

Title: Estimates of Learning, Monday, March 6, 2000

Date: 00/03/06

8:03 a.m.

[Mr. Stevens in the chair]

Designated Supply Subcommittee – Learning

Stevens, Ron, Chairman
Burgener, Jocelyn
Dickson, Gary
Fischer, Butch

Graham, Marlene
Hlady, Mark
Johnson, LeRoy
Massey, Don

O'Neill, Mary
Pannu, Raj
Severtson, Gary
Soetaert, Colleen

THE CHAIRMAN: Good morning. I'd like to call the meeting of the subcommittee to order. There is a motion that I would like to read into the record.

Be it resolved that pursuant to Standing Orders 56 and 57 the designated supply subcommittee on Learning allocate the time for its consideration and debate of the 2000-2001 estimates of the Department of Learning as follows:

- (1) The time allocated for the subcommittee will be a maximum of three hours.
- (2) The minister responsible first addresses the subcommittee for a maximum of 20 minutes.
- (3) Official Opposition subcommittee members then have a maximum of two hours for questions and answers. Those members may allocate the time for questions among themselves as they see fit.
- (4) The ND Member for Edmonton-Strathcona then has a maximum of 15 minutes for questions and answers.
- (5) Government subcommittee members have the remainder.

Be it further resolved that in the event government subcommittee members do not exercise their right to utilize the remaining time, the chair shall call for a motion to conclude discussion of the estimates and to rise and report.

Be it further resolved that in order to conclude prior to four hours, as allocated under Standing Order 56(7), unanimous consent of this motion will be required.

I would invite someone to move the motion as read.

MR. JOHNSON: I so move.

THE CHAIRMAN: All in favour? Opposed? Seeing none opposed, the motion is carried unanimously. Thank you very much.

Mr. Minister.

DR. OBERG: Thanks, Ron. I won't use the full 20 minutes on my opening comments because I believe we'll probably get the majority of it out in the questioning.

Good morning. I have a few opening comments, and then I will entertain questions from the committee members. The estimates for Learning begin on page 329 of the 2000-2001 government and lottery fund estimates. The business plan starts on page 227 of the government's Budget 2000 document. These estimates are a further step to a vibrant and seamless education system in Alberta. They provide support to all Albertans for the achievement of lifelong learning.

In 2000-2001 Alberta Learning plans to increase base spending by over \$371 million to \$4.4 billion, or a 9.2 percent increase. This increase will ensure we are meeting the needs of students, whether they are attending a school or a postsecondary institution. Add to that mix \$162 million of opted-out revenue, and you have a total of \$4.6 billion in funding for learning in the province.

We want a learner-centred system, so this is a learner-centred budget. This budget will provide funding for school authorities to hire more teachers and teachers' aides according to their needs and

increase the financial support for postsecondary students.

On page 334 of your estimates book operating support for basic education is increased by almost \$214 million. This increase will ensure school jurisdictions receive the funding they require to operate their schools and provide a quality education to their students. All operating grants will increase by 3 percent so that the school boards can direct more money to the classroom, including meeting the needs of their students with severe disabilities. One hundred and ninety-five million dollars has been added to fund a 3 percent operating grant increase and the anticipated enrollment increase of about 1.8 percent, or almost 10,000 students. These 10,000 will join our current student population of 556,000.

Spending on programs for English as a Second Language and students with severe disabilities will increase by more than \$18 million. This funding will accommodate the expected cost resulting from my announcement last year that lifted the caps on these programs. It will also accommodate enrollment increases expected in the 2000-2001 school year.

Funding to accommodate the new Alberta initiative for school improvement program, developed collaboratively among education stakeholders, will cost \$38 million this fiscal year, and for the 2000-2001 school year \$66 million will be available. This program allows school boards to implement initiatives like the stay-in-school program, early literacy or numeracy programs, or smaller class sizes for early grades.

Funding for early childhood services is increasing by \$12.5 million to \$114 million. This increase accommodates an expected increase of 15 percent in the number of children with severe disabilities served and also recognizes the higher operating expense experienced by ECS providers.

Private schools will receive \$42 million in 2000-2001, an increase of \$5 million. This continues the phase-in of the 1998 Private Schools Funding Task Force recommendations to increase per student funding to 60 percent of the public system's basic instruction grant. To ensure school boards can perform comprehensive planning to meet the technology needs of students, we have funded this planning for the next three years, \$20 million per year in 2000-2001, totaling \$60 million. This \$60 million is up fronted this year.

Last but not least under the public and separate school support is the student health initiative. The 2000-2001 fiscal year will be the first full year of operation for this initiative. The initiative may be accessed by up to 73,000 students who have special health needs such as speech, language, or occupational therapy. Improving student health is a priority of this government and mine.

Page 336 details how the \$858 million, an increase of \$34 million in 2000-2001, will be spent on postsecondary institutions. I have targeted \$95 million of funding, which includes an extra \$28 million, to expand postsecondary enrollments and to enhance access to apprenticeship training, which will result in an increase of over 1,200 new entry spaces in nursing and health technology and ICT. These 1,200 new spaces and the 1,200 spaces we created in '99-2000 will now double the number of graduates in ICT programs. Funding increases through the performance envelope for universities, colleges, and technical institutions will average 3 percent.

I would like to direct your attention to page 337, our assistance to learners. The core tenet of our assistance remains that the cost of

postsecondary education is a shared responsibility between students and their families and government. We have recognized the issues facing our students and have responded by increasing the financial assistance by \$23 million to \$125 million through loans, scholarships, bursaries, and maintaining, I believe, the most comprehensive remission program in the country. In fact, student assistance overall will enjoy the largest percentage increase in the entire budget of Learning: over \$50 million in new benefits over the next three years, with the largest increase occurring this year.

Alberta loan assistance will now be available to undergraduate students wishing to study in other provinces of Canada. Graduate students will continue to have this option available to them. Loan remission is our key measure, designed to limit the amount of Alberta loan debt a student must repay. Loan remission payments will increase by \$17 million to over \$50 million by the end of the three-year business plan. This includes partnering with the federal government on a program to reduce debt after all other repayment efforts have failed. To ease the transition between school and work, the interest relief program has increased the period allowing graduates to suspend payments from 30 to 54 months.

Students will be able to earn \$225 per month without affecting their level of provincial assistance. In addition, the scholarship exemption will be doubled to \$1,600, ensuring students retain a greater share of their rewards for academic excellence. The number of students assisted is expected to rise by 10 percent over the next three years to about 50 percent annually.

To ensure the students we assist can meet the health and dental costs of their children, postsecondary students will now be eligible for the Alberta child health benefit.

I also recently announced a new \$3 million scholarship program to recognize achievements of full-time postsecondary students who have completed their first year of studies. I expect 3,000 students will be rewarded \$1,000 each.

Overall, the 2000-2001 budget and business plan highlight my commitment and this government's commitment to lifelong learning, facilitated by a seamless system that continues to be affordable for all Albertans.

Thank you. I'll now take some questions.

THE CHAIRMAN: Who would like to go first? Don.

DR. MASSEY: Thanks very much, and thank you, Mr. Minister, for the comments. Some good things have happened, I think, in special education. Allowing those students with severe disabilities, when they move, for the funding to be adjusted and not penalizing the boards that pick them up is a great move, and I think it's been recognized as such.

8:13

I want to start off with a couple of general questions and then maybe get your reaction to it. As I have visited school boards across the province and talked to parents, the issue of funding adequacy has been raised time and time again. If you look south of the border at the kind of lawsuits that are being put in place, where states are being sued by boards and boards are being sued by parents on the basis of providing inadequate funding, the search for a formula or a method of arriving at what is adequate funding goes on, all kinds of different resource-based models that they're exploring. I guess I'd like to know what the department is doing, if anything, in that area in terms of trying to come up with a base that we could – I mean, we talk each year about the percentage increases over the previous year and the millions that are going in, but it's never backed up since the cuts, that I can recall, with a rationale for why those dollars.

DR. OBERG: Sure, Don. First of all, I will not say to you that we

have a completely logical reason why the dollar amount is X number of dollars. We are grappling with the same thing that's happening in the States, which is to come up with a justification for the amount of dollars we spend one way or the other, in all fairness, because it may be that when it comes to funding adequacy, we may actually be spending more than we need to, or we may be spending less than we need to. Consequently, we do funding based on last year's results, based on last year's budget, which at this moment in time is the only thing we have.

What I would like to see, Don, and one thing that we will be doing very shortly is looking at the whole outcome effort. I believe that when we do that and when we tie funding to outcomes, we may well have a better example of exactly what is the adequacy of the funding.

You commented about the boards down in the States being sued. I would hope that that doesn't happen here. I have, first of all, absolutely no idea – I'm not a lawyer, obviously – how they would ever come up with that. Maybe what we can do – and I certainly have no problems – is if they come up with a solution as to what is funding adequacy and they can describe it, then we will certainly look at it.

DR. MASSEY: There's nothing right now in the works in terms of a review of the funding?

DR. OBERG: Yes. That's what I was commenting on, Don. What will be coming out is a whole review on the outcome indicators, on the performance indicators, what mechanism we can use to measure school boards, what measures can be used, and this will be done by the five partners of education, the ASBA, the ATA, et cetera, et cetera. Plus the department will be sitting down and attempting to change how we fund the school system to fund on the outcome as opposed to the input. Right now, as you know, we fund on the input side of things and don't fund on the outcome side of things. So we are looking at that, and that will probably be announced within the next couple of weeks.

DR. MASSEY: Okay. So it is going to be a sort of formal setup, a structure for dealing with the problem.

DR. OBERG: Right. Just if I can, Don, on that. What will be happening: the first phase will be on performance indicators and outcomes; the second phase will be tying funding back to that.

DR. MASSEY: One of the sources that I check every year is the Pugh Foundation and Education Week's ranking of American states, and they use a much wider range of performance measures than we do in terms of making judgments not just about school boards but making judgments about the government; for instance, the government's fiscal effort, the percentage of the budget that goes into education versus other spending. Will it include that kind of broad look at performance measures, or will it just focus on school boards?

DR. OBERG: No. Everything will be in the mix, Don, and we're hoping this will be a major review of the funding system of schools. I believe it's time. It's been probably about five or six years. A lot of things have changed in that last five or six years. We'll see what happens. I'm not guaranteeing the results, but that doesn't mean we shouldn't go after it and attempt to find a better funding system.

DR. MASSEY: Will there be an attempt to gather some information based on what actually happens in schools? I was at Kirkness the night the budget had been announced, and the calculation there was that it would make a difference of about \$32,000 if all the money flowed through right to their school and that they would still lose a

teacher come September. I guess it's that sort of microlevel information that I hope will be part of this review, that you actually take some schools and run the numbers through to see what they look like when they're translated to classroom practice.

DR. OBERG: We're certainly going to attempt to do that. One of the problems we have with that though, Don, is that we don't control the amount of dollars that actually go down to the school. We control the amount of dollars that go to the school board. How the school board then distributes to the schools is in their realm. Some of the issues we've seen are that some school boards have chosen not to put the increases down to the schools and instead have sort of carved off pieces for technology, carved off pieces for this, carved off pieces for that, and that quite frankly is one of the issues we need to get at, their ability to do that. What they're doing, in essence, is taking it out of the classroom.

DR. MASSEY: I was with Rob Lougheed out at Fort Saskatchewan at a meeting there, and we had the same litany of school after school with the parents standing up saying: "This is what the difference is in our school, and we're still going to be fund-raising, selling chocolate almonds. We're still going to be in a difficult position. Class sizes won't change." We had information from, I think, about six different schools out there. I think that any kind of information would really be valuable. Even if boards are handling it differently, then, I think that would have to be part of it somehow or other.

