

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

Title: **Wednesday, May 4, 2005**

1:30 p.m.

Date: 05/05/04

[The Speaker in the chair]

head:

Prayers

The Speaker: Good afternoon and welcome.

On the Holocaust remembrance monument located on the grounds of the Alberta Legislature are found the following words: "I swore never to be silent whenever and wherever human beings endure suffering and humiliation. We must always take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the tormented." Those words were written by Elie Wiesel, a survivor of the Holocaust, a poet, and a Nobel peace prize recipient. As we pray, may God provide all innocent victims of racism and genocide eternal peace. Amen.

Please be seated.

head:

Introduction of Visitors

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Drayton Valley-Calmar.

Rev. Abbott: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is a great privilege and an honour for me to rise on this glorious Alberta day and introduce somebody who probably needs no introduction and that is because she was the MLA for the Drayton Valley constituency from the 19th to the 21st Legislatures for the Progressive Conservative Party. Currently she is a tireless volunteer in the riding and has taught me how to door-knock and how to get elected. So I would like the hon. Shirley Cripps to rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

head:

Introduction of Guests

Mr. Lougheed: Mr. Speaker, I'm pleased to introduce to you and through you to members of this Assembly a group representing the Multiple Sclerosis Society of Canada, Alberta division. I'd like to welcome Neil Pierce, the president of the MS Society, Alberta division, and Adeline Blumer and Christine Purvis, staff members of the society. They'll be joined shortly by Judy Gordon, a former member of this Legislature and a member of the board of directors of the MS Society. They're in the Speaker's gallery and I'd ask that they rise and receive the warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development.

Mr. Horner: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's indeed a pleasure for me to rise today and introduce to you and through you to all members of the House a group of 17 visitors from the constituency of Spruce Grove-Sturgeon-St. Albert, namely from the Living Waters Christian Academy in St. Albert. They're a great-looking group of grade 9 and 10 students who are very keen on what we do here and are interested in the proceedings. They are led by group leaders Mr. Keith Penner and Mr. Nikke Gauthier as well as parent helper Mrs. Alida Milne. I believe they are in the public gallery. I would ask them to rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Marz: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's a great deal of pleasure for me to introduce to you and through you Mrs. Margaret

Rodger from Acme and 38 other seniors from the Acme-Linden area that are here today to visit the Legislature. I learned just this last weekend from another senior in Acme that Acme was the former home of a very prestigious Albertan, the Hon. Helen Hunley, who was the first female Lieutenant Governor of the province of Alberta and the second female Lieutenant Governor in Canada. So I would ask the Assembly to welcome them all as they rise in the public gallery to receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Highwood.

Mr. Groeneveld: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Today I would like to introduce to you and through you to this Assembly 15 students from the Blackie school. They are accompanied by their teacher, Mrs. Margaret Speelman, and seven parents: Bev Bennett, Angie Scott, Jodie Parker, Jackie Pope, Heidi Siewert, Elsie Baker, and Deb Gore. This is the school that I graduated from, but please don't judge these students by my intellect. They are very bright students indeed. I believe they are scattered in both galleries, and I ask them to rise and receive the warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Cardston-Taber-Warner.

Mr. Hinman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It gives me great pleasure this afternoon to introduce to you and through you to this Assembly a dedicated Albertan and a colleague from the Alberta Alliance Party. Phil Gamache has recently been named the Edmonton region president of the Alliance Party. He was a candidate in the last provincial election, and he is committed to the citizens of Alberta, just as all of us are, in making our province better. I ask Phil and his wife, Carmen, who are seated in the public gallery today, to please stand and receive the traditional warm welcome of this group.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Battle River-Wainwright.

Mr. Griffiths: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a great pleasure to rise today to introduce to you and through you to members of this Assembly the future of rural Alberta and this province in general. We have 40 students from the Blessed Sacrament school with us here today, and they are accompanied by their teachers, parents, and group leaders Mrs. Folk, Mrs. Miller, Mrs. Smith, Mrs. Shopland, Mrs. Smith again, Mr. MacDonald, and Mr. Norris. They're seated in the public gallery. I would ask them to rise and please receive the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Drayton Valley-Calmar.

Rev. Abbott: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I also have some guests today in the public gallery. Earlier today some MLAs from central Alberta met with the ATA presidents from the same region, and we had a very excellent discussion about some important issues. I would ask if Jere Geiger and the other presidents of the ATA would just stand and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

head:

Ministerial Statements

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Community Development.

Yom ha-Shoah, Holocaust Memorial Day

Mr. Mar: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise today to recognize Yom ha-Shoah, Holocaust Memorial Day, which this year falls on the 5th of May. This week, as Canada and other countries celebrate the 60th anniversary of VE Day, Yom ha-Shoah reminds us of the price that the world paid as a result of the many horrific events of the Second

World War. The highest cost of all was to the 6 million Jewish men, women, and children who were systematically persecuted and eradicated by the Nazi regime. Yom ha-Shoah reminds the world of the atrocities of the Holocaust as well as the senseless killing of millions of others through acts of genocide. Memorial services will be held in Edmonton and in Calgary to honour the many victims of this horrific period of human history.

In 2000 the Holocaust Memorial Day and Genocide Remembrance Act was passed unanimously as an act of this Alberta Legislature. This legislation reaffirms Alberta's commitment to value the diversity of Alberta's cultural mosaic and to combat racism, violence, hatred, and persecution. The act reminds us how much the respect for justice, liberty, and human rights defines the way of life in our province, and the events of the Holocaust remind us of what can happen to civilized people when bigotry, hatred, and indifference reign.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Official Opposition.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's with great humility that I rise today along with the Minister of Community Development to acknowledge and reflect on Yom ha-Shoah, Holocaust Memorial Day. In 1959 Israel's parliament proclaimed a day to memorialize the 6 million Jewish people murdered during the Second World War. This day is known as Yom ha-Shoah. Shoah means whirlwind or destruction in Hebrew. Yom ha-Shoah is a day of remembrance and a day of hope. It is a remembrance that transcends all race, all religion, all humanity. We remember the unspeakable tragedies of the Holocaust in Europe, but we acknowledge all victims of genocide whether it be in Rwanda, Bosnia, or even present-day Sudan.

