year are on the rise again. They're up to about 7,500 from 5,300.

So what do we know? We know that in 1993 this province generated \$73 billion of activity. Today this province generates \$106 billion, \$30 billion more of Alberta goods and services being produced by a workforce that's over 27,000 people higher than what it was the year before, 57,000 new jobs, a quarter of a million new workers since 1993. Of course you're going to have more complaints. There are more people working here than ever before.

What we do know as well is that the productivity of the employment standards department increased last year alone by 17 percent. We're taking advantage of telephone counseling. We're taking advantage of closing files faster than ever before. We're also responding by saving taxpayer dollars in the area of administering this part of our labour legislation, and we're working with employees and industries to make sure that we're preventing this type of activity from increasing at an even greater rate.

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

Grazing Leases

MR. DUCHARME: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Over the past few days I've received more than three dozen calls from rural constituents who attended a meeting in Bonnyville last Friday concerning grazing leases. According to the feedback I'm getting, the information presented at this meeting suggests that grazing leaseholders on public lands are going to have their rights and privileges revoked by legislation. To the Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development: is it true that the government intends to take away the rights associated with these leases on public lands?

2:20

MR. STELMACH: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The proposed legislation's purpose is to strike the right balance between the legitimate interests of all the stakeholders representing public lands; that is, the leaseholders, the oil and gas companies that operate, other mineral

extraction, and also the recreational public. The most important is that we are also protecting and representing the owners of the land, the people of Alberta.

Leaseholders will still have the right to sell and assign their leases for whatever the market will bear, and most importantly leaseholders will still have to be compensated by oil companies or anyone wanting to take a portion of the lease out for other purposes. Those leaseholders will be compensated for damages and any other operational concerns on that particular lease.

The regulations, which will be the next step in this process, will include all of the stakeholders, including ranchers, oil and gas companies, and all of the other recreational users, in making regulations that will represent the public lands for many years to come.

MR. DUCHARME: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the same minister: does the minister intend to provide information to my constituents regarding these proposed changes?

MR. STELMACH: Mr. Speaker, the MLA committee has consulted quite widely, since 1997 actually, on this particular issue, and the process was chaired by the MLA for Drayton Valley-Calmar. It's culminated in collating all of the information and drafting the proposed legislation. We've also met with the Alberta grazing lease association, with the Alberta Cattle Commission, the Surface Rights Federation, and the Western Stock Growers.

Yes, Mr. Speaker, we'll make every effort possible to get the correct information out to every leaseholder and, most importantly, to all members of the public as well so there's very clear, concise information with respect to this issue.

MR. DUCHARME: To the same minister: will grazing leaseholders be consulted on the new regulations that will define compensation for damages and operational concerns?

MR. STELMACH: Mr. Speaker, absolutely. Our goal here is to include all of the stakeholders in a committee that will be writing those regulations. The intent of course is to pass the legislation, and then the hon. Member for Drayton Valley-Calmar will be working with a stakeholder committee in identifying concerns, talking about operational concerns, damages, and also talking about those issues of access to public lands and the fines and fees that will be related to that.

Protected Ecological Areas

MS CARLSON: Mr. Speaker, in March 1992, in the presence of His Royal Highness the Duke of Edinburgh, president of the World Wildlife Fund, the then minister of environment, Ralph Klein, and the late Don Sparrow announced a commitment to protect 14 percent of Alberta's natural heritage. In November of that year Alberta signed the statement of commitment to complete Canada's network of protected areas. The World Wildlife Fund has again given Alberta a failing grade, yet they point out that in other provinces where there is leadership things happen. When will the Premier show that leadership?

MR. KLEIN: Mr. Speaker, I'm very proud to say that, yes, we made that commitment and that as minister of the environment then we started the process. It was followed through by the hon. Brian Evans and is being followed through as we speak through the hon. Minister of Environmental Protection.

Mr. Speaker, I'm going to have the hon. minister supplement. First of all I don't give much credence to the WWF, the World Wildlife Fund, as opposed to the World Wrestling Federation. I

think that our record is absolutely commendable. We're well on track toward achieving our goal that was committed to in 1992 by the year 2000.

I'll have the hon. minister supplement.

MR. LUND: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The fact is that there has been great progress made in the program. As a matter of fact, since we announced the process back in 1995, we've now increased our protected land by 60 percent. By 60 percent. The fact is that there are currently another 57 sites in the process.

Now, I know that the Liberals don't like to do public consultation. They don't like it. They don't like to have local people making decisions, and that was demonstrated today very clearly by the Member for Edmonton-Rutherford when he was talking about VLT plebiscites. They don't like local decisions, but we on this side of the House believe very, very strongly in having public consultation. We believe in having the ability for local people to make decisions.

Mr. Speaker, yes, the process is long. It's complicated, but we did make good progress last year. Let me just go through some of the progress.

Speaker's Ruling Anticipation

THE SPEAKER: Hon. members, I really love what I do. My great objective in life, though, is to encourage all members to read the Standing Orders and a few of the other documents that govern the activity of question period.

Now, if we're going to continue with this series of questions, I simply want to remind all members that one of the traditions that has been established in this House which is a very, very good one is that the opposition gets on a Thursday the right to ask the government what it's planning to do in the following week. The government then provides that information, and an Order Paper is printed. It's called the Routine. I'm looking at the Order Paper for today, Wednesday, April 28, and I see that scheduled for debate later today in Committee of the Whole is Bill 15. Now, if these questions here pertain at all in any way, shape, or form to Bill 15, I'm simply going to rule them out. If they don't, the hon. member has the floor, and she may continue.

Protected Ecological Areas (continued)

MS CARLSON: Mr. Speaker, why does the minister like the WWF in the years that it gets an A and not in the two consecutive years that it gets an F, which makes a total of three Fs for this province over the past 10 years?

MR. KLEIN: Mr. Speaker, I'm so very happy the hon. member . . .

MRS. SLOAN: You just got your notes.

MR. KLEIN: No. I just got the copies of our own report card, Mr. Speaker, and I would like to table five copies of Albertans' environmental report card, not the WWF but Albertans' environmental report card.

Ordinary, Average Albertans

The real contributors to the Special Places class. Enthusiastically nominated sites and now participate on every local committee. Turns in excellent, practical reports about how to add new Special Places. Recognizes their input just as special as the so-called special interest groups.

They get an A++.

Real Conservation Groups

These groups are doers, not complainers. They roll up their sleeves, fundraise and work cooperatively with government and industry on

specific projects to enhance and improve Alberta's environment. A partial list of these groups include: Ducks Unlimited, Trout Unlimited, Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, The Nature Conservancy and The Alberta Conservation Association [amongst others].

Now, they get an A+ for the work they do.

Special Interest Groups

These groups often seem most preoccupied with sensationalizing their own narrow view of a problem and with the media attention they can generate.

and I would add, through the opposition.

Their limited fundraising support from Albertans seems directed at perpetuating their ability to criticize rather than coming up with any constructive solutions on funding environmental projects.

So here are the associations that get an F. The Alberta Wilderness Association gets an F.

Refused to join in Special Places class work at all, but still shouts loudly and often from the hallway to tell others how to play. AWA's often inaccurate comments or accusations get attention, but they don't make any contribution whatsoever to those doing the real work.

So they get an F, Mr. Speaker.

2:30

MS CARLSON: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I will table the comment where he applauded the A they got.

Mr. Speaker, can the Premier answer this question: why is the government not prepared to provide ways to phase out existing dispositions when major industry groups and over 90 percent of Albertans agree that industrial activity is not compatible in protected areas and this government is creating uncertainty for industry and risks international trade repercussions as a result?

MR. KLEIN: Mr. Speaker, I don't know if hogwash is unparliamentary, but that is hogwash. We are working with industry. That's why the real conservation groups get an A+, because they work with government and industry to find solutions relative to dedicating special places, whereas organizations like the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society

knew the rules before they joined the class, but didn't like them.

Quit last year when the teacher wouldn't make everyone else do exactly what they wanted instead.

So they get an F.

And the World Wildlife Fund:

More progress could be made if WWF would stop disrupting the class continually, just to hold everyone else up. May also need glasses, seems unable to see the positive in absolutely anything.

AN HON. MEMBER: Table it.

MR. KLEIN: I have tabled it, Mr. Speaker.

They get an F too.

And the media. *The Edmonton Journal*:

This storyteller spins up the strangest tales for anyone who will listen, but seems to get his information from only a few of his favourite classmates. Needs some serious work on perspective and accuracy next term, to avoid having to make more retractions.

They get an F.

Alberta weekly newspapers:

Keep up the good work. Not easily misled by comments of one or two classmates [including the opposition] with their own axe to grind. Checks facts and writes balanced stories without resorting to cheap sensationalism.

They get an A.

The Edmonton Sun

shows continued progress in class. Writes balanced reports with attention to plain language and brevity. Communicates well with average Albertans.

They get an A.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Calgary-Egmont, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Meadowlark.

Education Funding

(continued)

MR. HERARD: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Recently Mr. Eric Newell, a great Albertan and a man that I have a great deal of respect for, spoke of how education represents the foundation of everything we want and need to achieve excellence both economically and socially for the future. But he also warned that underfunding of education could dim the province's hope for the future. So my serious question to the Minister of Education is: is education being underfunded in this province?

MR. MAR: Well, Mr. Speaker, I want to say first of all that I agree with the premise that was set out at the outset of the hon. member's question. I agree that Mr. Newell has much important to say about education and the importance that it has in this province and what it will mean for this province if it is not funded properly. But I wish to say in the strongest terms that education is appropriately funded.

Mr. Speaker, that does not mean that we're not willing to look at pressure points as they may arise and increase funding to priority areas that can improve our education system when money becomes available. I've already stated at some length the billion dollars that will be reinvested and invested in education over the six-year period from 1995 through to the year 2001. I wish to point out that with respect to that billion dollars our greatest emphasis is on focusing it on classroom instruction. Three out of four dollars that will be spent by this province will be spent in the area of instruction.

I listened very carefully to what Mr. Newell had to say in his comments, Mr. Speaker. I think that he had a number of interesting points that he addressed. Most notably, he did not indicate support for the idea of throwing money at education, but rather his focus was on ensuring that there would be innovative and inventive ways of improving our education system, and I couldn't agree with him more.

Finally, Mr. Speaker, I just wish to say that programs like the student health initiative, the teachers' assistance program, the early literacy initiative, English as a Second Language, a boost on areas such as special needs have demonstrated clear examples of the government's commitment to the type of innovative and inventive ways of improving our education system that Mr. Newell was referring to.

MR. HERARD: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given that Mr. Newell stated that Alberta's first . . .

Speaker's Ruling Questions Outside Government Responsibility

THE SPEAKER: Hon. member, please. This Mr. Newell, is he an employee of the government of Alberta? Is he a participant in the administrative competence of the government of Alberta? Is he any different than Mr. Winstone who lives north of Fort Assiniboine? And in a democracy are his views more important or less important?

Question period deals with the administrative competence of the government. Let's have a question on the administrative competence of the government.

Education Funding

(continued)

MR. HERARD: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the same minister: given that per student funding appears to be remaining close to the

bottom among Canadian provinces even though people development was at the top of the priority list at the growth summit, how does Alberta compare to other provinces in per student funding?

MR. MAR: Well, Mr. Speaker, I want to state first of all that our per student funding is not at the bottom among Canadian provinces but rather is fifth among interprovincial comparisons on a per student basis, but I wouldn't want anybody to be left with the impression that there is somehow a connection between the quality of education and the amount of money that is spent. There is in my thorough review of this area no measurable way of establishing a connection between the amount of money that is spent on education and the quality of the program. As I've said time and time again and I expect to continue to say time and time again, it's not how much money you spend; it's where you spend it.

I think the most important part, Mr. Speaker, in my response to this is this: that we have middle-of-the-pack spending but top-of-the-pack results. In the most recent round of test scores that I've seen released related to grade 8 science students where Alberta students participated with students from countries around the world, I wish to point out that Alberta students came out at the top of the pack among Canadian provinces.

So, Mr. Speaker, I simply wish to say that middle-of-the-pack spending and top-of-the-pack results are what we strive for.

MR. HERARD: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My final supplemental to the same minister: given the concerns with respect to the ability of our system to deal with jobs of the future, what are we doing in junior and senior high school classrooms to prepare today's youth for the changing workplace of tomorrow?

MR. MAR: Mr. Speaker, I think that this is a very important question, because it's clear that our intention is to prepare students for the future, not prepare them for the past. My department supports and encourages school and business partnerships that give opportunities to students to explore different careers in learning about the world of work such as the registered apprenticeship program, Alberta technology preparation, Careers: the Next Generation, the junior achievement entrepreneurial programs, the job safety skills for young workers program, the young scientists conference.