DR. OBERG: I agree, Don. I'll give you my position on that. I have problems, quite frankly, when I show on paper and quite literally show that it goes into the classroom, in the broader sense, an 8.8 percent increase. That's what we're doing this year, 8.8 percent. Yet when I talk to the schools, they're saying they're only going to see minimal increases. This isn't like the HRDC in the federal government. I can actually track where those dollars are going, what those dollars are going to be used for, and it does come out to 8.8 percent.

DR. MASSEY: Then I guess the rejoinder would be that they're still catching up from the cuts, that they never really recovered, that there's inflation, and that they're facing 3 percent teacher contract increases. I guess it just points out the need for really being able to look at the local level and see what's happening in a sampling maybe of schools across the province.

DR. OBERG: Yeah. Absolutely. I certainly think it does.

The one point that you made, though, about the inflation. We've run those figures. We've actually run it for enrollment, and we've run it for inflationary pressures. We're up 5 percent on enrollment and inflation over the past five years. So it is increasing at a faster rate than inflation and enrollment.

DR. MASSEY: Have you gone back to '93, when the cuts were done? Is that information you could share with us?

DR. OBERG: Sure. Certainly.

DR. MASSEY: I'd appreciate having a look at that.

Linked with this is the whole business of governance and school boards. As you know, I think that the firing of the Calgary board sent a chill through the province in terms of school boards and school governance. We heard recently of the board out in Parkland having a meeting and, I guess, having questioned the motion that they had passed. There had been one dissenter. The board found itself in your office having that decision questioned. I wonder if

you'd talk a little bit about your view of school boards and where you see them fitting in the future. It seems that in terms of their power, they've certainly had that curtailed. I haven't talked to a lot of them, maybe a dozen or so in the last couple of months, but certainly the feeling among some trustees is that they're very much under the gun and that their autonomy is certainly threatened. I guess I'd like to hear from you what you think.

8:23

DR. OBERG: Sure. I'll start with your last comment first, about the school board trustees being under the gun. I feel that they should be under the gun, because quite frankly we're giving these people a little over \$3 billion to handle. We're giving these people the lives of our children to look after when it comes to education, and it's an extremely important job. So I think they do need to have pressure. To take all pressure off them so they can shrug their shoulders and say, "Well, you know, it happened," I think that is wrong. I think they have to be accountable. They are elected by their electorate, and I think they have to be responsible to their electorate. I think they have to do a good job. I think it's way too important a task to just take it lightly and to not be accountable for it.

With regard to school boards in general, I think school boards are critical. Most people in this Assembly have heard me talk about local decision-making. It's something that I believe strongly in. Whether it's children's services, whether it's health boards, whether it's school boards, it's something that I believe very strongly in. Quite frankly, what happens in Brooks is a lot different than what happens in Edmonton as opposed to what happens in, you know, High River, High Level. They're all different, and you need that on-the-ground approach to find answers to the problems.

With regards to Parkland specifically, what is happening in Parkland is a very unfortunate incident where you have two communities, from what I understand and from the letters I get, that are in essence at each other's throat. On one hand, you have a community that is attempting to take their school out and make it a charter school. They've written letters to me about that. On the other hand, you have a different town that is saying, "Oh, everything's fine, and we want these people," et cetera, et cetera. So when I talked to Parkland – and again I think everyone in this room has seen examples of communities becoming entrenched. I've had it in my constituency, I've had it in my own community where you get two sides on an item, and rationale tends to be gone. It tends to be all emotion. That's what's happening presently in Parkland.

What I suggested to them is to bring in an objective third party and find out what the best way is that things can be done, what the best way is that it can be done for both sides. I said that there's no way that I know, because I'm not involved in that situation, nor would I want to be. But we do have experts, people who have dealt with this, and what I said to them is that we need to try to get a win/win scenario for everyone involved. I have no idea what that is. I get extremely disconcerted when I have two towns that are quite literally on opposite viewpoints or I have school boards that are, in essence, on opposite viewpoints, and I need to give them a way out, Don. That is what is needed right now.

DR. MASSEY: How does that square, then, with autonomy of a local board? It's going to happen all over the province. They're going to try to close schools, and you're going to have community against community. It already happens. Where does that leave local boards if every time the loser on one of those votes – and there's always going to be a loser; one community is going to come out not having their school – goes to the minister? What does that say about local autonomy?

DR. OBERG: Well, first of all, ultimately in the jurisdiction of

Learning in the province of Alberta I have the ultimate authority and the ultimate accountability. So to say that the Department of Learning and myself in particular are not a party to this is wrong.

DR. MASSEY: I didn't say that. I guess you can talk about local autonomy and say it's important, but if the actions don't follow that, does that not really undermine a local school board?

DR. OBERG: No, it doesn't, Don, because the issue becomes: I'm not going in on a whim saying that you must do this or you must do that. The only thing that I have said, in Parkland in particular, is in all essence exactly the same thing I said in my own constituency, that we need to bring someone in who is an objective third party to have a look at it. I gave my pledge to the school board that if that objective third party comes out and says exactly what they're going to do, I will back it one hundred percent. But when tempers run high – you know, from the letters that I read, there seemed to be some question about process. There seemed to be some question about the decision. Consequently, I have opted for an independent third party. As I say, if that independent third party agrees with the school board, fabulous. Then they have one hundred percent of my support behind them. I'm trying to get a win/win scenario for that school board.

DR. MASSEY: Okay. Are there plans afoot to look at the role of school boards in the province and to do any kind of adjusting in looking at their role?

DR. OBERG: There is no formal plan afoot at the moment. I think the school boards play a very important role, and I'm hoping they will continue to play that role. As you know, in this budget, Don, one of the key points is the flexibility that is given to school boards. I could have gone in and targeted exactly where all this money is going to go, but I didn't. I didn't put in new programs. I didn't start any new programs, apart from the AISI, which was actually started before. I felt that the flexibility given to the school boards is very important, and I hope to increase their flexibility that they have through this whole outcome measurement.

DR. MASSEY: Thanks very much.

MR. DICKSON: Good morning, Mr. Minister. I guess 1998-99 was the first year that we saw ESL funding extended to Canadian-born children who had some challenges in English. A great move. I was delighted to see that happen, but that still leaves, in my respectful view, one other major shortcoming with our ESL funding. It is, you know, manifest if you look at the dropout rate at a high school like Forest Lawn high school in Calgary, where you're looking at something over a 70 percent dropout rate for high school ESL students, something that I hope causes you as much concern as it does me. There have been numerous recommendations to you, Mr. Minister, or at least to your predecessor, to provide some flexibility with ESL funding. The three-year cap seems to be wholly arbitrary. It may be perfectly adequate for . . .

DR. OBERG: There is no cap on ESL.

MR. DICKSON: Okay. Well, that's very good news. My understanding had been – and I was even talking to school trustees – that there was still a three-year limit on ESL funding.

MRS. DAVID-EVANS: We asked them to look at the three-year limit, but there's no official cap on it.

MR. DICKSON: Oh, okay. Well, that's good news as well.

DR. OBERG: We did that last summer actually, Gary. We took that off.

MR. DICKSON: Okay.

The other thing I wanted to ask. Just one encouragement. There's an excellent program at St. Monica school. St. Monica school has a number of children that have come from the former Yugoslavia. They have an excellent partners in peace and education program that deals with children who actually come with some pretty disturbing experiences and memories. I hope that's a program your department is going to be able to support, because it meets a real and pressing need for children who come from war areas.

Another concern I've heard. I understand there's still a cap on administration, a 4 percent cap, and I'm thinking of the four larger boards, the public and separate boards in Edmonton and Calgary. An issue that's been raised with me is a concern that when you get to a board particularly the size of the CBE, the Calgary board of education, just because of the complexity, the size of their student population, the range of issues and needs that children present with, there may have to be some additional flexibility in that cap. I understand it's a 6 percent cap for some of the smaller boards. So I relay to you and would be interested in your thoughts in terms of whether we're ensuring that with those very large boards, with some different kinds of challenges qualitatively and quantitatively than some of the smaller boards, that's something there may be some flexibility on, Mr. Minister.

I have a number of questions in terms of what I observe in Calgary, and I'd be interested in any specific plans you've got to deal with them. There was the Calgary teachers' convention recently. I had a chance to spend a day there. I talked to lots of teachers, school principals. Some of the things that I heard: a lot of concern around teacher stress and low morale in the Calgary public system, and it may be true in the Catholic system too; you've got a high rate of absenteeism; you have a number of teachers choosing to leave the profession. I was told, for example, that we don't have enough teachers coming out. Right now the University of Calgary Faculty of Education has but two students graduating with a mathematics major. If in fact this information is accurate, I'd be interested in knowing what kinds of short-term plans your department has to address some of those needs around a shrinking experienced teacher base.

I'm just going to keep going, Mr. Minister, unless there's something you'd like to jump in and offer some observation on. I'd appreciate that.

8:33

DR. OBERG: Sure. You know, so far, Gary, you've asked me four questions that I can answer here. Do you want me to?

MR. DICKSON: Absolutely. Why don't we have a go at dealing with those, please?

DR. OBERG: Sure. First of all, the partners in peace program I think is an excellent program. One of the issues – when you ask about support, absolutely, we will certainly give support. We will not give monetary support, and the reason we aren't going to give monetary support is because this is the flexibility the school boards have wanted. This is the flexibility they will get to put in these different types of programs. What we will do is give them the basic grant and the programs that are needed.

This goes back to Don's question a little bit, too, about the flexibility and autonomy of the school boards. I believe they must have that autonomy to put in programs that are needed in specific situations, and this is a specific situation. I'm confident that the school boards will respond to those particular situations. When it

comes to any support administratively, clerically, et cetera, curriculum-based support, anything like that, we will certainly help them. Again, though, I think it sets a bad precedent when this department goes and funds specific individual programs around the province. There would be a lot of recourse, for example, for the Grasslands school division in Brooks to say, "Well, we have one Yugoslavian child; I want you to fund that program in Brooks," despite the fact that it may or may not be needed. Still, it's very difficult.

The cap on administration. The cap on administration is something that I hear a lot about as I go around the province, and I hear it diametrically opposed on two different sides. On the school board side they say that there is not enough money for administration, yet when I talk to the public, when I talk to Albertans, they say we absolutely have to keep that cap on. When I talk to MLAs as well, one of the issues has been that with a lot of these schools boards, especially the large ones, too much money gets put into administration and not enough into the classroom. By keeping the cap on, what we can do is ensure to parents, ensure to Albertans that the dollars are going into the classroom as opposed to administration.

I think, in talking to some of the larger school boards especially, that they're doing well when it comes to administration. The case I'll use is Edmonton public. Edmonton public tends to be doing quite well in how they distribute it out. The other thing we have to remember is that as we go to school-based funding, school-based budgeting, the amount of central office administration that is needed is actually decreasing, as more of the administrative functions are going out, so we hope there's a saving.

In all fairness, Gary, I don't see the cap changing at the moment. One thing I will say, though, is that there has been a 3 percent increase on that as well. As we increase the budget, their dollars go up as well.

Teacher stress and low morale. Absolutely that's a problem, and I think it's quite a serious problem. When I first became minister, within basically a week or 10 days of becoming minister, I sat down with the Alberta Teachers' Association and addressed this exact issue. One of the things I said was that I believe a lot of the issues about stress, about low morale, about the negativity surrounding the education system is because that's all everyone talks about. The commitment I gave them at that meeting was that they would never hear a negative word about a teacher out of my mouth. In talking to the ATA, hopefully you may have noticed that things have changed slightly over the last six or seven months as we try to elevate this profession.

I use the example – and it's exactly the same thing with me, being a medical doctor. I hear a lot of stories of doom and gloom. We say, we being physicians, what the medical system is like, et cetera, et cetera, and what that does is degrade the work atmosphere that we work in ourselves. I'm not saying, you know, that we wear rose-colored glasses for everything, but on the flip side I don't say that we look at everything in a negative sense. I think there are a lot of positives in our education system, and that certainly has something to do with teacher stress and low morale.