At the outbreak of the Second World War the Nazis' goal was to cleanse Germany of its Jewish population. As they conquered Europe, more Jewish populations fell under Nazi control. Jews in Poland, Ukraine, Italy, and France were methodically forced into concentration camps. The Holocaust evolved into the systematic and efficient murder of any person with Jewish roots. Six million people, including 1 and a half million children, were shot, gassed, or otherwise murdered. A full one-third of the world's Jewish population was entirely wiped out. Entire families simply disappeared.

1:40

So let us remember what today symbolizes. Yom ha-Shoah is observed around the world with candle-lighting, poems, prayers, and singing. It is a day of mourning and a day of hope. With the memories of concentration camps, of gas chambers, and of mass graves in our minds we must also remember the acts of courage, those who opposed the Nazis and risked everything to help the persecuted. They're called righteous Gentiles, a phrase used for non-Jewish people who risked their lives to save the Jewish during the Holocaust, people like Oskar Schindler; people like Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German pastor and theologian who was persecuted, imprisoned, and eventually killed because he valiantly opposed Hitler's regime.

In a world that continues to have the Bosnians, the Rwandas, and the Sudans, let us continue to recognize and help those who fight for the oppressed.

Thank you.

The Speaker: Hon. members, might we have unanimous consent to allow the hon. member for Edmonton-Strathcona to participate?

[Unanimous consent granted]

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Today is Holocaust Memorial Day, a day when we acknowledge and remember the horror of the wave of mass murder that swept across Europe during the Second World War. By the end of the war approximately 6 million people, mostly Jews, including 1.5 million children, perished at the hands of the Nazi murderers. The Holocaust remains one of humanity's darkest hours, and as such it will never be shelved as simply another moment in history. Indeed, for those who survived the concentration camps, for those whose families were violently torn apart, the Holocaust is a living and persistent reality.

As legislators and as citizens of a global community we have an obligation to ensure that each new generation understands the horror of the Holocaust and the ever-present possibility that humanity could plunge to such depths again. Indeed, if we are to be honest, we must acknowledge the atrocities of our own generation, such as the slaughters of Rwanda and the ongoing devastation in the Darfur region of Sudan.

On behalf of my colleagues in the NDP opposition and with all of the hon. members of the Assembly, I stand in remembrance of those who have suffered the horror of genocide and to renew our commitment to building peace throughout the global community.

Thank you.

The Speaker: Hon. members, might we have unanimous consent to allow the hon. Member for Cardston-Taber-Warner to participate?

[Unanimous consent granted]

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Hinman: Thank you. I am truly grateful and humbled also to be here today with this Assembly to recognize Yom ha-Shoah. I, too, would like to add how important our freedom is and the importance of remembering the horrific genocides of the past and the importance that we always have the courage and strength to defend people's rights to life, liberty, and property and that we are diligent at removing all the forms of hatred and persecution in our society and that we run and stand at the sides of those who are being persecuted.

Thank you.

head:

Oral Question Period

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

Calgary Ward 10 Election

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This government's unwillingness and ineffectiveness to get to the bottom of allegations and scandals is mushrooming. This government ignored requests for a full public inquiry from the Liberal opposition, the people of Calgary, Calgary city council, and even the Court of Queen's Bench in the ward 10 scandal. Instead, they copped out with a weaker public inspection that may now never find the truth. My questions are to the Minister of Municipal Affairs. Given that the ward 10 scandal goes straight to the corruption of democracy, why did the minister let down the people of Calgary by calling a public inspection instead of a full public inquiry?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Renner: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I want to make a couple of points very clear to the hon. member. First of all, the process that was instigated by this government and by this minister was designed to accomplish two things. First of all, it was designed to allow a police investigation to determine whether there were any irregularities that were contrary to the Local Authorities Election Act and lay charges against any individuals if that were the case. That has in fact taken place. Charges have been laid. The police were also to investigate to determine whether or not any criminal offences occurred as a result of this election. I understand that that investigation, in fact, is still ongoing, and that process is unimpaired by the inspection process.

At the same time, we appointed Mr. Bob Clark to conduct an inspection to determine whether there were flaws within the electoral system that needed to be corrected, and Mr. Clark was to conduct an inspection and provide the government with recommendations on where those flaws were and what should be done to correct them.

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the same minister: will the minister inform this House about any conversations he has had on this subject with the Member for Calgary-Montrose?

Mr. Renner: Mr. Speaker, I have had no conversations with the Member for Calgary-Montrose. The Member for Calgary-Montrose is a part of my caucus, I have conversations with him about many other things, but on this particular matter I thought it was inappropriate for me to have those kinds of conversations.

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Well, given that the Member for Calgary-Montrose is prepared to testify with what he says is a lot of information that may be interesting to the public, will the minister now call a full public inquiry?

Mr. Renner: Mr. Speaker, the reason the process that was implemented was chosen was so that it could allow for two concurrent processes to take place at the same time, the police investigation, which will arrive at any wrongdoing individuals, and an inspection, which will determine whether there were flaws within the system. This was a process that was specifically chosen to allow those two processes to go on concurrently. To do anything else would have required waiting until after the police investigation, which, I mentioned earlier, is still ongoing, before we get into the next step, and frankly I think Albertans deserved a lot better than that.