Mr. Speaker, my department has also established a careers transition initiative to work with schools, teachers, businesses, and the community, and this program will help improve career planning and counseling in schools and help link schools to real work situations. It'll improve work experience programs. It'll develop employability skills, and it'll improve recognition of high school learning at postsecondary institutions.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Workplace Fatalities

MR. MacDONALD: Mr. Speaker, at a Calgary work site last year two workers were electrocuted from 8,000 volts when they contacted a high-voltage overhead power line. These workplace electrocutions occurred because this government does not require Calgary's electrical system to have a fuse device that shuts off the over 8,000 volts of power after initial contact. My questions are to the Minister of Labour. On this day of mourning for Alberta workers killed on the job, can the minister please explain why a fuse device costing a few hundred dollars is not required to be installed on high-voltage power lines in Calgary?

Thank you.

MR. SMITH: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In fact I was at that site the day after the electrocution, and it was . . . [interjection] Did somebody over there say: too late? God, you guys. You know, is there something wrong with you that you would have to say something like that? Two fatalities.

2:40

Mr. Speaker, at that site there were some other issues being dealt with. The work being done by ENMAX in the city of Calgary and the work done with utility operators: they're meeting the requirements of the Safety Codes Act in Alberta, and they have systems in place similar to those used all across North America. They take their job very seriously. There was a number of, actually, rehooks of the power supply during the period of that fatality. It was thoroughly investigated. The real issue was the fact that the scaffolding was being moved before being dismantled, and that was what came in contact with the line, causing the fatalities.

MR. MacDONALD: Thank you. Mr. Speaker, the real issue here is the height of the scaffolding. The scaffolding violated your OH and S regulations. Why is your report inadequate and does not address that?

MR. SMITH: The member is quite correct in saying that the scaffolding was high enough to come in contact with the line. There were certain tie-offs made. They were attempting to move this scaffolding. Our report is quite consistent in its investigation, and the Department of Labour will stand by that report.

MR. MacDONALD: Mr. Speaker, my third question is also to the minister. Given that we must investigate why accidents occur to prevent them from reoccurring in the future, can the minister explain why there was no formal fatality inquiry into this case and why it is not a standard practice whenever a work site fatality occurs? Alberta workers deserve no less.

MR. SMITH: Mr. Speaker, I am appreciative of the question on this day of mourning. I know that the member has previously made statements reflective of his desire to make fatality inquiries mandatory. Never has any of the investigations made by the Department of Labour resulted in the calling of an inquiry board.

As to the details of an inquiry and how they work, they are clearly under the purview of the Minister of Justice, and he may wish to supplement the answer, Mr. Speaker.

MR. HAVELOCK: Thank you, Mr. Minister, but at this time I would prefer not to supplement. Thank you.

THE SPEAKER: Hon. members, I would strongly encourage those of you who need it to take a 30-second break. We'll all take one, and then we'll proceed to Recognitions.

Before we proceed to Recognitions, might we receive the consent of the House to revert to the introduction of visitors?

HON. MEMBERS: Agreed.

head: Introduction of Guests

(reversion)

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

MRS. O'NEILL: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's an honour today to introduce to you and through you to members of this Assembly 51 students from École secondaire Sainte Marguerite d'Youville in St.

Albert. They are accompanied by John Kimak and by Mme Gidget Bouchard and M. Michel Nault. They are seated in both the public and the members' galleries. They are here today as part of an organized school day in which they have also visited the law courts and are now attending to the Assembly. I would ask them to please rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

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

MRS. SOETAERT: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I, too, have an introduction today. Within this group is a young woman by the name of Farren Hawkes. She represented Spruce Grove-Sturgeon-St. Albert the other week in Mr. Speaker's Youth Parliament. I know she is up in that gallery, and I would ask Farren to please rise and receive the warm welcome of this Assembly.

Recognitions

THE SPEAKER: Hon. members, seven members today have indicated their desire to participate in Recognitions. We'll proceed first of all with the hon. Member for Calgary-Fort, then the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Asian Heritage Month

MR. CAO: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is with great pride that I rise today to recognize Asian Heritage Month. Through the month of May people in communities around the world and across Canada, including our provincial capital, will be taking part in this wonderful celebration of Asian art, tradition, and culture. Asian culture covered an extensive period of human history and an expansive part of our planet: thousands of years and almost half our world.

Albertan cultural groups with heritage roots traced back to the north, south, east, west, and centre of the continent of Asia will be participating in the events that will give all Albertans the opportunity to explore the beauty and the variety of Asian culture as an integral part of the Albertan/Canadian social fabric.

As members of this Assembly we are often invited to attend many of the cultural celebrations that are held throughout Alberta every year. These events allow Albertans to learn more about our world, our neighbours, and the numerous cultures that proudly call Alberta home. I encourage all members of the Assembly to participate with their constituents in Asian Heritage Month and help to recognize Alberta culture.

I would like to thank people of various heritages, whose cultural contributions bring richness to our province and to our life.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Workers Killed on the Job in 1998

MR. MacDONALD: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would like to recognize this afternoon on behalf of all Members of this Legislative Assembly the 105 workers in this province who lost their lives in workplace accidents in the year 1998. I would like to express once again my condolences on behalf of everyone here to these families in their difficult time.

The loss of someone dear is always very difficult. I know these families are blessed with many fond memories, which I trust will help them pass through this sorrowful time. I'm sure, on behalf of everyone, our prayers are with the families at this time.

In closing, I would like to recite a stanza of this poem that was

written by an AUPE member to one of his fellow workers who died in a workplace accident.

Someone
someone died
the other day
an accident
is what they say
the boom went up
and hit the line
the medics came
but not in time.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Wetaskiwin-Camrose.

Gordon Porteous

MR. JOHNSON: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Today I would like to congratulate Gordon Porteous, who was introduced earlier, on his recent award of merit from the Alberta Association of Agricultural Societies. Gordon was a director and president of the association from 1990 to 1991 and finds himself in elite company of award recipients, as the award has only been given out three times since 1989.

Gordon was chosen for this award of merit because of his contributions to improving the quality of life not only within his own community but for all of rural Alberta, for his contributions to the betterment of agricultural fairs across Canada, and for helping the Alberta Association of Agricultural Societies develop its goals and objectives to meet the challenge of change. His successful career includes director of the Canadian association of fairs and exhibitions, of which he was president from 1994 to '95 and general manager of the Camrose regional exhibition from 1985 to 1996.

Congratulations, Gordon, on receiving this very special award of merit.

Workers Killed on the Job

MS BARRETT: I rise today, Mr. Speaker, to recognize the men and women who have died while on the job in Alberta. Our hearts go out to their mothers, fathers, spouses, sons, and daughters. We must never forget those Albertans who have died doing their jobs, and in remembering them, we need to ensure that employers do their part to maintain safety in the workplace and that they work with their employees to ensure job safety at all times. Profits must never be put ahead of human life.

Alberta has a growing workforce. It is critical that workers enter the workplace knowing that employee safety is a priority and not that safe practices are implemented after horrible tragedy has occurred. As MLAs we should work towards such ends to ensure that every worker in Alberta arrives home safely at the end of their workday. Without taking such action, tributes on this national day of mourning are meaningless.

Thank you.

2:50

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

Proclamation of Family Violence Legislation

MRS. BURGNER: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The announcement today of the Protection against Family Violence Act proclamation date of June 1 follows lengthy preparation with Alberta's community services providers, First Nations and Métis communities, and police services. The lead time for training Police Service members and

orientation of Crown prosecutors, probation officers, and victims' services staff will ensure effective implementation. We have been able to achieve this through our Interdepartmental Committee on Family Violence, which has worked very effectively throughout this process.

I would at this time like to acknowledge the support I received from the Minister of Justice and the Minister of Family and Social Services. I would also like to acknowledge the contribution of the MLA for Calgary-Cross, who is the chairman of the Advisory Committee on the Human Rights, Citizenship and Multiculturalism Education Fund, which provided dollars to assist with our diverse community issues with the development of our brochure. I would like to acknowledge the initial work of the Law Society and the work of a former colleague in this House, Alice Hanson.

I encourage all members of this Assembly to become familiar with this new legislation. Abuse of any kind is not acceptable to Albertans.

Thank you.

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

Drug Abuse Resistance Education

MR. GIBBONS: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have the greatest pleasure to stand in this Assembly and recognize a very important program at a graduation I attended on April 21, 1999. St. Dominic's elementary school held their drug abuse resistance education, better known as DARE, graduation. Sixty-eight enthusiastic grade 6 students received a graduate certificate and T-shirt after completing a 17-week classroom setting course.

Uniformed police officers teach this course in a classroom setting to grade 6 students because this is where it has the greatest impact: two very capable Edmonton city police officers, Detective John Glenna, a 22-year veteran who has taught two years in this school, and Constable Barb Gamblin, who has taught in R.J. Scott previously.

The DARE program started in Los Angeles 15 years ago. It was developed by police officers and teachers. It is taught all over the world in many languages. The course message reads like this: what drug abuse is; the consequences of using tobacco, alcohol, and drugs; dealing with peer pressure; learning resistance techniques; building self-esteem; learning assertiveness; managing stress without taking drugs; reducing violence; combating media influences on drug use.

Mr. Speaker, I think this is a very worthwhile course and very powerful, and I would hope that the whole province would look at taking it on.

Clean World Award

MR. TANNAS: Mr. Speaker, I'm pleased today to give recognition to the Alberta Department of Transportation and Utilities in winning the Clean World award. This award, approved by the Governor General of Canada, His Excellency the Hon. Romeo LeBlanc, recognizes the good work of departmental staff and thousands of volunteers across Alberta in their commitment to a cleaner environment through the annual spring cleanup program and the adopt a highway program. Last year approximately 11,500 participants and 429 organizations took part in the 22nd annual highway cleanup.

Mr. Speaker, the adopt a highway program has grown rapidly since its beginning in 1994, and today nearly 3,000 kilometres of primary highways are cared for by some 762 adoptive families, community groups, companies, and nonprofit organizations across the province.

Congratulations to the Department of Transportation and Utilities and to all volunteers. Well done.

THE SPEAKER: Two points of order today. First of all, the hon. Leader of the Official Opposition.

Point of Order

Allegations against Members

MRS. MacBETH: Mr. Speaker, I rise on a point of order under sections 23(h) and (i) of the Standing Orders of this Assembly with respect to challenging my motive in regard to private schools. The issue is not support for parents' choice to send their children to private schools in this province. In fact, it was a choice embodied in the School Act which I was pleased to sponsor in this House in 1988.

I've never questioned that it was a choice for parents. What I question is the government's decision to increase support for private schools in this province from 1994 through to its planning period of 2001 by over 50 percent, during which time public schools received less than inflation, in other words a negative number, over the same period. That was the clarification I wished to make and straighten out the impression that had been left otherwise.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Government House Leader on this point of order.

MR. HANCOCK: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I don't believe I heard anything in the hon. member's argument which would raise a point of order under the Standing Orders that she raised. It sounded more like she was trying to use the opportunity of a point of order to further explain her position, something which, quite frankly, I think you were trying to point out to us, we had far too much of in question period already in terms of engaging in debate and the length of questions and answers, and the spin that was being put on the preambles. In fact, the rather excessive preambles, I would suggest, in question period today really contributed to that process.

The fact of the matter is that if we're going to get into clarifications under points of order, as the Minister of Education pointed out during question period, the increase in the funding to the public school system over that same period of time and through the three-year business plan amounts to 36 percent.

There is an appropriate place for debate. We've just come through a month of estimates in terms of how much money is enough and whether the percentage increase is sufficient, whether the public system should be getting more than the private system. The place for that debate is not in points of order nor question period, as I think you were pointing out.

I don't think the hon. member has substantiated a point of order here this afternoon.

THE SPEAKER: It strikes the chair that the hon. Leader of the Official Opposition used the Standing Orders to raise in fact a point of clarification, which doesn't exist.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenora.

Point of Order

Brevity in Question Period

MR. SAPERS: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. I rise today and will be quoting from *Beauchesne* primarily three sections -- 410, 417, and 496, and maybe even 495. It all stems from questions put to the Premier and then his responses. In the context of the excessive use of time in the answers, the lengthy reading from documents, et cetera, I have to place that in a context where I have seen an increasing disrespect for question period in this Assembly and what the purposes of question period are.

This was brought most clearly to mind yesterday when a member

of Executive Council admonished a private member for not asking the question that was provided to them to be asked. Then we see the members of the front bench almost having a contest to see who can use the most time in answering a question. You hear them egging each other on, saying, "Just another minute" or "Tell us more" or "Please" and then handing it off to their colleagues on the front bench to supplement.

It's getting increasingly abusive, and I would direct you first to *Beauchesne* 410, where we are told in 410(3) that "time is scarce," and then to 410(7), where it reads, "Brevity both in questions and answers is of great importance." Then in *Beauchesne* 417, of course, it says: "Answers to questions should be as brief as possible, deal with the matter raised and should not provoke debate." Well, there's a fine art on the front bench of avoiding questions. As you've said yourself, Mr. Speaker, that's why they call it question period and not answer period. But 417 is pretty clear that the answer should bear at least some resemblance to the questions asked.