Time may prove me wrong on this, but specifically on the Calgary public I will say that I think the new school board is doing an absolutely excellent job. They are very cognizant of their teachers. They are attempting to increase the morale and lessen the stress in situations that are involved there, and I think they're slowly but surely doing it. I have been very impressed with the Calgary board.

Your fourth question, Gary, was about teachers graduating. This is going to be a critical issue. As we look four or five years down the road, the number of teachers we see – first of all, a lot of teachers in the 45- to 55-year-old age group obviously, as they move forward, are going to be retiring. There are not as many people that are

coming in. Plus, obviously our student population is increasing, so we're going to be needing more teachers there as well.

A couple of things. We've talked to the universities specifically about this. One of the issues I have personally with the universities is that Lethbridge, for example, is now at a five-year teaching degree, Calgary is at a six-year teaching degree, the U of A is still at a four-year teaching degree, and I've expressed my displeasure with this to them. I think objectively, as I look back, I understand the rationale, and the rationale in Calgary is that it's a four plus two. You do a degree, and then it's two years on top of that degree for your teaching certificate. This is great for people that don't know exactly what they're doing, that go in and take a science degree, an arts degree, et cetera, et cetera, and then go into teaching. I think it's great for that.

The University of Lethbridge has decided they have an excellent teaching program, which I think everyone acknowledges, and they feel they can get more excellence out of their teaching program if they go to five years. The University of Alberta has stayed at four years. What I'm recommending when I go around the province is that if you want a teaching degree, if you're completely confident that you want to be a teacher, then probably the University of Alberta is the best place to go rather than the University of Calgary, six years, and the University of Lethbridge, five years.

One other thing I've done is that I've served notice to the rest of the ministers of education in Canada that Alberta is going to be moving towards accepting their accreditation of teachers. What is happening right now as we look across Canada is that every province has various barriers up to teachers coming into their province. What I'm now saying – and I served notice a couple of weeks ago at the meeting I was at – is that Alberta will very soon move to accepting their accreditation carte blanche.

I had an example of a priest moving here from Manitoba who had been teaching for 22 years, had been doing an excellent job, and could not get a teaching certificate here to sub, and that just is not acceptable. We are looking at that, and again I've served notice that we are looking to attract teachers from the rest of the country as well, so we're hoping some of this will continue.

The second part of that is the whole idea of a math major, and I think that's an excellent point, Gary. I think we have to find a way to get more of these teachers into especially mathematics and science, where there seems to be a demand for it. One of the things that can be done is through the access funding in universities, where they can specify that these positions are held for teachers. Again, I see that as a problem upcoming in the future that we have to look at very seriously and deal with.

8:43

MR. DICKSON: Thanks, sir. I know my colleagues have questions too, but since you've sort of taken us to the universities, I spend lots of time talking to people at the University of Calgary, and I'm told, Mr. Minister, that if you look at the salaries paid to instructors, to professors across the country, the University of Calgary would rank about number 22 out of the 25 largest universities in Canada. That's information I haven't been able to check independently, but you know, I'm always struck with what seems to be a disconnect between our talk about all the high-skilled, high-paid jobs we want to develop in the high-tech sector in a knowledge-based economy and what seems to be some fairly significant pressures, strains. It looks to me like manifest underfunding, certainly at the University of Calgary, and I wonder, Mr. Minister, if you can address that. I mean, I was also at that meeting when you met with the board or maybe it was the senate of the university, and it was a raucous meeting. I wasn't quite sure what I'd stumbled into.

DR. OBERG: Neither was I, Gary.

MR. DICKSON: You know, there was lots of passion, there was a lot of concern, and it wasn't just on the part of students. We saw some of the leading businesspeople in the city of Calgary register concern with what's happening at the University of Calgary. I invite your comments on what we're doing to ensure that our universities – I'm talking about that one, but some of this applies to all our universities – are leading the way to take us where the government says it wants to take Alberta.

DR. OBERG: Sure. Absolutely, Gary. First of all, on the overall grants – not grants at specific institutions but overall – the funding went up 7.7 percent this year to postsecondary institutions. That's the money that goes directly to the institutions, so that's a fairly large whack of money. I will give you a proviso on that, and the proviso is that some of that money is tied to the access fund. So in essence what we're saying is that here's the money, but you also have to incur more expenses to get that money. There are 1,200 spaces, for example, that have been funded across the province, so there's a little bit of proviso in that.

The point about the professors' salaries is an absolutely excellent point. There is a recent study that came out a couple of weeks ago, and it basically said that Alberta professors were going down in real dollars as opposed to going up. I see that as a real challenge in my department. It's something I'm very seriously looking at and attempting to find ways to bring back up, because your point about the knowledge-based economy is absolutely correct. We can't have a knowledge-based economy if we don't fund our professors, so that is something I am very seriously looking at. I think my caucus colleagues around here know the kind of passion I display when it comes to postsecondary funding. I think we'll continue on, and I'm sure we'll get that one done.

On postsecondaries as well, though, interestingly on Thursday I was at a sod-turning ceremony in Calgary – this is a little bit of an aside here – and I came to the realization that since my short tenure as minister that's the fourth building I have taken part in turning the sod for, and that's in about eight or nine months.

So it is coming, but I won't say we're completely there yet.

MR. DICKSON: I think the CBE would say they'd like to see that same rate of sod-turning in their K to 12 area too, Mr. Minister.

Just a couple of other questions. Specifically now looking to program 1 of the budget, there are some questions in terms of element 1.0.4. What's the intent? There's an 8.5 percent increase.

DR. OBERG: Hang on. At what? At 1.0.4?

MR. DICKSON: Yes, 1.0.4. You've got an 8.5 percent increase for finance and administration. I'd like you to particularize what the intent of that is, and I've got a couple of similar questions. If you look at 1.0.5, similarly, what would be the intent of the 7.2 percent increase for human resource services? And at 1.0.7, what equipment will be purchased with the \$575,000 additional funding requested for IT? Then if you look at support for adult learning in program 3, 3.1.3, can you give us a justification for the increase in funding for learning television? What programs will this fund? Why is it being funded almost entirely by lotteries? Then just while we're in program 3, look at element 3.1.5. There's a 115.4 percent increase in the budget for other program support. I've given you probably enough questions to have a go at.

DR. OBERG: Okay. Let me start off with 1.0.4. That's finance and administrative; it has gone up 8.65 percent. There are several reasons for that. The first one is a salary increase in 2000-2001. There's also a provision to support the Imagis core team, plus there

are some funds reallocated from the administrative system support for unfunded but occupied positions between AECD and HR and E.

With regards to 1.0.5, which is human resources, we're seeing an 18 percent increase. This is one FTE for human resources. The account was introduced in '99-2000, and it was underutilized due to the reorganization in '99-2000. What we're saying is that it was artificially low because of the reorganization in '99-2000, so this is bringing it back up, plus there's one FTE that was added to it in the Learning account.

Okay; learning television, 3.1.3. The reason the operating expense was funded by lotteries is that we felt this would be a good position for lotteries to be in. We are entering into a service-based contract with learning television, which means they have to provide the service in order to get paid for the programming. I think we've all seen the Access programs that are on, where there are courses with Athabasca University and things like that. That's where those dollars have gone. The \$7.6 million again just purely comes from lotteries into our budget. It was allocated from lotteries into our budget, so it's included in our budget. Apparently lotteries felt that this was a good area to put the money into.

The other thing was 3.1.5, which is other program support. What this is is there are some dollars in there, in the support for adult learning, that have not been allocated yet. This is one of the potential areas where we are looking at allocating this for professorial salaries, and we are attempting to find a way to put some of these dollars into that. These dollars have not been fully allocated.

MR. DICKSON: Okay. Thank you.

MRS. SOETAERT: Actually I'd like to revisit your discussion with Don about the Parkland school division. With all due respect, I think the board has done a great deal of homework. It has documented it. In fact, it was a unanimous decision to amalgamate all three programs, not an easy decision. This is a very responsible group of people who care very much about the entire area. I think some local people have blown it out of proportion, which is very hurtful and divisive between two communities that have a history of working very well together.

Part of my concern. The reality is that funding won't accommodate three programs, so they've had to make this decision based on: we cannot support three programs in three different locations. But if the independent study goes through, my understanding of that is it will be based on not only finances but community impact and educational impact. Well, the board doesn't have that flexibility in making the decision. They only have the funding flexibility, so I think they feel like this is a setup to show they can't make a good decision. I feel badly about that. I also know there has been local interference by their local MLA, trying to barter something for something else. Two different issues entirely. So there is resentment on that board about the involvement of the heavy-duty government coming upon a board that has tried to make and has made very responsible decisions and in the past has not run a debt, has had to amalgamate programs, cram 33 kids in grade 2 French immersion into one classroom in a very old building. I have always given them respect due to their decisions.

I feel that because half of it is in a different political riding, if you like, as opposed to another, this has been part of the stirring of the pot. My fear is that you may be getting caught in the middle of it without all the cards on the table. I guess I caution you because this is a strong board that has made, I think, very sound decisions for their areas, and they're very upset. They're very upset with the lack of autonomy to even deal with program location, and I share their concern.

8:53

DR. OBERG: Okay. A couple of points on that. First of all, if it shows on the financial documents that they have to do this in an effort to save money, then I have absolutely no problems with this. What the people from – is it Stony Plain?

DR. MASSEY: Stony Plain.

DR. OBERG: What the people from Stony Plain have been saying, when questioned, is that they will not show them how they have saved money, how this is a money-saving procedure. That has not been done. I take full account of what you say, and the issue to me is that if there's any question, as there is – and I think you're absolutely right. It is tearing apart two communities, and from my way of thinking the only way to get a correct answer on that is to have an objective third party come in and take a look and see what is right based on finances – that would be first and foremost – based on the communities, based on perhaps busing, based on a lot of different issues. But I don't see any problems with having an independent body come in and either reaffirm their decision by saying, "Yes, this is the correct way to go" or saying, "No, we could do this better."

That is the type of thinking where we as politicians get into a situation where we can never relook a decision. Because we've made that decision despite the fact that further evidence comes forward I think is an extremely scary thought, and I think it's scary for both us as MLAs and for school boards. Those school boards and myself are in this to do what is right for the kids, and if we get an objective expert in who says that this is not right for the kids, then I think we have a problem. If he says yes, it is right for the kids, then . . .

MRS. SOETAERT: How do they fund it?

DR. OBERG: What's that?

MRS. SOETAERT: The reality is: how do they fund it? They have everything you've mentioned, busing and where students are located and the funding of it. I know that information is there, and I'm surprised you don't have it, because it's there.

DR. OBERG: I don't have it, and the people of Stony Plain don't have it. That is one of the things this person will be looking at, and if there's a huge financial argument, then the case in point is not there. It is a moot point.

MRS. SOETAERT: Because it's easy to say it's always nice to keep your child as close to home as possible. Even studying that is a moot point. You know, the reality is that it's nice to stay near home. For them I believe most of it was a practical funding reality, and the best way to offer a program was combining it.

DR. OBERG: Then it should not be a problem at all to bring in a third party and they show them the financial figures and say: for this reason and this reason and this reason we're doing this. That was not given out to the people of Stony Plain, and what I'm attempting to do is bring an objective opinion to a huge rift between two communities.

MRS. SOETAERT: I don't know if it's a huge rift, maybe between the 20 families who may have to move.

DR. OBERG: You know, I just received a petition with something like 350 or 360 names on it.

MRS. SOETAERT: Yeah, I'm aware of that, Lyle. I'm hoping you're not missing an element that is there. I caution you on that one. I think the board is really upset with the interference. This was not an easy decision, and it's not easy for them to make this decision.

DR. OBERG: Then, if I may, Colleen, it should be much better for them if they get the backing of an independent report that says that what they did was correct.

MRS. SOETAERT: The independent backing, they fear, is just a setup to make sure that local MLA is happy.

DR. OBERG: It's not a setup.