The Speaker: Second Official Opposition main question. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Enron Activities in Alberta

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Legal transcripts explicitly reveal Enron traders cavalierly joking about manipulating power markets in Alberta, yet the Minister of Energy continues to be evasive and to ignore all the evidence that shows that Enron ripped off electricity consumers here in Alberta. Meanwhile, several U.S. states have initiated lawsuits to return the illegal windfall profits of Enron to where they rightfully belong, in the pocketbooks of power consumers. My first question is to the Minister of Energy. Given that Project Stanley materials have shown up in a number of lawsuits and investigations in Texas and in New York, has the minister or his

staff contacted authorities in those jurisdictions where similar market abuses have taken place?

Mr. Melchin: Mr. Speaker, it was at the investigation insistence of both, clearly, our department and the market surveillance administrator asking for and requesting transcripts of one in particular, of Washington state. We have always been interested to make sure that we have the complete and full information of any evidence that's coming forth. That said, there have been some investigations in the past. This continues to be a subject that we've said is a serious matter for the market surveillance administrator. They will continue to act on any evidence that is brought forward. If they've got some new information, please bring it forward.

1:50

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again to the same minister: has the minister or his staff contacted the U.S. Department of Justice office in northern California where criminal indictments for similar offences have been issued?

Mr. Melchin: Mr. Speaker, with that specific instance I am not aware of it. If there are some more, we'll be happy to inform him later.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again to the same minister: given that the following Enron traders, John Forney, Jeff Richter, and Tim Belden, admitted – admitted – their guilt of power-price manipulation in the United States, how many of these greedy traders appear in the Project Stanley tapes conspiring to drive up prices here in Alberta?

Mr. Melchin: Mr. Speaker, Project Stanley at that time has been investigated. That does go back to a 1999 circumstance. It does also correlate specifically with a time when legislative hedges were in place. Alberta consumers were not harmed by this if they attempted to accomplish it. They were not because any excess volatility in price would have been returned to the Power Pool, in which Alberta's consumers would have been protected.

The Speaker: Third Official Opposition main question. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenora.

Policing Services in Crowsnest Pass

Dr. B. Miller: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Crowsnest Pass residents are stunned by the decision to hold back police funding for their community. This government has ignored legislation requiring them to provide more funding for police, has not lived up to its commitments to provide more policing to rural areas, and has behaved like a neighbourhood bully. My questions are to the Solicitor General. Can the minister explain specifically what part of the Police Act allows the government to supersede the Crowsnest Pass regulation, that is in effect until 2012?

The Speaker: Hon. member, we all know – and I've said this several times before – that interpretations of statutes are not purview and part of the question period.

Hon. minister, if you wish to comment, go ahead.

Mr. Cenaiko: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. The Crowsnest Pass regulation deals only with the calculation of grants. It is not applicable to the Police Act with regard to the fact that the province pays for policing to a certain threshold.

Mr. Speaker, I've met with the mayor on several occasions now, and we've discussed the issues. The special regulation under the MGA, the Municipal Government Act, does provide the community of Crowsnest Pass with the opportunity for provincial grants that they can receive, whether it's three small or four small communities or one large one.

The issue is that under the Police Act it's specific that the population threshold is 5,000. It's for policing grants, not for municipal grants. It's for policing grants, as was discussed with the mayor.

Mr. Speaker, we have to be very careful because this is a difficult situation, other than the fact that there are communities, like Ponoka, Rocky Mountain House, Peace River, all with the same population, which are all receiving roughly an increase of about 150 per cent in their policing grant this year, which will give them approximately a quarter of a million dollars, about \$150,000 more than they received last year. So these are some of the issues we're dealing with with the town of Crowsnest Pass.

Dr. B. Miller: When will the minister table the intimidating letter that was sent to the municipality of Crowsnest Pass, which the mayor described as being "like something out of *The Godfather* – we'll have your signature on this document, or your brains"?

Mr. Cenaiko: Well, Mr. Speaker, it wasn't an intimidating letter. It was a letter that was provided to me by the department, which drafted it. It was also in consultation with the Minister of Justice, with regard to the fact that we did get an interpretation of the act from Justice to ensure that our position was just in fact that, that they are treated as a municipality that is over 5,000 as their population is 6,200. Therefore, the letter did go out. They have an opportunity to sign the agreement and receive a cheque from the province for \$250,000.

Dr. B. Miller: Did the minister consult with the residents of Crowsnest Pass before deciding that the Crowsnest Pass regulation was superseded by the Police Act? Why was there no public consultation?

Mr. Cenaiko: Well, Mr. Speaker, there are 30 communities between 5,000 and 20,000, all of which received this funding model this year and anywhere from 36 per cent to 198 per cent increases over last year's funding. We didn't consult with those communities. We did consult with the AUMA and the AAMD and C. The AAMD and C president, as well as the AUMA, is extremely pleased with the funding they've received for those smaller communities with regard to the smaller communities they have between that 5,000 and the 20,000 threshold.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview, followed by the hon. Member for Cardston-Taber-Warner.

Securities Commission

Mr. Martin: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This government is allowing the Alberta Securities Commission to act like a bunch of belligerent, sullen bullies, and it's time we grounded them. The arrogance and intransigence are astounding. This notion that they're going to take the Auditor General, who is an officer of this Legislature, to court to

stop him from getting to the truth is beyond the pale. How does this look to investors not only in Alberta but across Canada? My question is to the Government House Leader. What is it going to take to get this government to stop the ASC from challenging the authority of this Legislature?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Minister of Finance has over and over in this House indicated that there's a process in place to review the issues arising out of the Alberta Securities Commission. The Minister of Finance has indicated that the Auditor General will be doing a review. The Auditor General and the Securities Commission are in the process of determining the scope and the type of documents that will be available and the access. The Auditor General has an act which he follows, the Securities Commission has an act which they follow, and it appears that in the course of their discussion they may have to consult the court as to how those two acts interrelate.