I will note, sir, that not once today but twice you intervened to try to move things along. It was subsequent to both of those interventions that the Premier, in his exchange regarding questions put from my colleague for Edmonton-Ellerslie, went on and on and on and on. When he did so, he quoted from documents. I won't take up any more time than needed, but I will refer you to *Beauchesne* 495, where it says:

(1) A Minister is not at liberty to read or quote from a despatch or other state paper not before the House without being prepared to lay it on the Table.

(2) It has been admitted that a document which has been cited ought to be laid upon the Table.

Then 496, referring to quotations, talks about how a speech shouldn't be just simply a matter of reading.

So, Mr. Speaker, I would appreciate your ruling in this matter and hopefully some guidance so that we can make the best use of question period.

3:00

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Government House Leader.

MR. HANCOCK: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To deal with the latter parts first, section 496 of course is not relevant as no speech was being made. As much as the hon. member might have thought it sounded like one, it was an answer to a question, a detailed answer, no doubt, but not a speech. Therefore, 496 doesn't apply.

Under 495, the question of tabling. The Premier indicated in answering the question that he would be tabling the document and in fact did table the document. So 495 doesn't apply.

With respect to the rules relating to time being scarce and to brevity, in fact, Mr. Speaker, you drew the House's attention to the fact that a couple of exchanges during the question period today took a long time.

In fact, at noon today I had the honour and privilege of meeting with a committee of members of the House of Commons on foreign affairs and international trade. We discussed a number of things, but before we got into the substantive issues, we talked about the differences between our question periods. They were lamenting the fact that they didn't get full and complete answers in the 35 seconds that were afforded to the ministers in the federal House to be able to give a full and complete response to the questions being asked. We in turn lamented that in the 35 seconds that they have for asking a question in this House, the preambles are sometimes so extensively long and that in fact the preambles to the question often seem to us to be more important to the opposition than the questions themselves. The preambles are used oftentimes to skew the facts or to twist the facts so that they can get in the preamble something which

cannot be appropriately responded to in an answer. Thus it encourages the ministers on this side of the House, in getting up to respond to a question, to deal with the skewing of the preamble, the facts in the preamble before you can ever get to a succinct response to the question.

So, Mr. Speaker, if there's any ruling to be made in the course of this point of order, if there's any response to be made to this point of order by yourself, I would suggest it would be, yes, to again admonish both sides of the House that answers should be brief and that questions should be brief, that preambles should be straight and to the point, and that there should be no preambles on supplementary questions.

There is a point to be made here. I would acknowledge that there's a point to be made here. It's a problem that you've pointed out consistently, the way we deal with questions and answers in the House. If the members opposite want brief, succinct answers, then I would suggest what they need are brief, succinct questions without long, twisted preambles.

THE SPEAKER: Hon. members, there were some interesting points and some valid points raised by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenora and the hon. Government House Leader with respect to this matter. Methinks that every once in a while we have a day such as the one we had today. Now, this is not something to be proud of. I am most certainly not proud of it. I'm not suggesting any hon. member in the House is proud of what happened today.

The fact of the matter is that question period is set aside for an opportunity for some members of the House to basically question other members of the House, those on Executive Council, on matters dealing essentially with those matters which come under the purview of the administrative competence of the government. All the rules, all the rules, all the rules that are there -- and there are actually not that many of them -- that apply to the Oral Question Period are pretty straightforward. Essentially there are a couple of themes that basically go through it: short, succinct, nonargumentative, nondebatable, noncontroversial questions that do not seek opinions or information about things that happen outside of the government confines or outside of this particular Assembly.

Now, one would think that within that particular kind of definition, wow, one would have a multitude of questions that might apply to a \$15 billion a year expenditure budget and issues dealing with nearly 3 million people and the like.

One should also recognize, as well, that the men and women in this particular Assembly are indeed very gifted. They are among the most gifted of the province of Alberta. They had to seek a nomination. They had to seek an election, which means they had to walk on their feet and they had to sell themselves to a public and they had to convince the public that they were worthy of participation in debate, because, after all, everyone elected here has come to debate and represent their constituents.

So needless to say, sometimes when these skills are not particularly honed later in the afternoon or outside of the question period or perhaps in the evening, when there are ample opportunities during the day outside of the question period to hone and develop and continue these skills -- and the chair just would love to see this kind of debate going on at 10 o'clock Wednesday night or 11 o'clock Tuesday night or 4:30 Thursday afternoon. The place for much of this debate is not the question period. The purpose of the question period is to come to the point, ask questions about information, and move on.

I suspect, looking back over my own career, that once or twice I've perhaps even violated the opportunity in terms of being argumentative on a question I might have asked and perhaps even

violated part of what I'm saying here in some of the questions I may have responded to. But I'm not a good example. So, please, don't ever use that. You could all be better is what I'm saying. You could all be better, and I'm just asking you all to be better.

So the points raised by both the Member for Edmonton-Glenora and the Government House Leader with respect to this matter are very valid ones. The worst thing that can happen is that we all become very pedantic, very, very restrictive -- this you can do and this you cannot do -- and in essence become very, very sterile with respect to the debate and the enthusiasm that normally is the play that goes on in this particular Assembly.

So today is this particular day. It's April 28. It's day 38 of this session. I think it's raining outside and maybe we all feel confined and maybe we all want to go out for a walk. Maybe that's the reason why we ask the types of questions and we get the kinds of answers. But if anybody suggests that a pointed question will not lead to a pointed answer or a pointed answer may not lead to a pointed supplementary, then they are living in an environment other than the one I see ahead of me.

The very nature of this business demands that one would always win with their mind. We have no gunboats in the skies striking people with bullets. Here we will defend ourselves with our mouths and our ability and a great deal of competence. If we want to become argumentative, I again encourage hon. members to really, truly participate in all the opportunities given for all the debates that are afforded them. You know, with 82 members in the House constantly from 1:30 in the afternoon to 5:30 in the afternoon and then from 8 o'clock in the evening to 11 o'clock in the evening, 82 members in this Assembly and the 83rd person in the chair, wow, what an opportunity. What an opportunity to really let the people of Alberta know what we are all about.

Question period seeks information. That's the purpose of question period.

head: Orders of the Day

head: Written Questions

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

MR. RENNER: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would like to move that written questions appearing on today's Order Paper stand and retain their places with the exception of written questions 206 and 210.

[Motion carried]

Funding Formula for Regional Health Authorities

Q206. Mrs. Soetaert moved that the following question be accepted.

Given that on pages 12, 31, and 32 of the Auditor General's report entitled Examination of the WestView Regional Health Authority dated March 31, 1998, the Auditor General states that different regional health authorities had different assets and liabilities at their inception as well as different costs in delivering services, when will the government implement a funding formula that considers the factors which the Auditor General cited on pages 12, 31 and 32?

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

MRS. SOETAERT: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Obviously this is of great concern in my constituency with WestView being so disproportionately underfunded.

MR. JONSON: Mr. Speaker, I wish to indicate that we accept Written Question 206.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Spruce Grove-Sturgeon-St. Albert to close the debate.

MRS. SOETAERT: Thank you very much. I appreciate the information and look forward to getting it.

Thanks.

[Motion carried]

3:10 Funding Formulas for Regional Health Authorities

Q210. Mrs. Soetaert moved that the following question be accepted.

In the funding formulas for regional health authorities how many data proxies, as opposed to factual data generated by the respective regional health authorities, are being used, and from what data sources are they derived?

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

MRS. SOETAERT: Really, this just springs from people's curiosity about how this is funded, what factual data there is, and what actually is, you might say, made-up data.

Thank you.

MR. JONSON: Mr. Speaker, there is really only one part of the formula where this is the case. However, I will accept the question overall and provide the answer.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Spruce Grove-Sturgeon-St. Albert to close the debate.

MRS. SOETAERT: Yes. Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I appreciate the answers from the minister.

[Motion carried]

head: Motions for Returns

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

MR. RENNER: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I move that motions for returns appearing on today's Order Paper stand and retain their places with the exception of motions for returns 207, 208, and 209.

[Motion carried]

Aspen Regional Health Authority

M207. Mrs. Soetaert moved that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing the number of individuals for whom the Aspen regional health authority No. 11 is financially responsible who are receiving continuing care and who are receiving home care.

MR. JONSON: Mr. Speaker, I accept Motion for a Return 207.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Spruce Grove-Sturgeon-St. Albert to close the debate.

MRS. SOETAERT: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm

becoming the envy of members on this side. I'm just getting so much information from the minister, and I really appreciate that.

[Motion carried]

Lakeland Regional Health Authority

M208. Mrs. Soetaert moved that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing copies of letters, memoranda, and written communications in whatever form and however stored from April 1, 1997, to the present between Alberta Health and the present chief administrative officer of the Lakeland regional health authority No. 12 which address in whole and in part the following issues: program reductions, program elimination, staff reductions, and other cost-cutting measures.

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

MRS. SOETAERT: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. With the changes taking place in Lakeland, these are issues of great concern, which I'm hoping we will get responses to.

MR. JONSON: Mr. Speaker, I recommend rejecting Motion for a Return 208. The communications being requested under Motion for a Return 208 must be considered for mandatory and discretionary exceptions under the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act. A request for information of this type should be initiated under the FOIP Act and handled in accordance with the guidelines established under the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act.

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Spruce Grove-Sturgeon-St. Albert to close the debate.

MRS. SOETAERT: Well, my heart's broken, Mr. Speaker. We were on such a good roll here, and now I'm not going to get that information. However, I appreciate what the minister is saying about requesting it under FOIP.

I also think that when it's public tax dollars, when there are costs involved, when there's been a change of administration, when people in Lakeland are worried and concerned, this kind of information is pertinent so that they understand the situation, so that everyone understands the situation. It would be nice to have it available to show what was in the works -- the program cutting, what was planned -- where the minister had reason to get rid of the board. Obviously, that kind of information I think people deserve, and I'm disappointed that the minister is not willing to share it.

[Motion lost]

Regional Health Authorities' Communications

M209. Mrs. Soetaert moved that an order of the Assembly do issue for a return showing copies of letters, memoranda, and written communications in whatever form and however stored between Alberta Health and regional health authorities defining administration, other direct labour costs, material costs, and capital costs for the purposes of cost accounting.

MR. JONSON: Mr. Speaker, I accept on behalf of the government Motion for a Return 209.

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

MRS. SOETAERT: Well, Mr. Speaker, with all my heart I do thank the minister today for sharing that information with us. I appreciate . . .

MR. DUNFORD: You're so sincere.

MRS. SOETAERT: I am very sincere in my appreciation.
Thanks to the minister.

[Motion carried]

head: Public Bills and Orders Other than
head: Government Bills and Orders
head: Second Reading

Bill 206
School (Grade One Entry Age)
Amendment Act, 1999

THE SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Wainwright.

MR. FISCHER: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is with great pleasure that I rise and bring forward Bill 206, the School (Grade One Entry Age) Amendment Act.

At the outset I wish to stress that the intention of this bill is to standardize the age when students enter grade 1, and although which date will always be disputed -- and it is interrelated -- the major thrust is to have each school board have the same entry date for grade 1 students.

I would like to start by saying that education -- and I know that we all recognize that in here -- is one of the most important investments this government can make in terms of the future of our province. Today's children are the adults, the parents, the workers, the citizens of tomorrow. They are the driving force behind Alberta's future prosperity, and while children learn and develop the abilities they will need later in life, they depend almost entirely upon adults to meet their needs and make the decisions on their behalf. Those adults, Mr. Speaker, are us.

Our children depend on us to prepare them for the challenges they will face. That means it is our responsibility to ensure our children receive and continue to receive an education of the highest quality. For this reason we must regularly evaluate our present education system to determine whether or not it is providing our children with a strong foundation to begin their academic careers. As we all know, if a child has a good start, there's a much greater chance that that child will experience future success.

Mr. Speaker, as a parent and a grandparent of 16 young grandchildren -- and I must say that any day now it will be 17 -- I have witnessed firsthand different experiences children have depending on the age at which they begin school. I am very much aware of the sensitive nature of children in their early years and how important it is that children are intellectually ready and socially mature when they begin school. I'm also very much aware that there is a big variation in when they are ready and when they are mature.

3:20

Over the last few years the issue regarding the age at which students are eligible to enter grade 1 in Alberta has been brought to my attention many times. Parents, grandparents, teachers, school administrators, board members have expressed serious concerns surrounding the variation in early entrance ages, but one strong theme that has developed is the unfairness and the negative impact on the children. The controversy appears to stem from conflicting

views concerning the best age to begin school. School boards want to establish the early entry age with the best interests of the child in mind, but how do they achieve this when they are forced to compete with other school boards for the funding dollars attached to that child?

Today I would like to bring before the House some of the issues that have been expressed to me. It is my hope that the members of this Assembly will give this proposed legislation serious consideration after hearing the concerns that are at the forefront of this matter.