MRS. SOETAERT: Well, then, that has to be made very clear, because when you talk about educational community and funding to that community, we just said that's a moot point. I caution you, because if we talk about the autonomy of boards, I think this will be seen as very offensive. I tell you this because I know it. What's happening I have real concerns about.

DR. OBERG: If I can just comment on that statement about the offensive part. My job is not to try and smooth everything over for the school boards. My job is to do what is correct for the kids of that community, and it's my job to ascertain what is correct for the kids of that community when I see a rift. There is a rift there now, and I am not going to go in and say I think you guys should go there or I think you guys should go there or I think you should do this. I'm not an expert in education, nor will I ever profess to be one. But I have experts that can go in there, and if they say, for example, that they're going to save this amount of dollars that can be shifted to somewhere else, they have 100 percent of my backing on this issue and I will go out to Stony Plain and talk to them and do whatever is needed. So I have no problem at all in doing that.

MRS. SOETAERT: Okay. They do feel there has been political pressure from other areas that have nothing to do with board decisions. That's for you to know. I seem to be in a hotbed of controversy in my riding.

Another issue that has Sturgeon, St. Albert Catholic, St. Albert Protestant all very concerned for all different reasons is . . .

DR. OBERG: What are you doing out there, Colleen?

MRS. SOETAERT: Just having so much fun.

Of course, you know the four-by-four issue. If you want to talk division in community, that has certainly happened in Sturgeon. I had a parent call me and say: now kids are picking on my son because he's going to the St. Albert Catholic, and they've lost his classroom somewhere else in Sturgeon. I am very concerned about what this does to the planning ability of school boards. They don't know if they're going to have X number of children at a certain point in the year. I also know that it's divisive in communities. I'm a Catholic. I went through a Catholic system. I live in the country. Realizing that, I knew my children would not get a Catholic education. So I sit in the middle of this with all kinds of feelings about it, but I am very worried that it is divisive in communities, that it may undermine one system because of this. I don't think there's an easy answer to this, because when I look at it, I say: okay; what would I do? I think this needs a great deal of work, and I think the way the four-by-fours were formed has people questioning the democratic procedure of that as well. Between three boards that truly get along very well with wonderful people on all of them, this is not good. So I guess my question is – good luck – now where are you headed on this one?

DR. OBERG: Well, if I can just back up a little bit to about 1902 or 1905. As everyone knows, in the Constitution it is the right of Catholics to form four-by-four votes. This goes back to a time and age which was a lot different than what it is now.

I would say to you, Colleen, that I am probably the most experienced person in Alberta when it comes to formation votes in that there was recently a vote, about four or five years ago, in Brooks which absolutely tore apart the community. Those scars are still healing, and whenever one little thing is done, the scars become that much deeper and that much worse. This last fall there was a vote in Strathmore and exactly the same thing happened in Strathmore.

This is a horrible situation, and you are absolutely correct. We have to come up with an answer. I will say to you that I am that far from coming up with an answer, and I'm actually meeting with the affected parties again tonight to deal with this issue. It's been something that we have been working on for about the past six or eight weeks with the affected associations. The one thing I will say is that one of the issues we have is this may need legislation, and we have to see what kind of legislation it may need. In all fairness, though, it may be very minimal legislation. I'm not attempting to prejudge this, but if we get to the point where the Public School Boards' Association and the Alberta School Boards Association and the Catholic School Trustees' Association and all their boards and the bishops agree with the process and everything we've done, I would ask for your support if we have to bring this through. Obviously, anything we bring through would be with the unanimous support of all these institutions, so I would ask for your support in that, because I think we all know the horrible situation this causes.

9:03

We'll see. We may not get it, but I'm hoping we will. As I say, if we do, I will ask for your support, and I will certainly come and talk to you before that time.

DR. MASSEY: Mr. Minister, will we be able to talk about 215, creating a lot of support for 215?

DR. OBERG: About what, sir?

DR. MASSEY: Bill 215, class sizes?

DR. OBERG: Oh. That's right. Politics is the art of negotiation, Don.

MRS. SOETAERT: Okay. Thank you for that. I look forward to seeing that one percolate up.

The AISI funding. I expressed concerns over it in its original form. I realize this is a bit better form. You know that my background is in teaching, and at the end of the day I would rather have a meeting with my colleagues about how to help a certain student, about a program, about what our school should do to build morale, or a thousand things other than, "Okay; what can we put in here that will get us more money?" Maybe I'm wrong, but I'm just looking at it as a practical use of my time as a teacher.

I'm not against creativity and new ideas and the whole bit, but I don't know if that's the best way to get them, chasing a dollar. You know, if you're setting up a program so you can get a dollar, I guess I feel: just give me the money to run with a decent education program. Take three kids out of my class so I only have 27 instead of 30. Don't make me spend four meetings within two months with my entire staff trying to figure out how we can get more money. I know that wasn't the intent of it, but I think in some places that's what it's coming down to.

Of course, then we get situations where people who have more time to meet and plan figure out a good something to apply for. I

just see it as: in all my day of making sure that Johnny's parents know he missed second block, I've got to now meet to find out how we can get more money. You see my concern about it. Don't make me jump hoops to teach kids. Just let me teach the kids.

DR. OBERG: But if I can, though, I respectfully disagree with your statements. First of all, I believe that this program will be probably the most effective and best program we have seen in Alberta in the last 50 years. This will be a program that will allow us to use measurement, to actually measure some of the results we are getting, actually look at what are better ways to improve our schools. What we're drawing on is the creativity of teachers; we're drawing on the creativity of school boards. We're giving the school boards the autonomy and the flexibility that have been asked for already as to how to do that.

We're taking it actually one more step. We're saying to the school boards: what is it in your school system that you want to improve? For example, in Northland school district probably the biggest method of improvement is if they actually get kids to go to school. In the school that Gary was talking about, if they get ESL kids to finish high school, that's a huge improvement. What these dollars will allow the schools to do is put in different programs in order to look at them. Quite frankly, if they find programs that are effective, then I have no problem in putting them across the province.

The other thing that we're doing is setting up web sites so we can monitor as programs are going on, so we can monitor exactly what is happening in programs, what results are being seen. I have stressed to school boards that I don't care if these programs fail, and the reason I say that is that we learn just as much about the school system if a myth is broken down as opposed to actually finding something that works.

A good example is the early literacy program, where that went out and is absolutely working famously. What I'm hoping is that we get 20 or 30 or 60 more early literacy type programs with this. I think the day when we can say we'll just sit down and work with the student and do the best job is gone. We have to find ways to use technology. We have to find better ways to use technology optimal ways to teach these kids, and if it means changing what we do in universities, all these things, that's what this program is about.

The other thing I will say is that it's not about competing over dollars. These dollars are secure to the school boards. They are receiving \$120, I believe it is, per capita, per student, that they can use with this funding. So it is not about competing. It may be competing between schools for programs, but that money is guaranteed to the school boards.

MRS. SOETAERT: They don't have to come through you and say, "This is the program we're setting up"?

DR. OBERG: They do have to come for the program approval, but if that one program is not approved, then they still have the money that they can put towards another program.

MRS. SOETAERT: Okay. And that's the time-consuming part.

Could, then, a school say, "Listen; we want to hire a teacher to work with all our home schoolers and try to convince them to come back into the school"? Would that be approved?

DR. OBERG: Absolutely. If they have something there to measure that, if that's something they feel is an issue.

MRS. SOETAERT: Yes. Even if there are 140 kids in the area?

DR. OBERG: Absolutely.

MRS. SOETAERT: Okay.

MRS. DAVID-EVANS: Excuse me. There needs to be a measurement around how the children coming back into the system would improve their performance or overall schooling. It can't be just . . .

DR. OBERG: Or improve the kids' performance too.

MRS. SOETAERT: Okay. Since I'm on this one, home schooling is growing in some areas of this province. I mentioned this, I think, last year at this time. As a parent, if you are educating your child in the way you see fit, I respect that, but I have real concerns about, I guess the word is, evaluating some of those children.

I have seen where children have not been learning. I don't think they have been evaluated. I also have some concerns with – dare I say it without being sued for something – the one school that I don't feel does any follow-up, yet courts students to come into their program at the bonus of a computer or whatever it is. I am really concerned that we have children at home who are not getting the best education. I'm not saying that you can't work with those parents. Actually, Parkland has set up a pretty good person who is working with those parents. It's a concern of mine that some of the home schooled kids – and I don't mean to insult any parents who are doing that, but I have real concerns over not evaluation but the . . .

MRS. DAVID-EVANS: Achievement tests.

MRS. SOETAERT: Yeah.

DR. OBERG: Achievement, period.

MRS. SOETAERT: Well, yeah, and the evaluation of it, because I know some parents give the test right there and help them with it. I knew one man who was in a literacy program, and his children were being home schooled.

I just don't know the answer to it. I don't know if we need to evaluate those programs that are going out and what they do to follow up with evaluation and if those parents are getting the bang for the buck in those programs that they're in. So I guess I have concerns about it. I support the right to do that, but I also think there's a responsibility to show that your child is learning.

DR. OBERG: Colleen, if I can comment on that, I think you and I agree completely on this one. I certainly have concerns as well. One of the things we have tried to move towards is virtual schooling, which I believe is an improvement. It still has some issues when it comes to, for example, the parents helping out when the test is there. You're absolutely correct.

9:13

Parents do have the ability to make the choice to home school their kids in Alberta, and hopefully the majority of parents make that choice on a very sound basis and for sound reasons. But home schooling is a concern. My concern is not home schooling per se. It's for the students, ensuring that the students are getting a proper education. I will be completely frank with you. In some situations I know they're not. This has been brought to my attention by the Taber school board, where they have a very difficult group of people who believe that education is not important for their children, that their children should not be educated.

These are very difficult issues. We attempt to go in, but quite frankly in this society we cannot go in and seize the kids and put them in school. We're certainly working to improve our virtual schooling, our home school programs. We're working to improve it. We're working to have the school boards with more contact with

the children involved. Is the system perfect? No. The system isn't perfect, but we recognize that it's something we have to be diligent and vigilant about, and we'll hopefully continue to do that and continue to find better ways to do it.

MRS. SOETAERT: A couple more things before I give it over to our critic. I was pleased to see the money going into scholarships for advanced ed. I'm always concerned, though, about that average kid who isn't an honours kid. Often those who are very strong academically come from advantaged homes, not always but often from what I have seen. They come from a home that values education, that will make sure their children have the money somehow to go, or actually it isn't an issue that they have the money. So I'm thinking of the average kid from a home that isn't as financially advantaged as others. That child, I'd venture to say has a real grind to get through university when you're doing it totally on your own without parental support.

I think all of us here with kids in university have given parental support because it's a priority, and no matter what we're going to make sure they get through. The kids who don't have that who also aren't an honours type student, I just see them catching the biggest load of the debt and not having the financial support from behind.

I guess if I were to weigh out more scholarship money – and I'd hate to choose. I would say, then, don't increase tuition rates. Maybe that's just peanuts compared to not raising tuition rates. I see the student who walks away in high school with about \$5,000 to \$8,000 worth of scholarship money. That is wonderful. But the reality is that then she gets another \$1,000 or he gets another \$1,000 and this other 65, 70 percent kid is still without access to those dollars at all.

I don't know the balance, but I think I would choose trying not to increase tuition rates and hold off on new scholarship money for the very, very top, because some of them do get a good healthy chunk coming out of high school. Those are great. I support them. I support all the scholarships but, I've got to tell you, not at the cost of keeping tuition rates stable.

DR. OBERG: If I can comment on that. Your argument is a little bit on both sides of the coin, because when you freeze tuition fees, you actually freeze it for the people you just talked about, the people who can afford it, the people that have an interest in education, the people who will find the dollars to put their kids through school. You freeze it for both sides of things. You say that you shouldn't give a scholarship because the scholarships are going to people that don't necessarily need them. That's the rationale you just used.