Mr. Speaker, that's a normal process although perhaps an unfortunate one. One would hope that they would be able to sort those out themselves, but when the interim chair of the commission is appointed imminently, I'm sure the appointment of that chair will help to resolve the issues so that those two organizations, the Auditor General's office and the Securities Commission, can come to an agreement on the scope of the audit, and that audit can then proceed.

Mr. Martin: Mr. Speaker, the Auditor General said that this has never happened in 25 years, him being taken to court. He's an officer of this Legislature. I'm asking the minister in regard to that: if there's a problem with the Securities Act, will the government change the Securities Act so that the people of the province can get some real answers here?

The Speaker: The hon. Acting Premier.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm sure this will be a learning process for all of us with respect to what might need to . . . [interjections] No. We should be open to learn from procedures.

This situation has come up where the Auditor General is looking at an audit of the Securities Commission processes. The Securities Commission has concerns under its act with respect to the information which it has and the circumstances under which it holds that information, and it has obligations under its act. If they can't come to an agreement about access after both having had legal advice, there may be an appropriate circumstance for the court to determine what's appropriate, and we'll learn from that process.

Mr. Martin: Mr. Speaker, this is becoming a joke across Canada. When will this government find its spine, dismiss all the ASC commissioners for their contempt and belligerence, and appoint an interim trustee to run the Securities Commission?

Mr. Hancock: Mr. Speaker, I think it's very presumptuous of the hon. member to suggest that all members of the commission ought to be dismissed. Certainly, if there are any issues that come out of the review, that will be determined at that time.

As I indicated, the appointment of an interim chairman is imminent. The current chairman's term is expiring within the next day or two. The new interim chair will be independent and fair and will ensure that there's a thorough review conducted. We expect that the interim chair will work with the Auditor General and the commissioners to help come to grips with the scope of the audit and

resolve that process, and we expect this to happen appropriately and in due course.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Cardston-Taber-Warner, followed by the hon. Member for Lacombe-Ponoka.

Electoral Reform

Mr. Hinman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In the past two months the Premier has stated that he's had to put his foot down on traditional marriage and oppose the original smoking ban legislation. Between 1995 and 2001 citizens' initiative legislation was brought to this House six times and was not passed. This government has stopped legislation to improve democracy and accountability in Alberta. British Columbia is having the first set-date provincial election in Canada, eliminating the opportunity for the government to time an election. My question is to the Government House Leader. Will this government follow the leadership of the B.C. government and commit to democratic reform by providing Alberta with a set date for our next election?

2:00

The Speaker: The hon. Acting Premier.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This government has provided leadership to British Columbia on all sorts of matters that the government of British Columbia has followed with respect to democratic renewal. They have looked at our processes with respect to our standing policy committee processes. They have looked at processes in terms of governance and efficiency. We, in fact, have been leaders across the country in many aspects of democratic renewal, and we will obviously also look at other things that happen across the country, including B.C., with respect to democratic renewal. It's in everybody's interest to make sure that the public is interested and informed and active and involved in the democratic process.

Mr. Hinman: The question was on set election dates.

Mr. Speaker, again to the Government House Leader: will this government improve MLA accountability and return the power to the people, where it belongs, by passing legislation giving Albertans the right to recall their elected representatives?

Mr. Hancock: Well, Mr. Speaker, the hon. member said that the question was about a set election date, so I'm not sure what the supplemental about recall might be then, and one certainly couldn't have discerned the question from the preamble. However, the answer is: we're not at the present time looking at recall legislation.

Mr. Hinman: To the Government House Leader again: will this government allow Albertans to have direct input into issues like defining and solemnizing marriage here in Alberta by passing citizens' initiative legislation?

The Speaker: The hon. Acting Premier.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Citizens' referendum legislation has been brought before this House, as the hon. member mentioned in his preamble, quite a number of times and certainly could be brought at any time by a member through that process again. It's not currently on the government's legislative agenda.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Lacombe-Ponoka, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Decore.

Emergency Preparedness

Mr. Prins: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This week is National Emergency Preparedness Week, and Albertans are getting lots of information on how to prepare for emergencies. In fact, an event on Monday in Medicine Hat focused on the emergency public warning system and the role it plays in giving Albertans advance warning of emergencies. My first question is to the Minister of Municipal Affairs. With Emergency Preparedness Week focusing on helping Albertans prepare for disasters and emergencies, what is the provincial government doing to ensure that it is prepared as well?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Renner: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. The member is quite correct in pointing out that this is, in fact, Emergency Preparedness Week. The message that the government is asking citizens to do is to assess risks in their lives, to prepare a plan should an emergency exist, and to prepare the necessary infrastructure so that they can be self-sustaining for a short period of time during an emergency. That's exactly what the government does within its own bounds through Emergency Management Alberta, which is a division within Municipal Affairs. This EMA is known across North America as a leader in emergency planning. We work with each of the departments to ensure that there is continuity should an emergency arise in Alberta, and we work with municipalities to assist them in their emergency planning as well.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Prins: Thank you. My next question is to the same minister. What is the government doing to help municipalities prepare for these emergencies?

Mr. Renner: Mr. Speaker, almost on a daily basis our officers work with every municipality, with First Nations throughout the province to ensure that they have adequate plans in place to deal with emergency situations, and on a regular basis they rehearse and demonstrate through mock disasters that they are capable of following through on those plans, identify concerns that need to be addressed, so that they truly are ready in the case of a real situation.

Mr. Prins: Again to the same minister. The other day there were reports in the media regarding the RCMP's terrorist tip line. What is government doing to protect Albertans from threats of terrorism?

Mr. Renner: Mr. Speaker, the issue of the antiterrorism tip line is more the responsibility of the Solicitor General, and the member may want to ask the Solicitor General on the specifics of that.