The objective of Bill 206 is to establish the standard date for children entering grade 1 before they reach the required age of six. The bill proposes to set the early entrance cutoff date at December 31, making the deadline consistent across the province. The current legislation states that every child who is six years or older on September 1 is to have access to an educational program. This date set for compulsory attendance age would not change with the implementation of Bill 206 as it establishes the mandatory age at which children must attend school. This date of September 1, however, is not the cutoff date at which funding is provided.

I suggested December 31 as the date because it is when the majority of the school jurisdictions have set their date. Although the majority of the students are in Edmonton, Calgary, and Red Deer and they have March 1 as their cutoff date and would be affected by this, there are also jurisdictions which have cutoff dates earlier than December 31, including the Buffalo Trail school division, which is in the Wainwright constituency. So it seems, Mr. Speaker, that the date of December 31 is the most appropriate.

This, however, is where the problems arise. At the present time a specific date for students younger than six is left to the discretion of each individual school board, which leads to competition among the school boards and other administrative concerns, which are not in the best interests of the child. By amending the legislation to include a standard early entrance date of December 31 for all school boards, Bill 206 would alleviate these pressures and allow school boards to focus on education and not on recruiting students for increased funding. We must have policies in place that focus on the children and not on the funding.

Mr. Speaker, if we look at jurisdictions across the province, there's a broad range of ages for accepting children into grade 1. Some school boards have set the entrance age at six by September 1, while others have settled on six by the following March. This means that in grade 1 in Alberta there may be an age variation of 18 months, over one and a half years. For children in their early years this is a substantial age gap. Allowing students of varying levels of social maturity and readiness to be placed in the same grade results in a significant difference that can actually hinder rather than help early development.

Currently some school boards in Alberta make adjustments in the curriculum to accommodate students who are not able to succeed in the regular curriculum. These jurisdictions have developed special programs that are usually built around a different kind of curriculum or classroom structure. Mr. Speaker, I will give you some examples of Education having to ensure the success of children who are too young for school. There are some jurisdictions that have a probationary program for students who enter school at an earlier age than their peers. Other school systems offer an extended grade 1 program, in which students are retained until they have mastered the grade 1 curriculum. A third approach to accommodating early entry age students is to make program adjustments in grade 2.

Mr. Speaker, these specialized programs are being offered to accommodate students who, if they were a few months older, would not be in need of them. Is this fair to the child who is not ready? Is this fair to the student who is ready and must accept increased class

sizes and reduced extra programs? The answer is a very clear no to both questions. The legislation before us today would eliminate this inefficiency and in fact could lead to substantial savings to school boards across the province.

This already-present age problem in grade 1 leaves Alberta's teachers feeling frustrated when they're trying to meet the challenges of wider and wider age ranges. These feelings were clearly outlined in a survey conducted a few years ago in one of our province's major school jurisdictions. Over 550 kindergarten to grade 3 teachers responded to this survey, which assessed teachers' opinions on whether entrance age is a major detriment to student performance at the primary level. Only a mere 17 percent of the respondents were pleased with the February 28 cutoff date established by that school division. The results concluded that a strong majority wanted the entrance age to be changed from February 28 to December 31 or earlier.

Mr. Speaker, the variation of entrance ages from school board to school board also causes transferability problems for children. Considering the increased number of families moving to Alberta in recent years, the mobility of Alberta's population, this variance in cutoff dates has been and continues to be a big problem. School boards, teachers, parents, and most of the students are affected by this problem. It seems obvious that establishing a specific entrance age within our province would ease a family's ability to move from one region to the other.

What do you think goes through a five-and-a-half-year-old child's mind when they move to a new jurisdiction and are rejected? What about the child that has grown up in the community and witnesses a newly arrived younger counterpart, who may be his friend, who is allowed to attend school while the child must wait another year? This may not be a big issue to adults, but for a five-and-a-half-year-old child, their feelings and their confidence can be crushed.

I want to stress that this problem occurs not only in the Wainwright constituency, where the military training base is continually bringing new families into the community, but it exists across the province. An example of this was recently brought to my attention by a community located on the outskirts of Calgary. This community has December 31 established as their cutoff date. However, February 28 is the date used in Calgary and other major centres in Alberta. This community fears that their jurisdiction will be bullied into adopting the early entry age deadline of the larger school board in order to accommodate the pressures being put upon them. This would be relenting to jurisdictional competition and jeopardizing their educational philosophy of ensuring that the best interests of the child are met.

As I have mentioned, Mr. Speaker, this school jurisdiction is not alone in their dilemma. Across the province communities are feeling the pressure from population increases and are having to make some difficult decisions. While this province encourages local school board autonomy, many parents, teachers, school boards, and communities have expressed serious concerns regarding inconsistency of early entry age to grade 1. This situation does not simply encourage local autonomy, but in fact it seems to be fostering a sense of competition where the larger school boards will always be the winner because of the sheer numbers they represent.

3:30

Do we want to support a system which deters the school boards from making decisions based on educational beliefs which benefit the student? Wouldn't our students be better served by establishing a provincewide entry age? I believe, once again, Mr. Speaker, that the answer is very, very clear to us. The majority of the rural communities support a provincial deadline of December 31. These schools support a date which considers the advantages to the child in their decision. They believe that older children experience a

greater chance of success, and they are willing to sacrifice additional funding in order to maintain their educational beliefs.

Mr. Speaker, funding becomes the issue when determining the deadline. Indirectly the cutoff date of February 28 has actually been established by Alberta Education. Under the regulations stipulated in the 1996 Alberta Education funding manual, funding is provided for students as young as five years and six months of age as of September 1, meaning that in order for a school board to receive funding for a child in the first grade, that child must be six before February 28. Therefore, the funding age, the date on which the money is provided, plays a significant role in determining the date when students typically enter grade 1. The setting of earlier dates also holds true for many jurisdictions across North America. In fact, most chronological age requirements in North America tend to be moving towards a cutoff date of September 1. By most standards our date of February 28 is a very young entrance age.

Mr. Speaker, December 31 is a date considered to be much more acceptable as a deadline. Parents would continue to have the option, based on the readiness of their child, to enter their child into a grade 1 program for the fall or wait until the following year. As it stands now, school boards are making the decisions for the wrong reasons, and parents must conform to that date. In a provincial comparison, with the exception of Saskatchewan all other provinces have implemented a standard early entrance date. Alberta needs to take an earnest look at the example set by the majority of the provinces in Canada and seriously consider the legislation proposed in Bill 206, which would provide consistency to Albertans.

Canada is not alone in realizing that consistency and later entrance are important. In fact, in the United States entrance ages for students have slowly risen over the years. Now the average cutoff date in the U.S. is December 1, and none of the states currently allow a child with a birth date as late as February 28 to enter school the same year. As well, Mr. Speaker, of the 50 states, 45 have a statewide mandated entrance age for first graders. These facts indicate to me that not only do we need to look at the example set in our own country regarding early entrance age, but we also need to look south of the border.

Mr. Speaker, a December 31 cutoff date is also consistent with the age requirement for most children's extracurricular activities, including community sports teams. Cutoff dates other than December 31 can be disheartening for some children as in many cases they are not able to be in the same activities as their classmates. This inconsistency can really hurt the tender feelings of a young child and have substantial impacts on the confidence and the development of that child.

School boards throughout the province have voiced their concern regarding early entry age over the years. In fact, the Alberta School Boards Association, which represents school boards throughout the province, supports a standard cutoff date. Recently the association asked school boards in Alberta if they would support a standard age across the province. Out of the 60 provincial school boards, 47 responded, and close to 75 percent expressed support for a standardized entrance age. Mr. Speaker, my figures on that may be a few weeks old. The rest of the school boards were expected to respond and with quite a positive response.

Many of the school boards also favoured December 31. Further support to them was prompted by Bill 206, and just recently the Alberta School Boards Association adopted as policy the standardization of grade 1 entrance, with December 31 as the cutoff date. In addition to the School Boards Association, the Alberta Home and School Councils' Association also affirmed their support. They passed a resolution urging the government to legislate a standardized grade 1 entrance age across the province and supported December 31 as their cutoff date. They value consistency and wish to decrease

confusion for parents and children. They are also encouraged by the possibility of alleviating student transfer problems. So as you can see, Mr. Speaker, here is another important educational stakeholder group among the many who believe strongly in the merits of Bill 206.

It is also important to point out that Bill 206 would affect only 6 percent of the students presently enrolled in grade 1, who would be unable to attend school that year. Six percent, or almost 2,700 students out of the 44,000, have their birthdays between December 31 and February 28. This would allow 2,700 children to spend an extra year of much-needed time with their parents learning non-academic life skills and values such as caring and sharing and love and respect. These children are only five and a half years old, and they need time to develop. [Mr. Fischer's speaking time expired]

I'm just about finished.

THE SPEAKER: Hon. member, please. The hon. member would need unanimous consent of the Assembly in order to continue. The hon. Member for Wainwright has requested, through the chair, to seek unanimous consent of the members to permit the hon. Member for Wainwright to continue.

MRS. SOETAERT: Mr. Speaker, a point of clarification.

THE SPEAKER: No clarifications.

Unanimous consent. All those in favour, please say yes.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Yes.

THE SPEAKER: All those opposed, please say no.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: No.

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

MRS. SOETAERT: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to speak to Bill 206, and I regret not hearing the end. However, had it been his second crack at it, it may have closed debate, and that was the question I had. Sorry that I'm not quite up on the issues . . . [interjections] Because if you get to speak twice, that could . . .

MR. WICKMAN: It's not the end of the world, guys.

3:40

MRS. SOETAERT: It's not the end of the world, because I know the member will get to close debate on this. But I am brokenhearted that that had to occur. My heart has been just in this place all afternoon.

Mr. Speaker, on Bill 206. I appreciate the member bringing this forward. I have some questions about it that I hope can be addressed. I realize that certainly in this day and age, with all the mobility of families and job opportunities not only around our province but around our country and the world, the consistency of school-age entrance would be a bonus. So I see some logic and some support for this bill.

[Mr. Clegg in the chair]

I heard the member say that some school boards had been consulted. He said that most had agreed. I'd like to hear which ones hadn't and their reasons. He was talking about this change affecting only 6 percent of the kids this year. My concern about that is: should there be a grandfathering clause? Especially coming from the grandfather.

MR. FISCHER: I was going to say that.

MRS. SOETAERT: He was getting to that.

So with that grandfathering clause, I'm assuming that will address those students who are presently in kindergarten looking forward to going to grade 1 and suddenly will be back in kindergarten again. I don't think that would do much for their egos and their tender feelings and their attitude towards school. So I look forward to seeing that grandfathering clause that would address those issues.

I'm wondering if that member is the grandfather of that caucus. Do you have the most grandchildren of anyone over there?

MR. FISCHER: I think Glen Clegg is starting to get there.

MRS. SOETAERT: Oh, the present person in the chair has more than you. Well, I'm not there, and that's just fine by me right now.

MS CARLSON: They're going to be tied.

MRS. SOETAERT: Oh, they're going to be tied pretty soon. Well, my mother would win, but that's another story.

MS CARLSON: How many has your mother got?

MRS. SOETAERT: My mother has 24 grandchildren, but that's another story. [interjection] No, she only has seven children.

Anyway, Mr. Speaker, on this bill. Different children, of course, have different abilities at different levels as they come into grade 1 certainly, and you'll even see that in different pockets of our population. No doubt it is related often to the financial income of that family. Not all the time, but certainly a family with greater income than others, where education is valued -- I don't mean to imply that people who don't have money don't value education. But if we look at the reality of fees, school fees, all the expenses of school right now that are a reality, not everyone has the same opportunity to learn and comes to school with the same skills and levels of ability. So in a way it's hard to, you might say, lump them all together and expect that on one date they'll all be at the same level, because that is not the real world. For the administration of this, I respect that it would make it easier, as I see it.

I do, though, wonder -- if the member is looking at this for amendments or if there are regulations -- if a board will be given the opportunity to have an exemption. I know we want it to be consistent. I appreciate and I actually support that it be consistent across the province, but there may be cases where a board will want to make an exception for some reason. Maybe a student truly is a gifted child and more than ready to enter school and there isn't enough maybe out in the community, et cetera, to keep that young mind stimulated and busy. Maybe there will be an exception for a student that a school board would like the power to consider. I don't know if the member has talked to school boards about that, if they have said that that may be a concern. I see that as possibly a concern.

For the most part, I generally feel, personally for me, that the longer my child is home with me the better. I enjoy it more. That's something that's good for me in my situation with my family. That's not true for everyone. [interjections] Some people are commenting: my poor children. Is that what you said? They've said that too.

As a professional teacher, I've often seen young children in a class and older children in a class, because, you know, in any given class you can have a year's difference in the ages of the children. [interjection] Eighteen months? Right. Okay. So if you're looking at that, I've often thought that you're going to lose it at one end of the spectrum of education or the other. I've often felt that when children enter very young -- now, this is generalizing. This is

generalizing, and it's not based on any solid fact. It's just from what I see as a mother and as a teacher. When children enter very young, they tend to take an extra year at the end of grade 12 before they leave basic K to 12 education. Often those who come in at a little bit of the older scale, a little bit older than the rest, they seem to leave right at the end of grade 12. They don't come back for an extra year. But that's not based on any stats. It's just based on what I think I've seen over the years.