MRS. SOETAERT: That's not quite how I would say it.

DR. OBERG: When you freeze tuition fees you do exactly the same thing. You're helping the people that don't necessarily need the help. Hence, that's why we put in all the money we were putting into the student loan side of things, so we can help the people that really need the help.

When it comes to tuition, we increased it \$300 this year, which more than matches the increase in tuition, and we increased that remission amount. We kept the amount that you would owe after a four-year education at \$20,000, and we increased the amount you could get. So we have increased the amount of remission. The whole idea behind that is so the kids who need the dollars can access the dollars.

With regards to the scholarship, we've had some successful programs, but I would say that one of the most successful programs we have ever had have been the Rutherford scholarships. This scholarship will be designed on exactly the same formula as the

Rutherford scholarship. This is also something that CAUS, the university students, and the college students actively lobbied me for: more scholarship money, more scholarships in the way of the Rutherford scholarships. They were the main ones that did this and said that that's what they wanted.

The other thing. If you noticed on the student loan side, we increased the amount of scholarship that each student can get before they have to declare it against their student loan, and for that exact reason: to promote the excellence. Again, I must say that this is the exact thing the university and college students asked me for.

MRS. DAVID-EVANS: And their earnings. We increased the level of earnings they can keep as well.

DR. MASSEY: I looked at the accessibility study put out by the students' union at the University of Calgary, and one of the questions they asked 12th graders was: when I think about the amount of debt I'll have when I finish and how long it's going to take to pay it off, do I have second thoughts about whether I continue my education? Then they looked at how students from different household incomes responded to that. Of those students from household incomes of less than \$30,000, 57 percent said that was a factor and they had reservations, while of those from families of \$50,000 or more income, it was 29 percent.

The large loans and the large tuition have a differential effect, depending on your family's income. If you come from a family that's low income, those big numbers scare you off. It's sticker-price shock. I think there's some pretty good evidence. The Harvard litigation journal or one of those journals did a study on the actual number of students that start making different choices at different levels. I guess it's been a concern, and I know the department has a study under way with the University of Calgary. What's the progress of that study?

MRS. DAVID-EVANS: We've just undertaken it, and we're doing it in conjunction with the student associations. We're concerned that there is that sticker shock and with some of the real issues there, about how you inform potential university students about the real costs and a number of other things. We're undertaking that. The terms of reference are being written, and we're in dialogue with the student associations to start that process.

DR. OBERG: If I may, Don. I think that process is absolutely critical. We don't want to deny access to anyone. I guess I have a little bit of an issue when we take a look at how after a four-year degree, if you qualify for the maximum in student loans, say, if you're at the lowest socioeconomic base, you're going to owe \$20,000, which is roughly the same as a new car loan.

DR. MASSEY: But what did you borrow before you ended up at the \$20,000?

DR. OBERG: Well, at \$20,000 you will have received about \$42,000.

DR. MASSEY: It's the \$42,000 that scares them off.

DR. OBERG: I know, but I guess what Maria was saying is that the issue is we have to put forward more about remission and ask: what is a better way to do that? You're absolutely right, Don. It is the \$42,000 that's the issue, but the \$42,000 is not what they have to pay back. I'll give you an interesting anecdote. Since the fall I've been talking a lot about student loans, a lot about remission. Our remission rates, because you have to apply for them, have gone up

dramatically. We are getting more money out to students through remission purely by communication. We're looking at changing our web site, changing our web page about student loans to get that information out to people that these remissions are available and that student loans are accessible. We haven't done a very good job of that up to date.

9:23

MRS. DAVID-EVANS: Dr. Massey, only 50 percent of the students who were eligible were making use of remissions.

DR. MASSEY: Some of them, when at the banks, couldn't find the remission forms.

MRS. SOETAERT: I don't even know about the remission forms, and I've got kids with that. You're saying that if they hit a certain debt load, they can get . . .

DR. OBERG: No. It's variable on each student loan. The maximum amount is \$5,000 per year that anyone will owe.

DR. MASSEY: It's not that students from low-income families are being denied access. It's that they're opting for cheap, short programs, something where they can get in and get out. You know, I don't think either one of us would ever want students making life career decisions based on how cheap the program is and how short it is.

DR. OBERG: Absolutely, Don. That's why we're entering into this study with the students' associations, to take a look at this and see what the actual effect of it is, and we'll see what happens.

DR. MASSEY: They're going to look at grade 10, 11, and 12 students from a variety of communities?

DR. OBERG: Yes.

DR. MASSEY: Great.

The other part. Colleen talked about it a little bit. You know, the scholarships are great. If you're a bright student, I don't think you can be denied an education in this province. There are all kinds of opportunities. But it's the 65s to 80s that I worry about in terms of their opportunity. I think there is a real struggle for some of them because they don't have access to the scholarship funds. They can't earn during the summer, like we could, enough money to pay tuition and board. Those kinds of jobs are not available for most of them. So it's that middle group that I have some concern about.

If I could, while we're on tuition, is there any thought of reviewing the 30 percent cap? We had a 20 percent cap as our proposal. I wonder if we aren't both wrong-minded in terms of trying to set caps. Once all the institutions get there, there'll be a period, I suspect, when they start playing around with: what does 30 percent mean? They've already done that. What does it include, and what does it exclude? It seems to me that 10 years down the road the long-term problem of financing postsecondary education won't be resolved unless we now start thinking about it and looking at some alternatives to tuition caps. The institutions are, I guess, going to be up against it once they hit that limit.

DR. OBERG: Yeah. Just two points. First of all, when it comes to the funding, we are again putting in a funding review, starting within the next week or so, about postsecondary education, looking at the different funding envelopes. One of the issues the universities and colleges came to me with was that they didn't like the funding envelopes. I said: "Okay I'll get rid of them. Give me the outcome

indicators, and I'll get rid of them." This is what we're in the process of doing: looking at ways to better fund, to more fairly fund.

I'll give you another example, Don. I have some institutions that are decreasing significantly, like a 20 percent decrease, in enrollment, yet they're still getting the same amount of grants. We have to take a look at how changing the funding system would affect these different universities. They don't have a whole lot of control over their enrollment, so we have to take a look at that.

The second point I wanted to make is the whole idea of the cap. I think the cap is a good idea. I think the individual cap on tuition fees is a good idea, where we say that it can be at most – \$243.50?

MRS. DAVID-EVANS: Yes.

DR. OBERG: That's the most it can go up on average within a year. Within an institution certainly there can be some programs that go up more than other programs, but the average can only be \$243.50. I think that's good.

I've talked to the people who put in the tuition cap at 30 percent, and I think they did not necessarily look beyond the 30 percent. We actually have our first institution that has reached the 30 percent cap, and they are still one of the lowest tuition fees. So what they have done is reached it through efficiencies, through cutting down their costs.

That leaves another school of thought: that we in effect are punishing them for their efficiency. This is something we have to deal with. I believe in the tuition cap. I believe it sends the right message. I believe in the individual cap. But when the universities get to that 30 percent, if they get to that 30 percent, we also have to take a look at that and find out the reason they got to that 30 percent. If it's because their expenses have come down, perhaps we need to take a look at something, because they're doing the right things.

DR. MASSEY: While we're on the universities, one of the figures in one of the staff bulletins was the loss of full-time professors and the very large increase in the number of sessionals now being used at universities to deliver instruction. Is that a concern to the department?

DR. OBERG: Well, first of all, when it comes to the loss of full-time or sessional, I will say to you that my concern is with the students' education. How the universities elect to do that is up to the universities. It's my job to look after the students' education and ensure that they're getting an education. If the universities find that they are better to use sessional instructors, then that's their decision. It's their autonomy on how to do that.

DR. MASSEY: You know, it sounds good, but what if they're forced into that because of finances? When you think of going to university, at least I would hope students would be exposed to some of the best thinking in the field that they've chosen. Sessionals are great, but the study I looked at showed there is a huge increase in sessionals, and a lot of those were part-time. I think the commitment to an institution is quite different than when they're there for a course or two courses a week.

DR. OBERG: Again, if I can, it is up to the university to make that distinction between full-time and sessional. Do I see a day when everyone is sessional? No. Do I see a day when everyone is full-time? No. It's a matter of getting that mix. I'm sure you know this, but I will say that the ICORE funding, which I believe is \$10 million a year – it's not in my department but through Dr. Lorne Taylor's department – is to recruit and retain professors. That's solely what that is for. There's the chairs program that was recently announced

by the federal government, which, again, I believe we're going to be receiving the lion's share of actually. Are we 50-some?

MRS. DAVID-EVANS: Oh, at least 60 in the University of Alberta alone.

DR. OBERG: I think that's the University of Alberta alone that will be receiving funding for those chairs. The other thing is the science and research endowment of \$500 million. All these things will certainly allow there to be more professors and more full-time professors.

Again, what I will say, Don, is that I'm not going to enter into that issue, because that is the university board of governors' decision, and it's their autonomy on how to do it. If the point is on the dollar side, then that is my issue, and that's why we increased roughly 7.7 percent overall. Some of the institutions got the lion's share of that or got more than that. The University of Calgary, for example, received about a 10 percent increase in funding over the last year. These are the types of things that are there.

DR. MASSEY: Do you have the same information on constant dollars for the secondary institutions as you do for the K to 12 system that you said was available, where you go back to '93? Do you have that information?

DR. OBERG: I don't have it with me, Don, but I can certainly get it for you.

DR. MASSEY: I'd be interested in seeing that.

DR. OBERG: If I can, though, on that. The one big difference between the postsecondary and the K to 12 is that the K to 12 only dropped the cumulative 4.77 percent over the two or three years of cutbacks whereas the postsecondary was at 21. So there is a difference in that. We are not as good in the inflation and enrollment figures in postsecondary as we are in the K to 12.

DR. MASSEY: You're still doing catch-up there.

Can I just bounce over to something? One nice thing about this format is you get to touch on some issues and come back to some of the questions.

First, on the Catholic boundaries. If you pull that one off, you can be assured of our support, if you can get that resolved. I'm saddened to see it come to this, having worked in the city with a Catholic board and a public board that just worked very well together. We just had things very, very easy between us.

9:33

DR. OBERG: I may hold you to that, Don.

DR. MASSEY: Yeah. Okay.

One of the complaints I hear from boards is on earmarked funding. It's the same complaint I hear from you and your colleagues about federal funding being earmarked.

DR. OBERG: You mean it doesn't just work one way?

DR. MASSEY: No, it doesn't just work one way.

The literacy. They're always quick to say: "Oh, yes, we think the money's great. AISI: it's good to have the money, but it's all earmarked." Is that a concern? I'm sure it's been raised by the associations.

DR. OBERG: Yeah. Absolutely. Do you want me to comment on these?

DR. MASSEY: Yes, please.

DR. OBERG: The literacy funding is being rolled into the general grant, and that will be after three years. The AISI funding I hope will do exactly the same thing, that it will be rolled in. What this is, first of all, is an attempt to get boards to do the initiatives and get the results, and then we will roll these into the overall dollars.

You're absolutely correct. We can't have it both ways, and in this budget especially I'm trying to give as much flexibility as possible to the school boards to what they can do with those dollars.

DR. MASSEY: The health initiative. When I looked in the budget – I haven't got the figures in front of me – it looked like the reporting was that there was \$25 million and about \$14 million of it had been spent. Is that . . .

DR. OBERG: That's purely on the school year issue.

DR. MASSEY: Okay. Twenty-five million will be spent.

DR. OBERG: Right. It's a school year versus a budget year.

DR. MASSEY: Okay. Good.

The fetal alcohol syndrome students. The old manual – and I haven't looked at the most recent one – wouldn't allow students to be coded. Is that still the case?