I would like to comment that we have an antiterrorism plan in place that is through EMA, that links the private sector and the public. It's been in place for over three years. The plan that we have in place is, again, being acknowledged as a leader in North America. Our counterterrorism crisis management plan has impressed not only other provinces and the federal government but has been recognized by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security for the comprehensiveness of its approach. The department is inundated almost daily with requests from other jurisdictions in North America for some information on the plans that we have in place here in Alberta.

Natural Resources Conservation Board Appeals

Mr. Bonko: Mr. Speaker, the role of the NRCB is to make fair

rulings on large developments like confined feeding operations. Advisers to the NRCB aid them in specific areas that deal with development of regulations. To the Minister of Sustainable Resource Development: are advisers of the NRCB allowed to represent companies in appeals to the NRCB?

Mr. Coutts: Well, Mr. Speaker, the role of the NRCB is to have a process put in place for applications for confined feeding operations under the legislation that is put in place under the department of agriculture, under the AOPA best practices legislation, to make sure that the environmental impacts of confined feeding operations are taken into consideration during the entire process. Where the process requires consultation with applications that are in front of the board, definitely the people that are making application have the ability to go in front of the board to make their case.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Bonko: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the same minister: does it suggest a conflict of interest on behalf of the NRCB to have a lawyer advise them on public policy and then the same lawyer represent a company in appeal of that NRCB ruling?

The Speaker: Well, I've warned once before about interpretation.

Mr. Coutts: I'm going to answer that question, Mr. Speaker, by the fact that the NRCB has been dealing with confined feeding operations over the last two and a half years. Part of the legislation was to have a review at the end of two and a half years. We're doing a review of the process right now, and those are the types of things that are being reviewed by the independent consultant.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Bonko: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My second supplemental question to the same minister: will the minister commit to investigating if there have been actual conflicts or potential conflicts in a situation in regard to advisers to the NRCB turning around and representing companies applying to the NRCB for expansion approval?

Mr. Coutts: Mr. Speaker, through the review that's being presently put in place and in front of all stakeholders, those are the types of things that will come forward in recommendations, and we will deal with the recommendations when they come to not only our department but to my desk.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Banff-Cochrane, followed by the hon. Member for Lethbridge-East.

Ghost-Waiparous Access Management

Mrs. Tarchuk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Ghost-Waiparous area, northwest of Cochrane, is highly regarded by Albertans as an ideal place to enjoy a host of outdoor recreational opportunities, everything from OHV trail riding to camping, hunting, fishing, and horseback riding. Significant growth in the province has made this area an even more popular one, and increasing usage has raised some safety and sustainability issues. In response, government has committed to developing a management plan that could effectively preserve the area while still ensuring accessibility for users in the future. My questions are for the Minister of Sustainable Resource Development. Firstly, with the ongoing public consultations to

resolve these issues, can the minister tell us what the timelines are for getting an access management plan in place for the area?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Coutts: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Following some very good consultation over the past two years, including something that's never been done before by our department, a public phone survey, we're moving ahead with a plan for the Ghost-Waiparous area, which is in the member's constituency. This summer we'll focus on implementation efforts of that plan based on public safety, education, and awareness. This summer also we will continue to make sure that we enforce applicable legislation that is in place by having more forest guardians on the ground to help us with the enforcement. We'll take a look at, also, public and stakeholder consultation, and we will continue to work on a plan for the Ghost-Waiparous area that is based on public safety, reducing the impact on our resource, and reducing conflicts between the users but, more importantly, for a variety of recreational uses.

Mrs. Tarchuk: To the same minister: how are the minister and his department responding to the growing concerns of OHV users regarding significant reduction of access to them specifically?

2:10

Mr. Coutts: Mr. Speaker, this is a very important question. Albertans want to be able to leisure on their land, and the Ghost-Waiparous remains a good place to do this. It's not about stopping off-highway vehicle use; it's about planned use. We've had a couple of situations in the Ghost. The original trail system was not built for the type of activity or the amount of activity in off-highway vehicle use in the area. In addition, what's happened is that unplanned trails have been developed because of all of this use over time.

Albertans want a managed trail system. We found that out by the phone survey. What we're going to do is that we're going to balance the environmental impact as well as the recreational use, and we'll work with the stakeholders over the summer and into the fall to develop that plan.

Mrs. Tarchuk: Lastly, to the same minister: what preparations are under way to manage the thousands of users expected in the Ghost-Waiparous this summer, starting with the May long weekend?

Mr. Coutts: Well, Mr. Speaker, the hon. member is talking about public safety and the need for more enforcement to ensure that public safety, and I want to assure Albertans as well as this hon. member that that is a priority for our department as well. This year's budget has given us new resources to employ more folks for education and enforcement. This particular summer we're going to have between our department, the RCMP, the Department of Community Development, and the Department of Environment 30 enforcement staff out there in the Ghost, and we'll have more people on the ground to make sure that public safety is a priority. Therefore, education outreach and enforcement will definitely be our priority.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Lethbridge-East, followed by the hon. Member for Little Bow.

Ministry of Seniors Financial Statements

Ms Pastoor: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In the 2003-2004 annual report the Auditor General issued a reservation of opinion to the

ministry of seniors as the audit found that approximately \$21.7 million worth of assets which were retained by management corporations were not stated in the financial statements. My question to the Minister of Seniors and Community Supports: what measures has this minister taken to address the issue of incomplete financial statements?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mrs. Fritz: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We do take the Auditor General's report very seriously. The area of management bodies, as you know, is through the Alberta Housing Act, and in the Housing Act, that was put into place about 1994, management bodies are arm's length from the government.

The operating surpluses, that the hon. member has brought to the Assembly, actually are an important issue. What happens is that management bodies retain operating surpluses for their future operations and some capital, but also part of the operating surpluses are given to the ministry. Management bodies report theirs in their financial plan each year, and the ministry has not been recording that along with the ministry's operating surpluses. So we will be working with the Auditor General and the Finance department in order to make that happen.