It's interesting. Those students who are a good 18 by the time they graduate, they're ready to go on and to try other things. Those that are still 17, I think sometimes they need that extra year, maybe not for the courses, maybe for different courses, maybe for upgrading. I think it's often for the chance to grow up for another year, to have that opportunity to grow up and that. It is a safer environment than being out in that world and going on to different education or into the working world. It would be interesting to have the stats on that; I bet they are available actually. Do those who are 17 when they graduate take another year of grade 12 as opposed to those who are 18 already? That'd be an interesting stat to look at.

MS BLAKEMAN: To look into upgrading.

MRS. SOETAERT: They often go back to do upgrading, but I think they're also going back because they're still pretty young to be out in that world of work. I of course was one of those older ones when I graduated, one of those few who could drive and legally drink. But of course that's not for this debate. [interjection] Was it 21 back then? That would have been a long time ago. No, no, I was one of those at 18, but I was always the designated driver.

Mr. Speaker, I want to get back to the entrance age. [interjections] Some of my own colleagues are asking about relevance.

I do have a few other things about this. The hon. member mentioned that competition was created by people lobbying for dollars and the earlier they have it. Interesting that this government somehow now doesn't like competition. I've often said that within the public sector, within education, it is not a business. It is not free enterprise. It is a public service that is provided, one that I wish was more strongly supported by this government. Competition, interestingly enough, has been created by this government in several areas. Just look at the present plan, the new program that the Minister of Education brought in where you get more money if you achieve higher marks, higher goals -- you see, it bothers me so much, I can't remember it -- the performance incentive, that performance-based money going out.

The member mentions competition, yet this government has created competition that is certainly unfair in the public sector. That is an example where I personally have lots of problems with competition. The member thinks competition is bad in this area, and I agree with him. I bet if he really thought of that incentive and that performance thing, he might disagree with that too. It's too bad that didn't have a chance to come to the Assembly to be debated, because I think some people in that caucus forgot some of these issues about competition and where it's good and where it's not good.

3:50

As far as competition goes within this bill, I realize that because of open boundaries with school boards now -- and I still have mixed feelings about that one. I do, being a person who represents five different school boards, all in close proximity. The lobbying for students, the money that gets spent on newspaper ads, radio ads, those kinds of things, to market to get a child into their system -- and I understand why they're doing it, but every time I see education dollars spent on marketing, it bugs me. To me that's not where those education dollars should be going. Yet the reality that we've put school boards at is that they do have to compete for those students,

and they do have to compete for those dollars. So no wonder this problem of competing for young children and changing the date and changing the date and changing the date across the province has been created, and now it has to be addressed through the Legislature.

I'd love to hear the member's view on that, that competition is bad in this area, yet this government endorses it in all other areas with public education. So I understand now why school boards have done this competing with children coming in at different age levels. It's a problem they created. They put that cart before the horse a few years ago when they opened up boundaries and said: you can lobby for all kinds of kids, all kinds of money if you market properly. And that's what's happened.

I'm torn on that. I support your ability to choose where you want your child to go, but I also know the difficulties it creates, especially if someone lives close to the boundary of another school. It's one thing if you live in the far corner of Sturgeon. You're most likely going to send your child to a Sturgeon school. But if you live right on the edge of St. Albert and you have the choice of sending them to St. Albert, to Spruce Grove, or to Sturgeon, you've created an issue where school boards have to compete for that person. Is that good? Well, maybe it puts everybody on their toes, but on the other hand it forces people to spend money on marketing dollars instead of where it should be: in the classroom.

You know, the member has the opportunity to have his bill up, and that's great. I envy that because I'm way down on the list, probably won't see the light of day certainly this session. If you really were worried about those grandchildren -- I know you love your grandchildren. I'm not questioning that at all. But for all those young children going into classrooms, wouldn't it be better to legislate class size? Wouldn't that be a more powerful private member's bill and better for your grandchildren?

I know that's not part of this bill. I know it's not, but I just question: when you get a chance to bring forward a piece of legislation, why wouldn't you bring forward something that would really have some impact across this province? But of course that would mean some funding through the government, and I realize that with a private member's bill it might not be possible. On the other hand, if some person had the courage to go forward, it would establish a principle if it were supported by the majority of the Legislature. It could go through, and you could go down in history saying: I did that and I'm proud of it.

Now, I'm sure you can go down in history by saying: I made sure everybody started grade 1 on December 31. Well, that's good. But just think what your grandchildren would say about you if you said: I made sure there couldn't be any more than 18 kids in a grade 1 class; I made sure of that. They'd say: Grandpa, you are our hero. But that didn't happen. Mind you, they may still say that because they probably love you, but truly other children across the province would have said that about the hon. member. Now that won't happen. He could have been the Wayne Gretzky of education, but I think the hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods is that. He is the Wayne Gretzky of education, not the Member for Wainwright.

Anyway, a few more things. Oh, I only have a few short minutes left. They might give me unanimous consent to continue though, but I don't think so. [interjections] My own colleagues won't.

I do look forward to the replies from the member about the grandfathering clause, and I'm assuming he said that this affects 6,000 children this year. I'm assuming within that grandfathering clause that will be explained, because that is not fair to children right now in early childhood, in kindergarten who -- I certainly don't want them to be denied the opportunity to go to grade 1 because we've got a new piece of legislation in. So I'd really appreciate a full explanation of that grandfathering clause and what it will mean to those children.

[Mrs. Gordon in the chair]

I appreciate the efforts of this member to get some consistency across Alberta. I think that is probably supported within the province. I'm anxious to see the replies from the school boards. I can appreciate where the member is coming from, and I'm going to listen to all the debate. But right now the way I feel about it, I will probably be supporting Bill 206.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

THE ACTING SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Bonnyville-Cold Lake.

MR. DUCHARME: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I'm pleased to speak in support of Bill 206, the School (Grade One Entry Age) Amendment Act, 1999, sponsored by the hon. Member for Wainwright. We have determined that the intent of the proposed legislation is to establish a standard cutoff date for early entry to grade 1 across the province so that every child in Alberta has an equal opportunity to quality education. I believe it is important that we as a province commit to a system of education in which our children are provided with a good start to learning while they are still in their formative years. A strong foundation in education undoubtedly leads to success in future endeavours and develops the skills needed to be healthy and productive individuals.

Currently the age at which students in the province of Alberta are eligible to enter grade 1 differs from one jurisdiction to another. The sponsor of this bill mentioned in his comments that the entrance age varies from six years of age by September 1 to six years of age by February 28. However, the majority of the school boards in Alberta have the cutoff date set at December 31. Madam Speaker, this is also the date proposed by the Alberta Teachers' Association, which represents the educators of this province, the people who have firsthand experience and knowledge of education in this province. School boards also clearly see the advantage of having children begin school at an older age. More than 30 school boards in the province have set their grade 1 entrance age on or before December 31 of a school year.

Madam Speaker, a number of issues are related to and affected by this inconsistency in basic education throughout the province. Today I would like to bring forth some of the positions held by those closely related to education in this province and encourage our government to closely examine this inconsistency and possible solutions for improvement. We must consider the current situation in our province and examine if our policies continue to meet the educational needs of our children. I believe the legislation proposed by Bill 206 attempts to serve Alberta students more effectively by mandating a provincial entrance age to formal education.

Madam Speaker, the current legislation in this province entitles every child who is six years of age by September 1 "to have access . . . to an education program." In order to make exception for those students who are ready to begin formal education before this time, the legislation goes on to state that students younger than six years of age by this deadline may be permitted by a school board to enter grade 1. I believe that the proposal of Bill 206 to amend this section of the legislation to establish a standardized deadline for all school boards is a positive step towards a more beneficial early education system.

4:00

Within the guidelines of the legislation the 1996 Alberta Education funding manual adds further regulations by stipulating that funding is provided for students to enter first grade when they are as young as five years and six months of age on the 1st of September. Madam Speaker, this allows for a six-month disparity across the

province in the deadline for accepting or rejecting grade 1 students. While this regulation may have been appropriate at the time, I would have to argue that it may not be serving the purpose of helping our children begin their learning process.

This issue of early entry age has been an ongoing concern with both parents and teachers across the province over the last few years. I have even heard concerns from my own constituents. There is clearly enough support from Albertans to examine the situation, making our goal to provide the best education for all children. We know that the Alberta Teachers' Association fully supports this legislation and in fact currently has a policy urging the government of Alberta to standardize the normal grade 1 entrance age throughout the province so that the minimum grade 1 entrance age is six years of age as of December 31 in a year. So, as you can see, Madam Speaker, the teachers of the province clearly support this legislation.

Teachers are one of the key elements in the successful education of our children. It is the teachers of this province who are witness to the potential difficulties children may experience when they begin school before they are developmentally ready. These difficulties have teachers concerned about the effects on a child who may be significantly younger than the other children in a grade. They understand and appreciate the individual differences and levels of readiness among children of similar ages, and they base their opinions on their experience in the classroom.

Madam Speaker, the educators of this province are telling this government that there is a considerable burden on teachers and on the students in the classroom when the age gap of the students in a grade can be as much as 18 months. Now, this may not seem very significant in adult years, but during the formative years of a child 18 months can make a considerable difference. This age-relative problem leaves Alberta teachers feeling frustrated when trying to meet the challenges of wide age ranges within their classrooms, frustrating in the sense that their commitment to each child becomes jeopardized when they must attend to a wide range of developmental stages of the children in their class.

Madam Speaker, the research is endless on the short-term and long-term difficulties experienced by children who may not be developmentally ready to begin formal education. According to the experts, this is hardly surprising since an 11-month period of growth in development is a significant portion of a lifetime for a six year old. The differences in social maturity and cognitive development create problems for teaching, and often when younger children are compared with their classmates who are older, they may not fare as well. This means that children who are the youngest in their first grade class are at a slight disadvantage.

Madam Speaker, these facts pose serious ramifications for education in Alberta, especially considering most of the research has tended to examine the potential problems of relative age when students are 12 months apart and not the 18 months' difference that tends to be the case in Alberta. It is, therefore, of no surprise that early entry age to grade 1 has been an ongoing concern for the Alberta School Boards Association as well. The association is the united voice for school boards and provincial education affairs.

As the hon. Member for Wainwright previously mentioned, the Alberta School Boards Association has recently received formal feedback from the school boards in the province regarding this proposed legislation. I would like to reiterate the fact that of the 47 school boards that provided their input on the issue, 33 of them are in favour of a provincial standardized entrance age into grade 1. This strong support of the individual school boards has prompted the association to accept a standard entry age of December 31 as a policy and would welcome legislation on the matter.

Madam Speaker, when school boards were asked about the advantages and disadvantages of the present system of jurisdictional

decision-making regarding entrance age, they expressed difficulties such as competition for students, transfer dilemmas, a wide variance in maturity levels, the frustration of financial versus educational decisions, and dealing with parental concerns. These boards suggested that many of these problems could be eliminated with a provincial entrance age ordinance.

Madam Speaker, over the last few years Alberta has seen significant changes with regard to the restructuring of school board responsibilities and the amalgamation of school jurisdictions. These changes have caused some difficulties and adjustments which take time to work out. Entrance age complications have added to this unrest. A provincial decision would erase the possibility of long-standing conflicts which may have occurred during the process of amalgamating the school boards and would put us on track with creating and maintaining the best education system we can offer.

An example of the difficulties experienced by school boards occurred a couple of years ago in Sherwood Park. With the amalgamation of three jurisdictions into Elk Island public schools there were two entrance dates, December 31 and February 28. The board had a difficult time determining a single date. Although many people preferred the December date, the board eventually decided on February 28.

Madam Speaker, another commonly expressed concern is that the freedom to set entrance requirements creates competition between school jurisdictions. More students means more funding, and one way to increase the enrollment is to allow younger students into grade 1. Therefore, if neighbouring jurisdictions have different entrance ages, then parents may select the school that allows younger children instead of making decisions based on education. If all jurisdictions had a common entrance age, then educators could focus on educating instead of worrying about birth dates.

An additional concern for educators is the transfer of students between jurisdictions. This is a common problem that school boards are facing as the population of this province grows and Albertans become increasingly mobile within the province. As an example, Madam Speaker, a child may be in a jurisdiction which has February 28 established as the cutoff date, and this child also happens to turn 6 years old on February 28. This child would begin school in the community for that school year; however, if the child moves to another jurisdiction during the school year which has September 1 established as the cutoff date, there may be the possibility that this child is six months younger than the youngest child in the class and possibly 18 months younger than the oldest child. According to one principal, often children who are transferred like this may be smaller, less mature, and have a difficult time adjusting to the older children in the class.