DR. OBERG: Two things, Don. First of all, they can be coded on fetal alcohol syndrome. Actually, I just talked to a school board on Friday. I spoke at a fetal alcohol syndrome conference, and they are being coded more. The other thing I will say is that I am extremely unhappy with all our special funding issues. We're in the process of looking at that, and we hope to have a resolution by September. I think there's a huge amount of problems with our special-needs funding, and we have to look and find a better way to do it. As I've talked to teachers all over the province, they've all said the same thing. So there has to be something wrong with it, and we have to find a better way to do it.

DR. MASSEY: They're spending too much money trying to access the funding, too much time and effort and paper.

DR. OBERG: And money, Don. An average assessment costs about \$1,000. Certainly from the school board's point of view, if they spend \$1,000 and get \$12,000, it's a good budgetary item, but from my point of view that's \$1,000 that isn't going into the classroom. These are the issues we'll be looking at, and hopefully we can find a better way to do it.

DR. MASSEY: You mentioned administration. I heard from the Lethbridge board that one of the things that's happened with the cutbacks and the envelope is that there was a whole group of experts across the province, mathematics supervisors and early childhood specialists, whom boards had employed. I talked to the Lethbridge board some time ago, and they were pulling a 10th grade math teacher and asking her to take on some responsibility for district leadership in terms of the changes in the math program and all that trouble that went around the applied and pure mathematics. Their lament was that they had lost that ability and they had lost those people that had provided leadership. Is there any thought of how that can be accommodated? It just isn't very efficient in terms of the way the money's being spent.

DR. OBERG: Yeah, there are two things. First of all, particularly in

the Lethbridge area they've hired two part-time people to go around and sort of be the mathematics experts. I've talked to them, and they're actually wonderful people that are doing it. Their contract unfortunately expires I believe this year or next year, and we have to look at that.

You know, for every cloud there's a silver lining. The cloud of course is the math curriculum. The silver lining is that we've learned an awful lot about the math curriculum. We did not do a good job when we put it in. We did not do good in-servicing. We have learned from that, and that won't happen again. We're still trying to catch up to the issues that were raised with the math curriculum, and we have to find a better way to in-service teachers.

We kept up the money to the consortia, which was \$900,000 we gave to the consortia. In talking to a lot of the school boards, though, there still seems to be a better way. One of the things I will be approaching the department with is whether or not there's a sort of regional team of experts that can be called upon or something along those lines, but I feel that those people are best employed by the department to go out and troubleshoot with the individual school boards on specific issues around curriculum. That's one of the things we will be discussing and will be looking at.

As I say, we do have to do a better job when it comes to getting the curriculum across to our teachers. The math experiment was a huge example of that, and we've learned a lot from it.

DR. MASSEY: Okay. We have to be careful about the enthusiasts that you have within the department, how much they have to say in terms of a new program.

DR. OBERG: No, no.

MRS. DAVID-EVANS: They have learned a lot as well, Dr. Massey. That's why it's a Learning department.

DR. OBERG: They've been forced to learn an awful lot.

DR. MASSEY: Looking at the university requirements for teaching, the four-year program versus five years versus six years, most American states now are at a five-year minimum before you're credentialed, but the pressure of course on those institutions has been more with content. The push, the demand by boards and just the general public is that those people going into classrooms have strong content backgrounds, and the only way they end up being able to accommodate that is to extend the program. I wondered if there was any thought in terms of making it a minimum of five years?

DR. OBERG: No. I'm leaving that up to the institutions. I think what we have right now is a very good mix between the four-, five-, and six-year programs. I think they each serve a purpose. The danger in moving everyone to a five-year program is that we would have one year where there in essence would be no teachers put out or very few teachers put out, and that would cause a lot of chaos within our system.

The University of Alberta is quite content that they can put out their students in four years, and I think that serves a very good purpose. I'm not sure, and I don't know when I say this, but I think perhaps what we need to look at is: what is a better teacher? Is the five-year teacher a better teacher than a four-year teacher, better than a six-year teacher? I think those are some of the evaluations that have to be done to find out exactly what is the optimum time.

DR. MASSEY: Those are the same arguments we had when we went from one year to two years to three years to four years.

DR. OBERG: Yes. Five years to six years.

DR. MASSEY: We survived it.
Just one last thing and then I'll let Colleen . . .

MRS. SOETAERT: Just on that one . . . Sorry.

DR. MASSEY: You should never give her an entry.

MRS. SOETAERT: You can see I'm well loved.

Just on the concern that we most likely could have a shortage of teachers in this province in a while. There used to be an old bursary program where if you committed to teaching in the area you came from or committed to – I don't know if that was a school board or a government initiative, but it gave the opportunity for people to go back to their community or to a community and commit for two years and often end up staying there for a lifetime. So areas in this province that already have a hard time keeping teachers – I don't know. Does that make sense?

9:43

DR. OBERG: Some of the northern school districts still have that, but it is a school board type of bursary. I'm a little philosophically opposed to that. That's been stated in health care as well with physicians.

I think physicians and teachers should have the ability to move wherever they want within the province, and if they want to come back to their home community, then it should be done because they want to be there as opposed to the monetary issue. I have no problem giving bursaries to students to become teachers, but I think it's very difficult for us to keep a teacher against their will someplace where they don't want to be, and in effect we may be doing that.

MRS. SOETAERT: Well, I mean, you could take the bursary on that condition, knowing that you are going back there. So I wouldn't see it as against their will. But that's splitting hairs, I guess. I'll let you finish.

DR. MASSEY: Go ahead. Start on your list.

MRS. SOETAERT: Okay. I had a few things. One of the things that concerns me, that has been an issue, for example, in St. Albert protestant, is the utilization rate. We have Bellerose comp at 10 percent, and then we have other older schools that are at 45 percent, which I know is a problem across the province. One of the suggestions they had was: could you have three levels of utilization rate; like, one for high school? Because you cannot – well, I guess you could if you had too, but splitting up a high school program to go to an elementary school isn't practical. Do you know what I'm saying? You can't have the grade 10s from Bellerose at Lorne Akins. It's not practical, and it wouldn't work. Well, I don't think it could be done. So they're wondering if that utilization rate could be based on high school, junior high, elementary.

DR. OBERG: I don't know on that, Colleen. That's under the Department of Infrastructure. They're the one's who look after that formula completely.

MRS. SOETAERT: I've had different comments about the split of the school buildings going to Infrastructure on both sides. One guy finally said: well, maybe they have somebody who understands buildings. I don't know. I've heard both. All right then. So utilization isn't within your department.

DR. OBERG: That's right.

MRS. SOETAERT: Transportation funding, however, is. I was at an Alberta school transportation advisory council convention, and one of the questions and concerns one of the major bus lines had was the reality of hiring good people for 9 bucks an hour. When we talk about the safety of our kids and the importance of getting to school safely and the responsibility of those bus drivers, this person was saying that in good economic times people have jobs that pay better than 8, 9 bucks an hour. She said that to keep regular drivers, when you consider they're paying 9 bucks an hour and they work two and a half hours in the morning and two and a half in the afternoon, it's really difficult to keep steady, good staff. Now, I realize that is an allotment from the school boards. But have you had that concern raised? [interjection] Well, that funding comes from the boards, I know. But have you had that concern expressed to you? Plus the rising fuel costs are an issue.

DR. OBERG: I haven't had the concern about the qualifications of the school bus driver. I haven't had that one raised. I've certainly had the issue raised about the cost of fuel. The bottom line on this is that the school boards have contracts, and they renegotiate their contracts each year. It's up to the school boards to take the contract which is best for them as opposed to cheapest for them. If they feel it is an issue with the amount that their bus drivers are paid, they have the ability to put that into the contract. This comes down to, you know, whatever system is providing the best service for that school board.

MRS. SOETAERT: This was the bus contractors paying their employees and being able to keep them at the money they got. That was just something I hadn't heard until then.

One of the things I was interested in – and maybe I haven't had a chance to totally read through all the plans – is the dropout rate. Where are we at with that? Are there incentives looking at that? I'm pleased to see somebody going yes, yes, because to me part of the dropout rate is being able to give those kids that need those different programs – I think of an example in one high school where they have somebody hired to phone home when somebody's not at school, and then funding cuts happen and that person's gone. I know in the big picture they think, "Oh well, that one can be gone," but they have no idea of the implications of phoning home and somebody following up on certain students. I think keeping them in school is just the wisest thing. I know everybody agrees on that. As far as saving dollars, I know we save dollars when we invest in them getting their education. So if there are any initiatives on that, I'd love to hear it.

DR. OBERG: Sure. One of the core performance measures – I'm just trying to find it here.

MRS. DAVID-EVANS: It's 235.

DR. OBERG: It's 235 they tell me.

Basically what we're looking at is increasing the rate of kids that finish high school, and I think that's absolutely critical. Obviously, we aren't going to increase postsecondary diplomas and the number that go through university unless we increase the number that graduate from high school. So this is something we measure, and it is something we are looking at increasing.

With regards to your question about phoning home, from what I understand the majority of schools actually do that now. They either phone home or many of them have an automated thing that calls after hours and says that their kid wasn't there, so most school boards recognize that as an issue and are doing something about it. I guess one of the problems is: should the principal be spending his time phoning home, as a high-paid person who has a lot of other responsibilities?

MRS. SOETAERT: What about teachers?

DR. OBERG: What's that?

MRS. SOETAERT: Well, if you're teaching four classes a day totaling 228 students, how do you do it?

DR. OBERG: Hence that's why a lot of school districts have gone to the automatic phoner after hours, when the parents are home.

MRS. SOETAERT: Yeah.

MRS. DAVID-EVANS: We're also undertaking a major study in trying to increase the number of completers of high school, and the target we want to hit is 75 percent completion rates. That's an improvement of 5 percent over our 70 percent right now.

DR. OBERG: The other thing on that is that I'm hoping some of the AISI money will be targeted towards that as well. As I said, the school boards have the ability to use that money there, and if one of their issues in a particular school is that their graduation rate is low, then what they have the ability to do is put in different programs or find different ways to increase the graduation rate from that school. If it means, you know, putting more programs in or talking to the students or guidance or anything like that, they have the ability to do that.

MRS. DAVID-EVANS: One other area that is of real concern for us is the completion rate of aboriginal children in school. If you take a look at the statistics, you'll see that's a much, much higher noncompletion rate. We right now have an aboriginal education funding policy review in the works, and those recommendations should be coming back to the minister in the fall. Hopefully that'll address some of those issues in terms of not only completion rates but getting aboriginal parents more involved in children's education and a few other things like that.

DR. OBERG: Potentially we could see – and it's still in negotiation – the opening of the first aboriginal high school in Edmonton in September.

MRS. SOETAERT: That is an issue for me; the Alexander band is within my riding. In the last couple of years they have had an administrator, and I would recommend you call him. I can't remember his last name. His first name is Art. He has a really tough attendance policy that the board has bought into, and they've hired a community liaison whose function is to keep kids in school. They truly celebrate those graduations with great ceremonies and recognition in the community. It's been quite significant the last few years at that school: the graduation rate is going up, and it's with a real commitment to learning from the community. So if you're looking for a school that's in the middle of doing it, I'll gladly recommend the one in my riding because they're just doing an amazing job.

MR. OBERG: Colleen, if I can, that in itself is one of the issues we have in education right now. We have school boards that are doing innovative and creative things, and they're not sharing it with other school boards. That's why under the AISI initiative we're having central data banks, so we can share it with all the different school boards and share their successes, because there are people that are doing this. People in southern Alberta, for example, aren't doing that, and they're having problems. We need to share that information around.

9:53

MRS. SOETAERT: Aren't they funded, though, through federal money?

MRS. DAVID-EVANS: Yes, they are.

MRS. SOETAERT: So then that communication probably isn't as free flowing as others. Do they qualify for AISI if they're funded? No, they don't. So that's probably why . . .

DR. OBERG: No. That may be why, but on the other hand they're more than welcome to use this system if they so wish, and I think it's essential that they do to find some of these things.

MRS. SOETAERT: Can you give me a reference? I know you have several, but certainly that school . . .