Ms Pastoor: Thank you for that answer. It partly fits in with my next question. How was the \$21.7 million in the surpluses and assets reported, and has interest been accumulating on that amount?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mrs. Fritz: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My understanding is, as I indicated, that the management body reports their operating surpluses within their own financial report. The ministry reports through our financial process, but we are putting both together in that we're moving the management bodies' operating surplus reporting through to the department and the ministry. As I indicated, hon. member, it's an important issue. This has to change, and we are working with the Auditor and the Finance department in order to make that happen.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Pastoor: Thank you. Further to that explanation, can the minister ensure that the ministry and department would not deviate from generally accepted principles of accounting?

Mrs. Fritz: I can ensure that that will happen. As I indicated, I am learning from the Auditor as well as the Finance department how to put the measures in place that are meeting the objectives of what both the management body has and what the ministry has, hon. member, and I will ensure that that will happen. You'll see that change by the next report.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Little Bow, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Calder.

Municipal Infrastructure Program

Mr. McFarland: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On behalf of 17 municipalities in the riding that I represent, I want to commend the government for \$3 billion of infrastructure funding over five years. The questions that I actually have come from municipal leaders in my constituency, and they deal with a little bit of uncertainty on

accessing this particular funding. My first question is to the Minister of Municipal Affairs. I would like him to clarify on his behalf for these municipalities if they, in fact, have to provide matching funds out of very limited reserves.

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Renner: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. That's a very good question. I'm pleased to report that not only do municipalities not have to use their own funds to match these dollars; in fact, it's been noted in this House before, but I think it's worth noting again, that there are ongoing infrastructure grants that are also flowing through to municipalities this year of some approximately \$400 million. That added to the \$600 million from the allocation this year is almost a billion dollars.

Municipalities are free to use the grants that were included in the \$600 million to match other municipal infrastructure grants that are available to them each and every other year. So not only do they not have to match the infrastructure dollars; they can use the infrastructure dollars to come up with matching dollars for other government programs.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. McFarland: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Because of the varying sizes and various scopes of different projects, these same municipalities have asked me to ask you, Minister, if you could clarify for them the types of projects that they can actually use to qualify for this funding.

Mr. Renner: Mr. Speaker, when I met with municipalities before Christmas in preparation for the budget and in fine-tuning this plan, I heard repeatedly that the program needed to be as flexible as possible. It needed to reflect the priorities of locally elected councils. That's exactly what this program does. The program will be as flexible as it needs to be to accommodate the priorities as established by the locally elected councils.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. McFarland: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My final question is to the Minister of Infrastructure and Transportation, and again it's a clarification. Some of the constituent municipalities, Minister, have heard different, varying reports. They would like to know if, in fact, they can use some of these funds to purchase new or replacement heavy equipment.

Dr. Oberg: Mr. Speaker, yes, they can is the very quick and dirty answer to that one. We will be sitting down with the municipalities and going over some of their priorities. Again, as the hon. Minister of Municipal Affairs alluded, we will be offering a sign-off on the particular projects. We want to ensure that before they buy heavy equipment, for example, their water treatment plants are in proper condition and that their roads are good. So the quick and dirty answer is yes, but the proviso is that it has to be in the top list of their priorities and, more importantly, their needs for infrastructure within their particular municipality.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Calder, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Currie.

Wildlife Protection

Mr. Eggen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Wildlife protection in Alberta

is a laudable goal, but from this government it's been all talk and no rock. This government has made it increasingly difficult for wildlife officers to do their job in enforcing poaching laws, and they have not taken decisive action to provide enough enforcement officers in the field. My question is to the Minister of Sustainable Resource Development. Can the minister explain how it's possible to efficiently catch poachers and protect endangered species with only 127 officers for the entire province?

Mr. Coutts: Well, Mr. Speaker, I'm a little surprised at the question because even though his comment about 127 enforcement officers is accurate, the budget and the estimates were before this House on, I believe it was, just last Wednesday night, a week ago, where the extra dollars that we are getting are going into more enforcement on the ground – not in offices, not in towers, but on the ground – for fish and wildlife so that they can get out there and do the job that Albertans want them to do. We expect, with the increase in our budget, to hire 15 additional enforcement officers for this year.

2:20

Mr. Eggen: Well, given that we were having conflicting announcements – it was 10, and then it was 40, and now it's 15 – when is this ministry going to commit sufficient money to have necessary resources so that officers can conduct routine, proactive patrols and nab poachers in the act instead of having to only react to calls once they've been made or complaints?

Mr. Coutts: In addition to the fish and wildlife officers that I just mentioned, Mr. Speaker, we are also hiring an additional 10 guardians that will help do some outreach and some education in our communities to let people know about wildlife issues in their area as well as the regulations that are out there on fish and wildlife. Not only do we have more fish and wildlife officers, but we have guardians that will be out there on the land, talking with people, doing education and outreach, and they will be involved in monitoring of the resource as well. So all in all, this particular budget for fish and wildlife is good news for the first time in about five years.

Mr. Eggen: Mr. Speaker, the fish and wildlife officers in the field, the Alberta Fish and Game Association, and even some members of the Tory caucus have stated that the number of fish and wildlife game officers, including the numbers that are being proposed to be increased, are inadequate. Why won't the government make a commitment to hire enough fish and wildlife officers to do the job properly here in this province?

Mr. Coutts: Well, Mr. Speaker, certainly if you want to have a fish and wildlife officer on every square mile or whatever they are today – I'm sorry; I'm in miles. I'm a little old-fashioned. There will never be enough money to do that. In addition to the 15 staff and the 10 guardians, we're hiring more support staff in the rural offices to help handle phone calls and those types of things.