Madam Speaker, this example illustrates how we may be exposing our children to unnecessary hardship by not making reasonable regulations that would avoid having them experience situations like this in the first place. I question why the system allows a child who does not meet the entry age requirement to transfer into first grade from another jurisdiction, but the same child would not be permitted to begin school that year if they were born in that very jurisdiction. It is difficult to explain to parents the reason why one child would be accepted into grade 1 from another jurisdiction while access would be denied to the same child if they were born in the community. The child would be accepted not because he or she is more ready but because the enrollment policy in a school system elsewhere was different. What mixed messages we are sending to parents of this province, not to mention the children.

It is no wonder, Madam Speaker, that parents find it difficult to determine the best time for their children to begin school. Often schools must spend a significant amount of time justifying the variation among school board entry dates and considering exceptions

to their deadline. This is once again an example of time and effort involved in the policy and administration of early entrance age, time and effort which could have been spent in the classroom.

Madam Speaker, I firmly believe that a standard cutoff date for early entry to grade 1 would be a positive step strongly supported by the education community and beneficial to the children of our future. It is administratively expedient, a step toward removing competition for students among school jurisdictions and allows for greater consistency in schools across the province. I will be supporting Bill 206, and I urge other members to do the same.

Thank you.

THE ACTING SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Norwood.

MS OLSEN: Madam Speaker, I think the hon. Member for Edmonton-Rutherford had his hand up.

THE ACTING SPEAKER: Sorry, hon. Member for Edmonton-Rutherford.

MR. WICKMAN: Oh, that's fine, Madam Speaker. Actually I had my name on the speakers' list, and the former Speaker may not have passed it on to you.

THE ACTING SPEAKER: Well, we'll certainly recognize you now.

MR. WICKMAN: Madam Speaker, first of all, the member bringing it forward made reference to grandchildren in his introductory remarks, which I thought was very, very appropriate in terms of a bill that deals with education. Those of us that are grandparents and those that are parents, but particularly grandparents, sense even more so the need for an educational system that is equal, that is fair, that provides the best possible opportunities for the young people. I say grandparents, because as grandparents we've been around longer and we've been able to experience three sorts of different generations of schools and how the changes have occurred. As a young parent we're so busy trying to make a living that we don't really have as much time to spend watching what's happening as we would as grandparents. So those members that made reference to grandchildren as it equates to this particular bill I think made very, very worthwhile contributions. I am somewhat proud to say that I have three grandchildren, maybe not the most of any member in the House but certainly the three finest, without question the three finest.

4:10

Now, when I look at this Bill 206 and I look at the emphasis of the bill and listen to the remarks of the member very carefully, it seems what is so important to him and so important to others in the House here is the need for a level playing field, a fair playing field, equality throughout the province, very similar to those arguments that many members of this same Legislative Assembly made yesterday when we dealt with the bill dealing with entrenching 400 hours of kindergarten into legislation. It's very, very similar in the sense that both bills try to achieve the same things: a level playing field, fairness throughout the province, and equal opportunity for all children no matter what part of the province one may live in and, quite frankly, regardless of what one's family wealth or income may be in terms of the kindergarten one, as it relates to the possibility of private kindergarten. But I don't want to stray too much from Bill 206, because 206 is here for a particular purpose, to unify the entry to the grade 1 level of the elementary system.

All of us probably in our earlier days, when we go back -- and

I'm sure the member from what I call the triple S constituency probably even in her day had a much different system of education when it came to entering it.

MRS. SOETAERT: We didn't even have kindergarten then.

MR. WICKMAN: Well, I didn't have kindergarten. In fact, when I entered school, I was seven years old in a place called Kivikoski, Ontario, where all 13 of us attending the school were in one classroom with grades ranging from 1 to 8. When I started grade 1, I was seven. [interjection] Well, mine was a one-room classroom.

It wasn't because my mother didn't think I wasn't capable of learning at six. It's because it was four miles to school, and any of you that know northern Ontario would know about the four feet of snow in the winter and all that kind of stuff and the wolves nipping at our heels as we peddled our little bicycles to head off to school.

Just so any of you, though, don't think I was disadvantaged, from grade 1 they put me to grade 3, so then I was on equal terms with the other students. From grade 3 they put me to grade 5, and then we moved to . . . [interjection] Madam Speaker, the member is throwing me off. Where was I? In Kaministiquia in grade 5?

THE ACTING SPEAKER: Please, hon. member.

MRS. SOETAERT: You were at grade 3, but you're skipping to grade 5.

MR. WICKMAN: Oh, yeah. I skipped to grade 5. We moved to Kaministiquia, and then they put me back to grade 4. In grade 6 they put me to grade 8 because there were no students in grade 7. Then in grade 8 she said, "Well, you can't go to high school yet." I said: "Well, why? I got better marks than my older brother." She said, "Yeah, but you're too young." So I had to spend another year in grade 8. So, you see, my educational background isn't something that I kind of brag about or promote, but it could maybe explain at times some of the statements I come out with.

Now, the important part of course, as I mentioned earlier, is to provide a system that is uniform across the province. However, at the same time, even though it is moving a particular date sort of entrenched into a piece of legislation -- and it's a good bill. But I think what would even improve that bill is an amendment that, when there was an exceptional situation where a child was particularly bright and really qualified to have that amount of flexibility, would allow a local school board the opportunity to say: okay; you're an exception to the rules for a reason. We see those exceptions to the rules in the educational system throughout the entire system, including postsecondary. We hear of instances where people as young as 15 or 16 years old may already be in their third year of university because they were gifted, just so totally, totally gifted that it gave them the ability to plunge way, way ahead, much more so than the normal person.

But the intent of the bill that the member has brought forward is good. It is there to eliminate a lot of the disparities we now see that the member from the Bonnyville area spoke to, where a parent may intentionally send their child to a different school district simply because that child could access a different school district at the age of five rather than the home district, creating not only transportation problems, but also it may not be the best scenario for that particular child. That particular child may be better off being schooled within their own district, where they may have brothers and sisters attending those schools and such. So the speaker has brought forward the basis of a good bill. I would hope that somebody would make that amendment that would allow that flexibility in the bill before we in fact wrap up the debate.

Now, some of the previous comments talked in terms of when we look at the educational system and means of improving it, and that's one of the things we want to do. I'm not going to get into the arguments of funding and all that type of thing because we do that during question period.

MRS. SOETAERT: Actually, you should get into that. You should.

MR. WICKMAN: Well, in fairness to the government members I think we've pointed it out so many times that if they don't catch on by now, will they ever catch on? That becomes the question. We'll continue probably tomorrow in question period asking some of those same types of questions around providing the type of funding that is required to provide an educational system that is fair all around.

Here we're talking in terms of a bill that makes changes to the educational system, and it's not really tied into a monetary matter. It's not that this bill is dependent on X number of dollars being allocated to a budget to make it possible. It is possible because it simply means a change in legislation, sort of like the bill we dealt with yesterday that was voted down in this House. Because there are 400 hours of kindergarten being provided at the present time, supporting that bill yesterday wasn't going to have any budget implications because it simply entrenched what was already happening. So those types of pieces of legislation like Bill 205 and Bill 206, which we're dealing with right now, are very simple ones to deal with because they don't bring forward the arguments of: well, are the dollars better spent in this area, or are the dollars best spent in that area? It is simply looking at a system, and there are many, many areas of an educational system that can be changed without having to throw more money into the budget.

There are other areas of course. We look at the class ratio. We advocate a class ratio of 18 to 1, but we do recognize that there are budget implications in that type of discussion. You simply don't reduce classes to 18 and say: you have to continue to do the same job with the same amount of money but restrict the ratio to 18 to 1. However, this particular Bill 206 doesn't have those types of implications to it.

Madam Speaker, as I start to wrap up here in anticipation of the Member for Edmonton-Norwood being just anxious to jump to her feet and talk about her experiences of schooling and also the schooling that I know her son has -- and the Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie is probably in a similar situation, although that member doesn't have the opportunity or the privilege to get up in this House like some of us do and brag about grandchildren because that member hasn't reached that golden age yet of having grandchildren.

MRS. SOETAERT: Neither have I.

4:20

MR. WICKMAN: Well, you've reached the age; you just haven't had them. Then we have the Member for Edmonton-Meadowlark, who I'm sure is still looking forward to becoming the legal age someday. It'll happen, Karen. It'll happen.

Madam Speaker, again as I go to wrap up here, I want to just key in on the key points, the key points from my point of view. We have a piece of legislation here, a piece of legislation that is based on making an educational system better than it is at the present time, a bill that in my opinion provides for a fairer playing field than we have at the present time, a bill that provides equal access throughout the province. I think Albertans would say that it's a fair bill; it's a good bill. It's the type of bill they would like to see legislators deal with and pass.

I sometimes do question, when we deal with these types of bills, why the members on the government side simply can't approach

their minister and introduce the bill and then have the minister convert the bill over to a government bill, which of course sure has better chances of passing. That hasn't happened in this particular case, but it shouldn't discourage us because we have had instances when private bills have gone the whole way. I believe we even had one in our caucus, a private member's bill that got first reading, second reading, committee stage, and third reading. It's very unusual for it to happen in this caucus, but it does happen on the government side, and this is one of these bills where it could happen.

Again, to the member -- and I myself, like the other members here, am very, very anxious to hear his wrap-up, to hear what he had left to say in that one more minute that he had to go in his introductory remarks. I'm sure he's going to give us that privilege, that opportunity as he wraps up.

But again I want to stress that the bill in my opinion is missing that one provision for allowing flexibility to be granted to the local school board when there's an exception of a gifted child who is younger than the age requirement would be so that that school board in its wisdom could say: "Okay; we're going to make an exception here. The parent or parents have made a good argument. This child is a special child in the sense of this child's learning capacity, or that child had already been home schooled to a point in his younger years so that that child is ready, and that child is mature in terms of their attitude." I don't expect to see those types of situations too often, but I'm sure there are instances when parents would like to have that flexibility of at least making their arguments before a local school board knowing they did have the power, they did have the provision to do that. So I would think that before this bill is finalized, such an amendment will probably come forward from some member.

So on that note, Madam Speaker, I am going to conclude, and hopefully we can next hear the intelligent remarks from the Member for Edmonton-Norwood.

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

MR. LOUGHEED: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I am pleased to join the debate on Bill 206, the School (Grade One Entry Age) Amendment Act, 1999, sponsored by my colleague from Wainwright. The bill we're debating today pertains to the current educational policy of the grade 1 early entry age and whether it should be determined at the provincial or the local level. This afternoon I would like to speak to some of the ideas that have been presented during the debate and highlight some considerations that need to be addressed regarding the intent of Bill 206.

Madam Speaker, the discussion surrounding this bill has raised some interesting points regarding education in Alberta. I appreciate the underlying objective proposed by the legislation. My understanding is that Bill 206 is attempting to ensure that our children receive a quality education by alleviating confusion surrounding early entrance dates. I've considered the benefits of Bill 206 within the context of my own constituency and my experience in the educational community.

Madam Speaker, during the debate we have heard about the pressure school boards are facing due to increased local responsibilities and the changing demands on our education systems. These are valid and important issues facing our school boards, and they should be looked at seriously. While I support change and progress in education, I do realize that some schools may be struggling to find the right balance between what is best for the students versus external pressures, pressures such as competition among school boards, community expectations, and also funding.

Madam Speaker, we've heard some debate and some discussion about competition for students. I believe the intent of competing for

students or part of the result of competing for students does increase school pride and, in fact, increases the student's wish to be there in the school where exciting things are happening and where it's well regarded in the community.

I don't believe, though, that that competition is appropriate. I do not believe it benefits the community in any way by spending money on competition for those students, because with them come the attendant costs of those extra students. They also will have diminished numbers of students in other schools, and those schools that have fewer students therefore have fewer resources there. It's just a matter of moving those resources from school to school, and I don't think it benefits education to go overboard in this competition area.

Madam Speaker, I question whether the amendment proposed by Bill 206 is the best means by which to reduce these pressures, and I consider this bill to be an infringement on local school autonomy and on parental choice, which in fact may create additional difficulties for school boards. Bill 206 proposes to establish a standard cutoff date for early entry to grade 1 across the province. As I understand it, with this legislation all school boards would lose their ability to establish their own early entry age deadline for grade 1. This means that the present autonomy of school boards to set policy based on the needs of their community would be eliminated, and schools would be expected to adhere to a standard date regardless of their philosophical beliefs or practices of early education.

Madam Speaker, this government has identified school board autonomy as a priority and considers it to be in the best interests of addressing the diverse educational needs of communities across the province. For this reason Alberta Education encourages flexibility within its programming wherever possible and understands how important it is to maintain the decision-making ability at the local level. School boards know what is best for their community and welcome the ability to respond to the needs of families within their community.

Madam Speaker, it's clear that parental choice and a flexible system are priorities with Alberta Education, and I feel that Bill 206 contradicts this mandate by proposing to diminish the already limited autonomy of school boards. The flexibility of the current system is established within guidelines set by current legislation. It allows schools to provide individualized programming for children and a very child-oriented approach to learning, which is critically important in order to meet the diverse needs of all students.