MRS. DAVID-EVANS: Treaties 6, 7, and 8 are involved in the research we're doing.

MRS. SOETAERT: Okay. So they'd be involved then?

MRS. DAVID-EVANS: Absolutely. Same with the Métis Nation; also involved.

MRS. SOETAERT: Okay. Anyway, good news out there.

I had a concern from a smaller school with low enrollment. It's in Parkland Village, which is a mobile-home area just outside Spruce Grove. However, I know I speak for several other communities with low enrollment, yet the reality of keeping that school in their community is very important, what it means to them. I know in isolated rural parts it's the same issue. Is there anything looking at those types of schools that now have low enrollments but are essential to the community? Have you looked at that, the special low-enrollment schools that are probably, but not in Parkland Village's instance, isolated but certainly a community unto itself, where it does a lot for the families as well as the whole keeping kids in school and involved in the community.

DR. OBERG: One of the components of the funding formula is a sparsity and distance component.

MRS. SOETAERT: This doesn't qualify for sparsity.

DR. OBERG: They may not, but the issue comes down to the priorities the school boards have. Many school boards will keep these small schools open despite decreased enrollment. For example, I've a school in my constituency that has an enrollment of probably about 25 people, but the reason it has 25 people is because quite literally it is 60 miles from anything. That's one of the issues. Do the rest of the school kids subsidize that school? Yes, they do, and we recognize that.

On the other hand, the school board has made a commitment to those parents and those students that those kids in K to 6 are not going to ride the bus for two hours, and I think that's an absolutely valid, valid issue. Where there's low enrollment and there's another school very close, then I think we have to take a look at that and see exactly: should these two schools be combined to get the economies of scale? Those are the tough decisions the school boards have to make.

MRS. SOETAERT: It's interesting, Lyle, that on one hand you support local autonomy when it's a difficult decision like, "Oh, they have to decide which school's gone," and on the other hand, "Well,

I'm going to interfere with where the program is." So I just caution you that you're playing both sides of the fence there, and you get a sore butt sitting on the fence.

DR. OBERG: On the flip side, Colleen, so are you, because you're asking us to get in and do these certain programs that are school boards' responsibilities. School boards have responsibilities.

MRS. SOETAERT: And funding is required for programs; right? I mean, there's no doubt.

DR. OBERG: Absolutely.

MRS. SOETAERT: So it's just an interesting relationship that I think elected officials at all levels have with each other. It's a fine line we walk because if it seems that it's hot, we can pass it to the school board, and if it's not, we can take the credit for it. I mean that collectively, so it's just interesting.

One other thing that one school in my riding was talking about is the funding for a blind child in their school. The funding they get is just not sufficient to cover the costs of providing for that student at a local school level, and the ethics of taking from other programs to support that one has administrators in a quandary. I mean, they do, they provide the education for that child, but it is at the cost of funding coming from other education programs. I guess the issue we are looking at as we educate high-need students in local schools is a funding issue, to be able to properly provide for it without affecting the other students.

DR. OBERG: Yeah. I guess until I see the exact circumstance, I can't really decide.

MRS. SOETAERT: Okay. Could I get that to you?

DR. OBERG: Absolutely.

So right now what they get is a little over 12 and a half thousand dollars. Again, that's expected to be an amount that is averaged over the school board, so there's nothing stopping the school board, if they want to, from putting more money into it. Actually, it's not \$12,000 they get; they get \$12,000 plus \$4,000. So they actually get very close to \$16,000, or a little better than \$16,000, per student. That's what the school board has to work with for that student.

Where there are problems – and this is one of the reasons we're looking at a review as well – is where there is only one student in a school that needs it. I will certainly admit that there are problems there, but that's what we need to look at. Perhaps we can free up funds somewhere else to provide for that kid where there's only one kid. If there were two kids, there probably wouldn't be a funding shortage. So these are some of the issues we have to look at.

MRS. SOETAERT: I see under 3.2 that there is an increase for private schools of 3.9 percent and public schools . . .

DR. OBERG: Just hang tough.

MRS. SOETAERT: Sorry; 3.2.

DR. OBERG: At 3.2?

MRS. SOETAERT: Grants to postsecondary institutions, 3.2. Then the private colleges got an increase of 3.9 percent and public colleges an increase of 3.2. I'm just wondering about the discrepancy there.

DR. OBERG: Basically what some of this issue is is to do with access and is to do with performance, and that's how it's given out.

There are no such things in postsecondary as you getting a standard grant. Perhaps what happened this year is that some of the private universities received a little bit more in access, or perhaps they received more in performance, but it's all formula driven as to how those dollars are given out. There is not a set "they get 3 percent increase." It's going to vary from year to year.

MRS. SOETAERT: Okay. Thank you for explaining that.

I'll let you go, Don.

DR. MASSEY: Okay. I couldn't leave without asking about class size. It was mentioned in the throne speech, yet there doesn't seem to be any one initiative in the budget that addresses it.

I've looked at class size legislation in some of the American states, and some of it is very, very prescriptive and has resulted in a number of problems. I guess I would like you to talk about class size, particularly K to 3. Again, I was talking to a kindergarten teacher at the convention on Friday with 28 students in her kindergarten in the morning, 29 in the afternoon. In the meeting we were at with Rob Loughheed, a kindergarten teacher there stood up and said she had 52 students in total, morning and afternoon. Very large. In that little survey we did, with about 80 percent of kindergarten children, from that sample anyhow, 17 or better in terms of class size. So I guess my question is: why was there not an initiative? I mean, there are other earmarked initiatives: early literacy, AISI, those things. Why was there not a specific, you know, program or target set?

In considering it, it seems to me that if you look at what happened south of the border, they ended up with some other problems. For instance, they didn't have enough school space. When they put in a class size reduction program, they had youngsters in all kinds of double shifting and all kinds of bad situations. I don't think it's a simple thing to deal with, and I can understand that. It has implications. They didn't end up with enough teachers to teach the classes, and in some cases the suspicion was that it caused more difficulty for children than it actually helped.

So I just wondered what your thinking is now on class size. If I could have predicted before the budget, I would have predicted that you would have had something that was earmarked.

DR. OBERG: Yeah. Again, though, this goes back to the point I was making about the earmarked funding. What I attempted to do in this budget was give the school boards as much flexibility as possible. With the AISI funds, that's where I see a lot of work being done on class size, especially in the K to 3. I'm sure you've heard that wherever I talk, I talk about K to 3 class size and getting that class size down. I really strongly believe in that. You know, I've read those issues as well, and there are a lot of issues that are out there. Perhaps the most confusing one for me is that in the study that was done in Tennessee, at 17 you saw improvement, but at 18 you didn't, and when you get specifically to that number, to me it seems like it's very dependent on the kids that are in the class. If you have, for example, two to three special-needs kids in a class, perhaps the class size should be 10 or perhaps it should be 12. If you have all upper socioeconomic kids who are very motivated, perhaps it should be 21 or 22. The other thing is that that study was done in Tennessee, which obviously is a different population than ours.

10:03

What I think we need to do is to get some studies out there. We need to see exactly what happens in different areas across the province, and we need to be able to validate this. If we can validate this, Don, I will be the first person out there pushing for legislation or pushing to have it earmarked in the budget that the class size must be down, and I'll give you my commitment on that. But I've looked at all the different things as well, and I'm just not a hundred percent

sure on the validation that is out there. I think there are still some issues that need to be looked at. For example, the class size project in Edmonton has actually dropped the classes down to between 13 and 14, somewhere in there – and we'll see what happens with that – in the high-needs types of schools.

MRS. SOETAERT: Sorry to interrupt, but I know one of the teachers that was hired there, a young second-year teacher, who said that it's just amazing what they can do with these kids and how they like to come to school because they get fed as part of it. Truly. We're talking kids that truly need a smaller class size, so I'm hoping the results of that – I mean, to me they're a given, but I'm sure it will be documented.

DR. OBERG: Yeah, absolutely. But if I were to mandate 17, what you would see is every school board aiming for that 17 figure. I prefer to give them a little bit of flexibility until it's proven, give them the flexibility to go down to 12 in some high-needs schools, you know, 18 or so in some schools that are not high need. Let's get the evidence in, and then let's do something about it.

DR. MASSEY: The Tennessee and the SAGE project are one of the first where they really had control and experimental groups so that you could have some confidence.

I guess one of the things that concerns me is – you know, achievement has to be what you look at, but there were so many other things that weren't factored in that teachers in those projects talked about, the number of youngsters who said: I don't get distracted as often when there are 17 as when there are 25. So a lot of other things are going on too, and I'm sure the Edmonton project will pick some of that up.

DR. OBERG: Absolutely.

DR. MASSEY: I've looked at the figures. School boards report numbers in grades. They don't report class sizes to the department. You can't tell how many grade 1 classes there are in a jurisdiction.

MRS. DAVID EVANS: PTR ratios is all we have.

DR. OBERG: But just on that, though, the PTR ratio I never use, because it's completely unreliable.

DR. MASSEY: I agree. I think it's been a false sort of comparison.

MRS. DAVID EVANS: Dr. Massey, if I could add, the pilot project that the minister has funded in the Edmonton area is also going to look at teacher methodology. One of the things we know is that if you maintain the same kinds of teaching techniques when you have 28 kids as you do for 17, it's not going to give you the maximum value for the 17. The other thing it's going to look at is what kinds of techniques need to be implemented with different class sizes, different populations. The other thing that I would just add is that under AISI, 60 percent of the measures are local measures, and if the measures in the local area feel that kids are coming to school and liking it more or whatever those measures are, they will be taken into consideration as well as the achievement tests.

DR. MASSEY: You talked for a minute about charter schools. Where do you see them going? It's certainly not been the kind of success story that we had hoped it might be when they were first introduced. I look at the Auditor General and his criticism of the boards. The department, I understood, took some measures to try to work with those boards in terms of what it means to be a trustee.

Where do you see the movement going? More charter schools for the province?

DR. OBERG: I'll sort of cross that bridge as we come to it. As you know, we're sitting at 10 right now, of which nine report directly to the department, directly to me, so there is no school board or school trustees that look after these.

DR. MASSEY: Parent groups.

DR. OBERG: Parent groups involved, absolutely. The other interesting point is that the parents are extremely satisfied with these charter schools.

Are charter schools going to be eliminated? No, I don't think they are. Are charter schools going to expand dramatically? No, I don't think they are. What I like and what I would prefer is the concept of magnet schools, which is what is taking place in Edmonton and hopefully will soon take place in Calgary, where parents have the choice as to where they send their kids, and I think that choice component is extremely important.

I think that if Calgary moves to that concept, the number of charter schools seen will go down. As you know, we're in the process of looking at all the regulations with regard to charter schools, and we'll be making some decisions about the issues that are out there. But when you talk to the parents in charter schools, they are extremely, extremely happy about what is happening to their kids, and I think that has to be something we take into consideration as well.

DR. MASSEY: How are we for time?

THE CHAIRMAN: We have one minute.

DR. MASSEY: Before it goes, I wanted to really thank the minister and his staff and our colleagues across the table. I'm sure some of this is old hat to you, because you discuss these issues in caucus, but this is our first chance to get that same kind of firsthand information from the minister. We really do appreciate being allowed this kind of a format, Mr. Chairman, and certainly the patience of the colleagues across the table.

MRS. SOETAERT: And I think we've been polite.

DR. MASSEY: Colleen has even been polite. Now, that's a first. That's progress.

I would like to ask about parent fund-raising and Campus Alberta and some other things, but there'll be some other opportunities.

Thank you again.

THE CHAIRMAN: Thank you.

Now that we're at the end of the Official Opposition section, we move on to the next, which is specifically allocated to the Member for Edmonton-Strathcona. Hearing no questions from the member, we then move directly on to the last section, which is dedicated to government members. Could those who wish to ask some questions just give me an indication by raising your hand so that I can make a list, and we'll proceed to identify you.