Again, all in all, we continue to make upgrades. Albertans expect that. Albertans have wanted that for a long time. We're making those moves, and we're making that commitment to Albertans in this budget to improve the enforcement.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Currie, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-East.

Postsecondary Education Review

Mr. Taylor: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Well, yesterday I think we

did get some good news in this House as the Minister of Advanced Education announced a complete review of the postsecondary system in Alberta. I'm encouraged that the minister has apparently moved from separate funding and affordability reviews to something more complete, more comprehensive. The next step, a small but important one, is to accept the Learning Commission's recommendation and make it independent. My question is to the Minister of Advanced Education. Will the minister clarify whether his statement yesterday that "we're doing a full . . . review" means that this review will be an internal government exercise and not an independent review, as called for by the Learning Commission?

The Speaker: The hon. Acting Premier.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This should be no surprise to the hon. member. I've mentioned it in the context when we've discussed questions with respect to the change in status of Mount Royal College. I've discussed it in the context of estimates. We are looking at the postsecondary system in this province in a full and complete manner to determine whether we have a system in place which will mean that Albertans can meet all the opportunities available to them and compete out into a global economy. That's what it's about: being best in class. That's the review we're doing. We're doing it involving stakeholders in the system, we're doing it involving external experts, we're doing it in a broad-based manner, and we're doing it comprehensively.

Mr. Taylor: Aah. But, Mr. Speaker, who's the "we"? Who's going to conduct this review?

Mr. Hancock: That would be my job, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Taylor: Hmm. Okay. Well, Mr. Speaker, given that most of the public voted for parties other than the government party in the last election, will the minister at least consider including members from all parties in the forthcoming review process? Can't hurt.

Mr. Hancock: Mr. Speaker, as I've always said, I'm open to advice and direction from all parts of the House and from all parts of the province.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-East, followed by the hon. Member for St. Albert.

Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped

Mr. Amery: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Yesterday the report from the MLA AISH Review Committee was tabled in the Assembly. This is great news for my constituents that depend on AISH and other community supports to function on a daily basis. While AISH recipients are pleased with the increase to their basic monthly supports, they are concerned, however, about the delayed benefit that they are entitled to. My question to the hon. Minister of Seniors and Community Supports: given that it is a lot easier to access employment opportunities available to AISH recipients during the spring and summer months, why was the ceiling on extra income for AISH recipients not increased in April with the increase in basic income supports?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mrs. Fritz: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We are making a number of important changes to renew the AISH program. The hon. member

did mention one, which is increasing the earning exemptions for our AISH clients to assist them to be able to keep more money at the end of the month. In order to make this happen, it's necessary to go through the regulation and the legislation. For example, we were in Committee of the Whole last night. That has to be put in place and proclamation, Royal Assent, those kinds of things, with the legislation. I'm hoping that will take place by the middle of June. Along with that, we also need to update the computer system. There's a lot of work to be done there. I know the deadline, as the member mentioned, is for October, but I have directed my staff to implement those changes as quickly as possible.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Amery: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I think the minister answered my second question, but I'll ask my third question. Given that the government accepted the MLA committee recommendation to review how income is treated under AISH, can the minister tell us what the criteria for that review will be?

Mrs. Fritz: Well, Mr. Speaker, I've had an opportunity to meet with a number of community organizations, and the reason I have done that is, first of all, they called, knowing about the AISH review and whatnot, but also because they have the ideas about how they would like to see this income clarified. That's the income that's fully exempt or partially exempt or not exempt at all. As you know, AISH recipients may have income in another way. For example, it could be insurance settlements, investment in trusts that people have left for their loved ones, or federal benefits. There's a variety of ways. The plan is to continue to meet with the stakeholders. I've assured them of that. It will take time to formulate the overall clarification of the rules.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for St. Albert, followed by the hon. Member for Drayton Valley-Calmar.

Achievement Testing

Mr. Flaherty: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Provincial achievement tests, particularly in the early grades, are costly, bureaucratic, and provide little information that can actually be used to help students, yet despite calls for change from teachers, testing experts, provincial advisory committees, and the government's own review of special education, we've yet to see any real action. My question to the Minister of Education: when will the minister follow the example of Manitoba and cancel its grade 3 testing program in favour of diagnostic testing that can provide specific guidance on how to help kids learn?

Mr. Zwozdesky: Mr. Speaker, provincial achievement testing has its role. We do it at the grades 3, 6, 9 levels, as all members here would know. In fact, I've had some active discussions about this issue with parents, with teachers, with school boards. It's one of those issues that on any given day can go one way or the other. Generally speaking, I think there's an understanding if not a desire to know where your child fits or how well your child is doing in comparison with all the other children at that grade level across the province. I don't by any stretch of the imagination want to infer that it's necessarily 100 per cent of the people involved with education who feel that way, but the majority still do.

Now, I should just indicate, too, Mr. Speaker, that if there are children who have difficulties with exams or have other reasons for not wanting to write them, superintendents have the ability to waive them.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Flaherty: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Is the minister's position that the time spent on memorization and teaching to the test is more valuable than targeted remediation for students with learning problems? Is that what he's saying?

Mr. Zwozdesky: Mr. Speaker, I think I made it pretty clear when I addressed the issue of grade 4 provincial achievement tests what some of those feelings I had were. They're very strong feelings because we all want to help those children who are in need of extra assistance with numeracy skills or literacy skills. That's one reason why we increased funding in those areas by tens of millions of dollars. It was to help out FNMI students, to help out ESL students, to help out special-needs children, and so on. Now, as more of this comes to my attention as we look at other ways of delivering diagnostic assessments, for example, for those children who didn't do so well in the grade 3 tests, then more programming will be developed to address their specific needs.