Madam Speaker, we all know that every child is unique in their development, and we can expect to find students of varying levels of readiness in a classroom. For this reason the legislation has been established to allow for some flexibility within the system. Children who are ready to begin grade 1 before September 1 are accommodated by the early entrance dates established by individual school boards. Alberta Education knows that there is no magic number to determine the age at which children are most ready to begin school, and therefore the necessity of individual consideration and flexibility is of utmost importance at the school board level.

I believe Alberta Education is moving towards a workable balance between consistency and flexibility. As an example, the current flexibility allotted to the school boards to determine cutoff grade 1 dates is balanced by the legislation addressing access to education. Universal access to education is standardized in the province, ensuring that all children who are six years of age by September 1 of a school year have the right to access grade 1. This provincewide consistency is even further child oriented by the legislation, which goes on to state that individual school boards are able to determine their own deadlines for early entrance to grade 1.

This results in a wide variety of entrance age policies being used by school boards across the province. For example, Calgary, Edmonton, and Red Deer require students to be six years of age prior

to March 1 of the current instructional year, while Westwind regional division requires students to be six years of age prior to September 1 of the given school year. This variation exists because school boards respect parental choice and respond to community input while sustaining the educational needs of students.

4:30

As you can see, Madam Speaker, this legislation would affect the current policies of major school boards such as Calgary public and separate, Edmonton public and separate, and Red Deer school divisions. In effect, Bill 206 would nullify the current dates established by these jurisdictions and delay the early learning experience for some children in future years. Additionally, the parents of children in the largest boards in the province born between January 1 and February 28 would have their discretionary rights to this access denied. Again, I would state that this is clearly an infringement on already limited school board autonomy.

Madam Speaker, we know that our current system of allowing school boards to establish early entrance age is more child oriented by being flexible. This is important, as it has become more and more common for children to enter grade 1 before they turn six years old. In many cases parents are finding their children are developmentally mature and ready to begin grade 1 at an earlier age. Many experiences contribute to this maturity, whether it be kindergarten, day care, media, having older siblings or stay-at-home parents. These experiences can prepare children for school at a younger age, and in many cases parents wish to send their children to school earlier because they feel they are ready for the school experience.

Parents prefer to have the choice to enroll their child in a program earlier if they so desire. They are obviously very knowledgeable about the readiness of their own child and should be able to have some input as to when their child is ready to begin school. The current early entrance age policy allows parents the flexibility they expect when they make the decision to enter their child into a grade 1 program before the age of six.

In some cases school boards may permit children who are even younger than their early entrance age deadline if the parents wish to enroll their child. Madam Speaker, these exceptions can be accommodated by requiring parents who want their child to begin school to consult with school personnel and have their child tested for readiness. With few exceptions parents ultimately have the choice as to when their child should enter grade 1.

Madam Speaker, I feel it's also important to point out that, from my experience anyway, there's no definitive research on the best age for beginning school. Therefore, how could we as a government randomly choose a cutoff date of December 31 for the province and remove the decision-making ability from those who have firsthand experience in the field of education? I would not feel confident burdening the school boards of the province with a decision such as this, especially knowing that this legislation would not be in the best interests of education. I realize it's a commonly held belief that students who are chronologically older do better in school. Research is not conclusive on a specific age or date when a child should begin formal education, and I don't believe we should be making that decision. As legislators I believe it's our role to establish guidelines in the best interests of education and allow for decisions to be made at the local level and by parents, where educational experience helps to make those decisions.

I want to comment on some of the statements made earlier. I recall many students at the high school level who were younger than their peers who completed high school even before the 12th year was finished, perhaps in the first semester. I remember one particular case and also talked with a young student just the other day who completed high school at the end of two years of high school, picked up another course along the way, and were finished in a little over

two years of school. These students were younger than their peers, and they were not hanging around the high school to mature. On the other hand, I know many students who are older than their peers and in fact stayed for an extra year of high school. So being older and spending 13 years in the educational system was often the case for students as well.

Our current system considers the needs of the child first and foremost. During the debate the issue of grade 1 entrance age cutoff dates and the transferability of children throughout the province was addressed. Madam Speaker, the fact is that families are able to move within the province and are able to begin school in their new community as long as they have kindergarten education as a basis.

I believe the School Act provides the flexibility Albertans expect and allows school boards to develop policies that meet local needs and preferences. Therefore, I do not believe that changes should be made to the legislation on school entrance age. It has been the goal of this government to establish the right balance between provincial involvement and local autonomy. We've looked at what are the most cost-effective and efficient ways of getting things done while at the same time respecting the rights of communities and of parents to manage their own needs and set their own priorities.

We've got that balance right now, Madam Speaker, and it would not be wise to disturb it. I do believe that the hon. Member for Wainwright has only the best intentions at heart. I do not believe that Bill 206 would make a significant contribution to education in Alberta. Therefore, I will not be supporting the legislation before the Assembly today, and I'd encourage all members to do likewise.

Thank you.

THE ACTING SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Norwood.

MS OLSEN: Thank you, Madam Speaker. Finally. I had to have a temper tantrum to get up here.

Anyway, Madam Speaker, I'm actually interested in the debate that's occurring. I've read some of the information on both sides of this issue, and I'm still not sure as to what are the really significant problems with the age. I'm not sure that taking the minimum age to start grade 1 to six by the end of the year is going to make a significant amount of difference. I only hearken back to my son and some of his friends in school. They're at the same level of growth, they're at the same level of maturity for 14-year-old boys -- and I wouldn't say that that's great for 14-year-old boys -- and they're certainly at the same academic level. Now, that's at this age, for the teenage years. I guess my question would be: where in the schooling years does this have the most significant impact? Many of the literature reviews talk about readiness and define readiness in many different ways, which makes it very difficult for somebody such as myself to then sit back and look at all this information. Because it's all research and it's all very opinion oriented, who's more right or who's more wrong in this debate?

You know, the notion that older is better doesn't necessarily mean that older is more mature, and I think that's an issue. I think we have to look at many of the environmental and social experiences that a young child has. You may get many kids who are six years old and who are emotionally ready and socially ready to go into a schooling environment, and you have kids who in fact are older and already in the system who aren't anywhere near that emotional or social level of maturity.

Then you have other kids who are equally in the same position when it comes to their comprehension level and their academic ability to enter into the school system, so we look at what's relevant when it comes to that. We have kids who are five years old who can read and write and can already do mathematics and some of the

basics they're going to learn in grade 1. Should those kids be held back as a result of that? So the five year old who's five years and eight months can't go to school because they're not six.

I think those are arguments that can strongly be entered into, and I don't necessarily, I guess, support the notion that being six years old is the absolute age for entry into grade 1. I think there is a variance on either side. In fact, a child that may be six and a half years or close to seven may not be ready for grade 1. So is the chronological age the key, or is it the social factors and the environmental factors? If you look at a community such as Norwood, I would venture to say that for a lot of those kids who don't necessarily come from the same social environment as kids in Riverbend, although they're both at age six, the entry into grade 1 may be very difficult for them given some of the situations that are occurring in their homes and in their families.

4:40

I think we have to look at issues such as poverty, such as dysfunctional families, those kinds of things, and in some cases what the limiting disabilities are. We seem to have a high number of youth of all ages with attention deficit disorder, at least diagnosed as attention deficit disorder, lots of kids with behavioural disorders, lots of kids with learning disabilities. The chronological age isn't defining that. It may be that's the time when it gets picked up because they're entering into the school system. But if we were prepared as a society to start looking at some of those issues earlier, all of the early intervention programs we've been talking about may be of benefit to those kids and those deficiencies may get picked up earlier.

One of the things I do have some concern about, however, is the issue of population-based funding. If you have inequities in school boards and school boards have these boundaries that are open so that all I have to do in order to get into school earlier is cross the street and I'm in a different school board in a given area, then I'm wondering how that impacts a number of different schools who are looking for kids. Because the more kids they have, the more funding they get, the more they can do with the dollars they do get. So I'm a little concerned about that.

Given that there is that competitiveness, I would suggest competing for kids isn't necessarily a good thing, because then you create ghettos in school environments. If all the suburban schools are competing for the same kids and they come downtown to take some of the inner-city kids out to their schools because they have the best academics or they might be a good athlete or something like that, I think that's detrimental to schools and will have an impact.

I also am concerned about class size. I may take the position that class size has a more significant impact on the ability of a student to learn than chronological age. I think that's something that should be addressed. Of course, pupil/teacher ratios and class size have been discussed in this Assembly for a number of weeks, and I think that has a much more significant impact than whether a child is six or whether a child is five years and eight months or five years and two months. So that's something that we need to talk about.

The other issue that's highlighted by some researchers is that some students who enter into the education system when they're five and a half years or five years and two months, as opposed to six years, receive or need more speech therapy. If that's the case, then we need to look at the existing system. We know that the existing system, Madam Speaker, does not adequately reflect the needs of kids in schools as it is. So is that something, then, we have to consider? High-needs schools are getting a speech therapist half a day a week, and that's not good enough. That's not necessarily based on chronological age, Madam Speaker. There are many kids who are in grades 1, 2, 3, and 4 right now at the appropriate age, and those youth require speech therapy. Well, they're not getting it. Again, I think we have to look at those kinds of programs not just for

grade 1s and not just for kids who are younger going into the program but looking at special needs all the way around.

There are all sorts of issues that are brought forward that seem to support the notion of chronological age, and some of those things refer to attention -- teachers report that younger children have difficulty settling in and paying attention -- playtime fatigue, work habits, peer acceptance. As I say, I look at my son's grade right now, and those don't seem to be issues with those kids. The only issue around age and the difference in age is who's going to get their driver's licence first or who's going to be 18 at graduation and those kinds of things. There doesn't seem to be a significant difference at all for the other issues.

One of the things I'd like to draw the Assembly's attention to is a study done that studied the key policy issues. I think it's put out by the Alberta School Boards Association. I know they support this, and I know the ATA supports this. Some of that literature is in fact quite interesting to look at. You know, there's the arguments for and the arguments against a chronological age. One of the things that I'd like to point out is a question the Alberta School Boards Association is asking: what or whose interest do we serve by going down this road?

In that literature review they say that this chronological age would be administratively expedient, provide for consistency throughout the province and across Canada, which could be communicated to all parents. So that means, you know, the jurisdictional issues that the hon. members for Edmonton-Rutherford and Spruce Grove-St. Albert talked about. They also state that if this chronological age was a factor, it would be a useful criterion for school entry. It clearly states the obligations of the government for the provision and funding of educational service for its citizens. Quite frankly, I don't think school boards should have to be in that position. I think we're getting into some pretty interesting discussions and debates in this House around funding of schools and whose responsibility it is and who is running what deficit.

The bottom line is that at some point we have to decide what constitutes a good education system and fund it and not in the manner that is currently happening right now, where we've gone back several years and now we're trying to play catch-up. Catch-up doesn't work. These are our kids. This is important. We have a little difficulty over here with the direction the government has gone. You know, the Premier wants to spout off numbers and dollars. Well, fine; spout. But you know what? It doesn't necessarily address the problem, and in this case we see that it's not addressing the problem. So the notion that the obligation of the government is there for the provision of funding is an important part of this discussion and it's an important part of this argument. It should not be based on the chronological age of a child entering into the system.

4:50

Another recommendation or concern that the Alberta School Boards Association identifies in support of the chronological age is that it removes the competition for students among school jurisdictions. I talked about that; I'm a little concerned about that notion. Those school jurisdictions that establish an earlier entrance age than surrounding school jurisdictions gain an initial economic advantage from attracting students whose parents want them to enter school at a younger age. That's when I talked about crossing the road and being able to be in a different jurisdiction, so your own school district may in fact be losing funding because parents want their kids in school younger. This may over time become an economic disadvantage if the child requires remedial attention, Madam Speaker, in order to achieve.

Now, the arguments against a standardized entrance age are equally compelling. One of those arguments is that although much of the research literature denotes a higher mean achievement for

older children than for younger children in the primary grades, satisfactory achievement was found with the majority of younger children. If we look back and even hearken back to our own schooling, if some people can go back that far, think about the age differences there and how well other youth did in comparison to yourself.

The argument against standardization for chronological entrance -- the research doesn't support raising the age. Arbitrarily raising the entry age would discriminate against children who are, in fact, ready for school, and we don't see compelling evidence, as I said before, linking chronological age at school entry to success in school. In fact, for many of those gifted kids that are 14 or 15 years old when they've completed grade 12 -- and there are some of those young people in our education system. You know, that just speaks to this issue and dispels that whole notion that school entry age and success in school are linked.

Those are just some of the comments, Madam Speaker, that I have. I really am at a bit of a crossroads here. I understand the equality of access argument. I understand the screening and early intervention argument of the sooner the better and a common baseline for testing. I think that's important now. In relation to the achievement tests that are being conducted, that is significant, especially given that the achievement tests are always used to score a school and its principal, and I think that can create other arguments and other discussions.

So with that, Madam Speaker, I will take my seat and listen to the debate so I can make a decision at some point. Thank you.

THE ACTING SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Wetaskiwin-Camrose.