Mary.

MRS. O'NEILL: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Mr. Minister, I wanted to ask you two questions. They are not related. The first one has to do with the allocation of funding for chairs, specifically at the universities and to be more specific at the University of Alberta.

DR. OBERG: The new chairs program?

MRS. O'NEILL: The new chairs program. Could you explain it a little bit further?

The second one was: could you articulate in layperson's terms how the formula for the remission of loans to the maximum of \$20,000 actually works – it used to be \$19,000 and something – and whether that amount of money is totally remitted or how it is factored in, et cetera. Those are things that I'm finding even when meeting with the members of the student governance particularly at the universities. They don't quite frankly understand it either. They aren't conveying it as I believe they should.

DR. OBERG: First of all, the new chairs program will result in between 50 and 60 chairs at the university. These are full-time, I assume tenured, positions that will be added to the university from the professors. This is funded out of the program from the federal government, and the money goes directly to the university to fund these. It is up to the university as to where these chairs go. They had to put in an application form to get the number, and again, as I said, the U of A and the U of C got by far the lion's share of the chairs from across Canada.

MRS. O'NEILL: May I interrupt you to just ask: is that a onetime allocation, or is it a trust?

DR. OBERG: It is a onetime allocation with continued funding. So, for example, they just don't pay the chairs for one year. The chair position is continued on, but there will not be 50 this year and another 50 on top of the 50, for a total of 100 next year.

10:13

MRS. O'NEILL: Is it an endowment process?

MRS. DAVID-EVANS: The federal government hasn't come out with all the regulations around this, and they're working with the universities across Canada to come up with the regulations, so we're not able to answer all your questions simply because the regulations around when and how much haven't been all identified yet.

DR. OBERG: With regards to the student loan remissions, perhaps I'll let Maria answer that one.

MRS. DAVID-EVANS: The remissions are based on financial need, and I think that's the critical key in terms of layperson's language. In other words, if you graduate from university with a \$40,000 debt, let's say, and you are a professional who is earning \$40,000 or \$60,000, you may not have the capacity to move your remission back. If you graduate from university and the income that you're making – because it's based on the income you're making – is half that amount, then you can look at remission. Remission is graduated, and it takes into account each individual person's circumstances.

The point that I think is really important to make here is that if you've borrowed fully and you've not had good marks and you've got a job that is paying you really well, you probably won't see much remission. If you've had an opportunity to make use of bursaries and grants, if you still had to borrow over \$5,000 a year to \$8,000 and you didn't have anything kick in in terms of scholarships and you're making a low salary when you graduate, then you have an opportunity to address the remissions, and that will be based on each individual person's income.

MRS. O'NEILL: So when you quote the amount \$20,000, you're not saying literally that that is remitted. For me, remitting something means you don't pay it.

DR. OBERG: Yes, we are. What Maria is not quite correct on is that if you borrowed \$40,000 and the reason you would have gotten the \$40,000 was because of financial need – at the \$40,000 level the most you will have to pay back is \$20,000. So the most that any student will have to pay back in Alberta is \$20,000. The rest is remission.

MRS. O'NEILL: The most for someone. So it's over and above the \$20,000.

Now, I'm sorry, but it's something I have to try to explain very frequently. If, for instance, an individual has accumulated a debt of, say, \$18,000 after four years and they're really struggling, is there any way that there's any remittance of a portion of the \$18,000?

DR. OBERG: I'm sorry. If they've already had the remission and they owe \$18,000?

MRS. O'NEILL: No. They have a debt of \$18,000 when they finish their four years. So no matter what their circumstances are – in other words, they're also going to have to work out a payment plan, but they don't get any of that remitted? Is that what you're saying?

DR. OBERG: No. If it's \$18,000, they will still get a partial remission, yes. We'll get back to you on that.

MRS. DAVID-EVANS: We'll get you a real good explanation.

MRS. O'NEILL: It's in order to give those entering the postsecondary institutions a bit of a heads-up, first of all. Also it's to eliminate those who are going in – because there is a little bit of a buzz around there that, yes, you can borrow up to \$20,000, but it's remitted in Alberta, so you won't have to pay it back.

DR. OBERG: It's not full remission.

MRS. O'NEILL: And that's what I'm trying to figure out.

DR. OBERG: The other thing I must say as well is that there is remission on the Alberta student loan, but there's no remission on the federal student loan.

MRS. O'NEILL: But we are the ones who administer it.

MRS. DAVID-EVANS: But there is no remission on the federal loans.

DR. OBERG: Yeah. The federal government does not remit their loans.

MRS. O'NEILL: But we administer the loans.

DR. OBERG: Yes.

MRS. O'NEILL: So that's where it always gets confusing.

MRS. DAVID-EVANS: Yes. They view it as ours.

MRS. O'NEILL: Thank you.

DR. OBERG: You're welcome.

MRS. O'NEILL: If you would get back to me, I'd really appreciate it.

DR. OBERG: Yes.

THE CHAIRMAN: All right. LeRoy, then Jocelyn.

MR. JOHNSON: I found this to be a very informative session, Lyle, and a lot of positive things are coming out of your department which I'm very happy to hear. I want to follow up on a couple of things though. One is the teachers' certification. I was happy to hear you talk about certification of I guess the imports, those coming here from other provinces, without difficulties and without having to take extra courses necessarily. But is it working both ways? How about our students that complete their degrees going to other provinces? What's happening there?

DR. OBERG: No, it isn't, LeRoy; it isn't working both ways. But what I'm hoping is that on the federal scene, by us doing that and accepting their accreditation, it will put pressure on them to do the same for us. I'll speak very callously here, but realistically we need more teachers, so if they put barriers to our teachers going elsewhere, it helps our teachers to stay here. Again, I'm speaking very callously, but that's exactly the message I gave to the rest of the ministers of education of Canada, so it's up to them to respond to us as opposed to us responding to them.

MR. JOHNSON: I guess in that sense it might help if we were a little more consistent in our own province in terms of the number of years of training we require. You mentioned that the U of A has four years, Lethbridge five, and Calgary six. My daughter was caught in that, and then she took four years at the U of A and went to B.C., where they required five years.

DR. OBERG: Yeah, that's right.

MR. JOHNSON: Those are some problems, I guess, that have to be worked out.

Another question. I was happy to hear what you had to say about teacher morale. I think that is an issue, and I'm glad to hear it is being addressed, so I applaud you for that.

The last point I would like to make or question is about SHIP, the student health initiative program. I would like to tell you that in my area it's going very well, and I think that as we have decentralized to a large degree and established children's authorities for the first time, there has been a challenge out there to bring the fragments together. The SHIP has done that very well in that particular area, and the children's services, education, and the rest are working together very well in our area. I'm very happy to see that, but in that regard I understand that SHIP is just one part of the Alberta Children's Initiative. I guess the fetal alcohol syndrome program is another part, and of course AADAC is very much involved in that. I've seen the groups work together very well, but I'm a little confused on what we really mean by Alberta Children's Initiative. What does it really include? Is it to be an umbrella program over many other programs? Can you just clarify that for me?

DR. OBERG: Sure, ask me all the tough questions. First of all, the Alberta Children's Initiative is meant to provide a macrolevel approach to dealing with children's issues. One of the problems we have had in government in general is that we've had a lot of silos of service delivery, and often these people don't talk to each other; often they give duplicate programs. All these types of issues are there.

What we're attempting to do is break those silos down; hence the new Alberta Department of Children's Services. All these issues are intended to break those silos down. We are an important component of the Alberta Children's Initiative in that we look after student health. The reason we look after student health is because it's in the

school, and it seemed kind of ludicrous to have the health authority providing speech, to have social services providing community liaison, the Learning department doing something else and the school board doing something else. So we brought it together under the initiative in the schools. There are a lot of other children's initiatives going on. Preschool, for example, in many cases is through this. It's an attempt to break these down.

MR. JOHNSON: So who's actually in charge? Which department is in charge of the Alberta Children's Initiative? Is it Children's Services?

DR. OBERG: Children's Services is in charge. We are one component. It's a multilevel, multidepartment issue between I believe about five or six departments.

10:23

MRS. DAVID-EVANS: Six or seven now, actually.

I think the important point is that the Alberta Children's Initiative provides a cross-government direction for all departments that are involved with children. It provides for the same goals that all departments need to meet, and that's safe, healthy, successful-at-learning kinds of goals. Within those goals are a number of initiatives, and just in our business plan you'll see the same initiatives included in all the departments that are involved in this. They are everything from student health, the fetal alcohol that you mentioned, to the children's mental health program, which, I might add, is piggybacking on the student health program. The same partners are involved.

When the minister talks about the partnership on student health, the funds don't flow unless all the partners are jointly signatory in a co-ordinated plan for those particular areas. There's a new one, conception to age 6, that we're looking at as well because there are many issues around that, and our department is jointly co-chairing that with Health and Wellness. Certainly the Premier's Task Force on Children at Risk is another initiative under there. So there's a number of initiatives that all produce a measure of direction for all government departments involved with children.

MR. JOHNSON: Well, I certainly applaud the partnerships that are taking place. I think it makes for much more efficiency out in our areas.

DR. OBERG: Yeah. The other thing I'd like to say is that we're allowing the flexibility at the regional level for them to determine how that partnership will occur.

THE CHAIRMAN: Jocelyn, then Butch.

MRS. BURGNER: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Lyle, I just have one question relative to St. Mary's College, which is a private Catholic college operating in Calgary now. They have contacted me with respect to degree granting in their future. When we met with the colleges and technical institutes the other night, I raised the question about what legislation might be coming forward with respect to private colleges, et cetera. You indicated at that time that there would be something coming forward in I think you said the next 18 months from a legislation point of view, a review of all their acts. I may have misunderstood you in that.

DR. OBERG: We're reviewing their funding, but we're not reviewing their acts.

MRS. BURGNER: I had asked them the question: did they require anything in legislation to meet their needs in the future? The answer

– I thought there was something you spoke to that said you'd be reviewing their legislation in the future, because Alberta College of Art and Design is certainly looking for a slightly different model. Maybe you could clarify (a) what you might be looking at from a legislative point of view, and (b) what is the plan for St. Mary's?

DR. OBERG: Sure. First of all, I'll do it in reverse. What the plan is for St. Mary's is that they have to go through the Private College Accreditation Board, and each independent degree they choose must be approved by the Private College Accreditation Board through significant criteria that they have to do.

With regards to the legislation, there will be a review. I believe it's by 2001.

MRS. BURGNER: That's good, referring to that.

Is there anything in the process of the accreditation regarding St. Mary's – I guess my concern is: are they having any difficulties, or is it moving forward? Are you aware of any?

DR. OBERG: I am not aware of any difficulties. It is not what I would call an easy approach, nor should it be. There are a lot of criteria they have to get, and it's the same criteria that's applied provincewide to degrees. We had our first degree granting probably about 3 or 4 months ago. I believe King's college was one.

MRS. DAVID-EVANS: Yeah. Some of them have actually had it for a while.

DR. OBERG: So they have to go through the private college . . .

MRS. BURGNER: They have to go through it, and they do it for each degree. The fact that one has been affiliated with another college outside the province, that speaks to what you were saying earlier. You want to make sure that there are some standards and that things are all acknowledged and at a certain level.

Okay; that's my question. Thank you.

THE CHAIRMAN: Butch.

MR. FISCHER: I think I'll just pass.

THE CHAIRMAN: All right. Any other questions from government members? Seeing no further questions from government members, I'd call for a motion to conclude discussion of the estimates and to rise and report.

MR. FRIEDEL: I move that under Standing Order 56(8) the designated supply subcommittee on Learning conclude discussion on the 2000-2001 estimates of the Department of Learning and rise and report.

THE CHAIRMAN: Thank you, Gary. All in favour? Opposed? Carried. Thank you very much.

[The subcommittee adjourned at 10:28 a.m.]