MR. JOHNSON: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I rise this afternoon to speak in support of Bill 206, sponsored by my hon. colleague from Wainwright. I have heard the concerns expressed previously by my colleagues, and I'm led to believe that it is desirable for us to establish in this province a single and standard cutoff age for early entry to grade 1.

There are several reasons for the basis of my conclusions, Madam Speaker, including transferability, consistency, and a reduction of competition between school jurisdictions in Alberta. Further, the two public school jurisdictions in my constituency have expressed their support of Bill 206.

The issues have already been discussed in considerable depth by my colleagues, so today I would like to focus on some of the research that has been carried out that would lead to support of Bill 206. For a start, I would like to reiterate what I believe to be proposed by the bill before us today. Bill 206 would establish a provincial standard cutoff date for entry to grade 1. However, children would still be required, under section 8 of the School Act, to begin their studies if they reach the age of six by September 1 of a given year.

What Bill 206 changes are the discretionary provisions of the act which allow a school board to permit a child who is younger than six years of age at September 1 to enter the first grade. Members before me have discussed the widely varying practices among school boards across the province, including cutoff dates set by school boards ranging from six years of age on September 1 to six years on February 28. While this is ultimately only a difference of six months, this can make a difference for the children involved. The readiness for school of a child who is six years old can be quite different from the readiness of a child who is only five and a half years old.

Madam Speaker, there is no specific chronological entrance age that will guarantee the academic, social, or emotional success of a

child, but it appears that, in general, raising the age of students entering grade 1 also raises the odds for a child to succeed. Bill 206 would address this issue by providing consistency across the province for the age range of children entering grade 1. The limit for discretion would be set at December 31, which would reduce the range of ages of children entering grade 1 in a particular year.

One point that has been made repeatedly in research studies on early childhood education experiences is that, chronologically and developmentally, older children have an easier time adapting to school and tend to do better than younger children. For example, certain studies have found that the youngest girls in a class tend to be about 30 percent less attentive than the older girls. This difference is even greater with boys. Younger boys were on average about 70 percent less attentive to what was going on up at the blackboard than were older boys.

Inattentiveness is not a problem in and of itself. It can lead to other concerns, such as lower achievement, more discipline issues with school authorities, and social problems. A wide range of ages in a class of students when they are at such a young age has also caused social difficulties for some kids because of different maturity and developmental levels. In other words, most kids tend to do better when with a group of other children who are at the same age level.

Of course, these studies come from educational experts who spend years studying these questions, but there's certainly common sense in these arguments, which I believe many Albertans, especially those in the teaching profession, can relate to. In fact, these points have been made before in home-grown surveys in this province. I'd like to reiterate the example used previously in this debate to illustrate this. In 1984 the Edmonton public school board conducted a survey of grade 1, 2 and 3 teachers. The study looked at the importance of entrance age for student success in the early grades. The results that came back were quite interesting: 83 percent of the teachers surveyed wanted the entrance age put back so that students would be older upon entering grade 1, and only 17 percent of teachers were satisfied with the minimum age of students being five years and six months.

A more recent survey, in 1997, looked at the Buffalo Trail regional division. Alberta school superintendents were asked about the criteria they used to determine their school entrance age policy. The results showed that school boards and parents are concerned with consistency across the province, the entrance age of neighbouring jurisdictions, and the maturity of students entering the school system.

5:00

It seems to me, Madam Speaker, that many of the factors which are of concern to Alberta's school boards are the same factors which Bill 206 addresses and provides a solution based on both research and common sense. The Alberta School Boards Association in a recent discussion paper identified some of the benefits which they feel would arise if Alberta were to establish a specific entry age.

First, the system would be administratively efficient. It would provide a greater degree of consistency throughout the province, which would contribute to Albertans' ability to move about the province without worry that their child may have missed the cutoff date in a new school district.

Finally, having a standard entry age across Alberta would also remove the competition for students among school jurisdictions. That is, those school districts that establish an earlier entry age than their neighbours may gain an initial economic advantage by attracting students whose parents want them to enter grade 1 at an earlier age. This economic advantage may later on turn into a disadvantage for the school district if resources are required to provide the student with remedial attention. Schools may have to make adjustments in the curriculum or classroom structure to

accommodate students who are not developmentally ready to begin formal education. As I mentioned earlier, the child himself or herself may fair poorly in terms of their educational success.

Madam Speaker, Bill 206 will be a good change, I think, for Alberta's education system. It will bring us in line with the rest of Canada. I will be supporting this bill and urge my fellow colleagues to do the same.

Thank you.

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

MS BLAKEMAN: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Well, this has been a great afternoon. We have seen debate from the hon. members on the other side -- always nice to see although not often enough -- and that's a good thing.

I have been waiting for a wider discussion on the issue of education because I think there are so many things that we do want to discuss, and we need to figure out where we want to take the province in the future. So I was very pleased to see the number of different areas that were brought up, the discussions on local autonomy versus a more overriding, universal approach to things. I wish we also could have gotten into a discussion about what the rural schools will look like in the future and how we can be best addressing the educational needs of students in our smaller centres and rural areas.

I do support Bill 206, the School (Grade One Entry Age) Amendment Act, 1999. I have a reservation, but I will come back to that. There are a couple of reasons why I think this is a good idea. I'm not a teacher, although I certainly had the benefit of the public education system here in Alberta, but I'm ever mindful of my parents' contribution to the education system in Alberta, for their careers as teachers here. [interjection] Yup, both teachers.

MRS. SOETAERT: How long did it take you to get through school? Same as university?

MS BLAKEMAN: Yeah, but, boy, I could never get away with anything, I'll tell you.

The certainty for families that are planning. I know one of my colleagues spoke about students who were already registering for next year. What would it do to them if this legislation were passed? Well, that would be creating uncertainty for them; I suppose that's true. It wasn't something that I had thought about prior to reviewing this bill, with the varying levels and the ability of the local boards now to move the acceptance of individual students and their ages around a bit. I understand some of that is due to competition between the schools themselves trying to secure more pupils, of course, which affects their funding. So I think the certainty for families in being able to plan, probably for the schools in being able to figure out how many pupils are available to them -- if they do want to compete, they can go out and start seeking them, because they should know how many are available.

There has been a long debate and I gather a good deal of literature, probably off the Internet I'm guessing, about younger and older students versus a culture of learning with making the classroom suitable or adapted to the students. Much has been said about the younger students that may not fare as well, and I accept the statistics. I wouldn't dare say that someone who has put in this amount of time and work into it is somehow wrong, but I do really believe in creating that culture, that climate of growth and creativity in every sector and every walk of life. So I think it's how the school works with that class of students together as a group that makes it exciting and challenging.

One of the things that we do gain by having slightly younger

students -- I mean, we're not talking 10 years here; we're talking a matter of three or four months -- is the ability to detect any potential learning problems and to test and diagnose and get them into Head Start programs or early intervention and those sorts of programs that are available, that are sometimes hard to get depending on where you're living in Alberta. Certainly the earlier screening and diagnosis is helpful to the students and to their families.

I'm sure we all know of a family that had a child with dyslexia, and for many years with these students nobody knew what the problem was. They kept sending them to get better glasses so they could see the blackboard, and really it was a matter that they couldn't take in the words that they were reading. I hope this doesn't happen again.

Baseline testing. It also means that we're starting with a group of children who are close enough in age I think to do baseline testing.

Lastly, the issue of access so that you don't have to shop around for the school board that's going to admit you and so that we don't have mobility problems for families that are moving. If you had a child that would have been able to go into a school in one area and you move and all of a sudden this child is not able to go in: that takes that uncertainty out of it. [interjections] I'm getting a great deal of assistance from my colleagues, and I do appreciate it.

5:10

Now we get into the argument about age versus the appropriate environment and the readiness of a child versus the environment that they're in. Some of my colleagues have already spoken about this, but I think part of this debate does need to include a discussion of the environment, which I believe in really strongly.

It does have to do with class size and availability. I think: well, what was it like when I was in school? I'm at an age where I'm sort of at the tail end of the baby boomers. There were 36 students with me for most of my time in elementary school, and we had one teacher. Teacher aides didn't exist at that time. So how did that teacher do it? I kept thinking: well, I don't remember a lot of individual attention. Certainly math and science, which I actually do have an aptitude for, I didn't seem to fare well in. So I called my mother and said, "How come? What happened here?" She remembered very clearly that the teachers were really scrambling, but at least they had classes of kids that were all the same age, no special-needs kids, no integration. It was a much flatter, simpler classroom. We don't have that anymore. It's not that simple anymore.

We've made some choices in our education system where we do have integration, where we have special-needs kids, where we have gifted kids, and you add to that mix the competition of the schools to get students. So you might have schools specializing in arts and culture or sports or academics. I think it's important that we do have a prolonged and thoughtful debate about where we want to go with education in this province.

I hear the other side say "excellence." Well, of course. Yes, we want excellence in our education system. How do we get there? What are we doing with what is becoming obviously quite a gap between the children in rural areas and the children in urban areas. How do we serve all of those children to the very best of their ability?

Just to finish off my example of my experience in the class of 36. I didn't get the individual attention . . .

MRS. SOETAERT: Oh, class of '36. That's quite a long time ago.

MS BLAKEMAN: Thirty-six students, not the year 1936. I would be remarkably well preserved if that were the case. It would be *Ripley's Believe It Or Not*.

The point there is that it's certainly my family's belief that I wasn't able to get assistance at a time . . .

THE ACTING SPEAKER: I hesitate to interrupt the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre, but under Standing Order 8(5)(a), which provides for up to five minutes for the sponsor of a private member's public bill to close debate, I would invite the hon. Member for Wainwright to close debate on Bill 206.

MR. FISCHER: Thank you, Madam Speaker. As I didn't quite get finished my opening remarks, my final point was on the grandfathering, getting those kids through kindergarten and into grade 1 without forcing them to stay out of school for a year or go back to kindergarten. That could be accommodated quite easily.

The other point that was mentioned was having an exemption for gifted students. I think that while it is a very good point and a good idea, I would like to have time to see what other states and provinces are doing with this issue. As you know, the exemption would be difficult to administer. I think it's a good point, and I'd like to investigate it, but I wouldn't want it to hold up this bill. As you know, there are a lot of different opinions on that particular item.

I also want to say that when you talk about students, gifted or nongifted, when they're five and a half years old and in rural Alberta, where they have to ride the school bus for an hour or two hours and get played out and are sound asleep when they get to school, it doesn't do much good whether they're gifted or not. I would just like to say that I don't want that lack of amendment to stop this bill from going through.

I also would agree with the Member for Clover Bar-Fort Saskatchewan on a point that he made that Edmonton, Calgary, and Red Deer students would have to change from the end of February until December. I agree with him that that change would be there, but the benefits of having a standardized age would be much greater than that, and they still would have the flexibility between September 1 and December 31.

So I would ask all members' support on this bill. It's a good bill for the betterment of our education in this province, and I think almost everyone knows that. Thank you very much.

Madam Speaker, while I'm on my feet, could I have unanimous consent to introduce some special guests?

THE ACTING SPEAKER: Could I have the unanimous consent of the Assembly to revert to Introduction of Guests?

HON. MEMBERS: Agreed.

THE ACTING SPEAKER: Go ahead, hon. Member for Wainwright.

head: Introduction of Guests
(*reversion*)

MR. FISCHER: Thank you very much. We have some guests in the public gallery from Mexico. We have Eduardo Valdez and Dr. Alfonso Poncé, both from Mexico, as well as Patricia Martinez, and we have Doug McMullen from Alberta Agriculture, who is with them. They are here to visit our fine country and to help make arrangements for a further tour of the Mexican trade mission.

Thank you.

head: Public Bills and Orders Other than
head: Government Bills and Orders
head: Second Reading

Bill 206
School (Grade One Entry Age)
Amendment Act, 1999
(*continued*)

THE ACTING SPEAKER: The hon. Member for Wainwright has moved second reading of Bill 206. All those in favour of second reading of Bill 206, please say aye.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Aye.

THE ACTING SPEAKER: Opposed, please say no.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: No.

THE ACTING SPEAKER: It's carried.

[Several members rose calling for a division. The division bell was rung at 5:18 p.m.]

[Ten minutes having elapsed, the Assembly divided]

[Mrs. Gordon in the chair]

For the motion:

Blakeman	Fischer	McFarland
Broda	Graham	Severtson
Carlson	Jacques	Soetaert
Clegg	Johnson	Strang
Coutts	Klapstein	Thurber
Ducharme	MacDonald	Trynchy
Evans	Mar	

5:30

Against the motion:

Amery	Kryczka	Sapers
Burgener	Laing	Shariff
Cao	Leibovici	Smith
Day	Lougheed	Stevens
Doerksen	MacBeth	Tannas
Dunford	Magnus	Taylor
Friedel	Nelson	Yankowsky
Fritz	Olsen	Zwozdesky
Hancock	O'Neill	

Totals: For -- 20 Against -- 26

[Motion lost]

[The Assembly adjourned at 5:32 p.m.]