2:30

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Flaherty: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given that the minister's own five-year-old report *Shaping the Future for Students with Special Needs* calls for a program of early identification and screening of students, when is the minister going to act on this report?

Mr. Zwozdesky: Well, Mr. Speaker, I don't recall it being my report because I've only been in this portfolio for five months, not five years. However, I wouldn't mind visiting that particular document. It hasn't come across my desk just now. If there were some undertakings there from previous ministers to look at it, I'll certainly be happy to do that, but at the moment it's not on my radar screen, although there might be ideas and suggestions from it that have already been taken forward. Certainly, a vast array of them were likely covered by the Learning Commission, and I'll be commenting on that further during the estimates for Education this afternoon.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Drayton Valley-Calmar, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Rutherford.

Home Schooling

Rev. Abbott: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I and other MLAs on the Standing Policy Committee on Education and Employment have been hearing from a number of constituents asking us about the home education regulation changes. When will the Education minister move ahead with these new recommendations?

Mr. Zwozdesky: Mr. Speaker, the home education regulation review, as I recall, started back in January of 2003, and there has been some significant movement forward in addressing them. In fact, my predecessor had done a fairly yeoman job of moving them forward, but there were some issues and concerns that needed some further debate, hon. member, and that debate has taken place. A little more will still take place.

The important thing to remember is that home education exists in this province for about 6,700 young students, and it exists as a matter of choice, as do public schools and francophone schools and separate schools and charter schools, and so on. So there's a lot to

this. Some progress has been made, and I expect it'll be moving forward very soon.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Rev. Abbott: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. My first supplemental is also for the Minister of Education. You mentioned some changes. What are the improvements that such changes would make for home-educated students?

Mr. Zwozdesky: Mr. Speaker, let me answer that this way. During the consultation process a number of ideas were put forward by home educating parents. Some very compelling reasons to address some areas, however, also surfaced. For example, there is a need to improve some of the linkages to student learner outcomes, to educational plans as derived by parents in consultation with the school board or a private board, with respect to making some of the wording more user friendly, with respect to some of the achievement tests and/or equivalency tests, and the reporting of results regarding numeracy and literacy levels. There was quite a bit on the table, and all of them were seen to be not only important but also important improvements to what is there now.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Rev. Abbott: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the same minister: given that home educators do take their jobs very seriously, have home educators had any inputs or consultations on these new regulations?

Mr. Zwozdesky: Yes, Mr. Speaker, home educators had considerable input into the new home education regulation proposals, and that goes back to at least January of 2003. I think there were a number of meetings that were held with my predecessor, and in follow up to that, Mr. Speaker, I went to Red Deer a couple of weeks ago and attended the Alberta Home Education Association conference and annual general meeting. I spoke there. I answered questions for quite a long time. So there was an exchange of ideas and information even then and also during the hour, hour and a half of walking around that I did with some of the executive members. So I would answer shortly by saying that home educators have had considerable input into all of the proposed amendments, and then we'll just see how they wind up here.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Rutherford.

Crime Prevention

Mr. R. Miller: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Automobile theft, youth violence, and drug abuse are issues of great concern to many of my constituents in Edmonton-Rutherford. In one recent case a stolen vehicle was recovered by the Edmonton Police Service with three suspects inside. However, because none of the three was behind the wheel at the time and, therefore, not in control of the vehicle, theft charges apparently could not be laid. My question is for the Solicitor General. Given that we average 25 to 30 stolen vehicles in Edmonton alone every single day, does this government have a plan to address the alarming increase in the number of automobile thefts?

The Speaker: The hon. Solicitor General.

Mr. Cenaiko: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. The short answer is yes, we do. In fact, there is an Alberta Vehicle Theft Committee in place right now and has been for two and a half years.

It's under the Ministry of Government Services. It has stakeholders at the table that are from the Calgary Police Service, the Edmonton Police Service, and the RCMP as well as five government ministries that are working along with them as well as members from the industry, the Insurance Bureau of Canada, the registries association, and a number of other areas that are looking at vehicle theft in this province.

The hon. member is very right, in fact, in saying that a vehicle is stolen – I'm not sure about 25 a day in Edmonton, but it is at least one every half an hour throughout the day in the province of Alberta. So those numbers are very high. That's about \$60 million a year of vehicle thefts in this province. A lot of that is organized crime, but a lot of that is joyriders as well.

We definitely are looking at all of those issues, whether it's a vehicle off the street or whether it's organized crime and vehicles moving out of the country in containers.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. R. Miller: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My second question, actually, is in regard to organized crime. What is the government doing to deal with the increase in vehicle chop shops, a major driver behind automobile thefts?

Mr. Cenaiko: Well, again, Mr. Speaker, the organized crime units and the auto theft units of the police services, all of them – all of the five major police services have auto theft units and are working with those. Obviously, the serial numbers of those vehicles are being looked at. They're being matched.

This is one of the areas within organized crime that is on the agenda. Again, the Vehicle Theft Committee, that is being chaired by Staff Sergeant Derek Curtis of the Calgary Police Service, is looking at all of these issues and looking at 19 recommendations that I believe will be coming forward to the Standing Policy Committee on Justice and Government Services here in the next few weeks. So we are moving forward with the recommendations in that direction.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. R. Miller: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given the obvious and documented connection between property crime and illegal drug use, will the minister commit to expanding Harry Ainlay's drug dog program in order to provide similar drug education in all junior and senior high schools across the province?

Mr. Cenaiko: That's a very good question that the hon. member asked. I'm not aware of the program, and I'd ask that he send some information to me with regard to it.

I can tell you, though, Mr. Speaker, that we are very interested in utilizing drug dogs in the schools. We do want to work with the Minister of Education but, as well, with the school boards and the parent associations to ensure that if there is an opportunity to utilize a drug-sniffing dog, we definitely will do that as long as we get co-operation from the school board and the parent associations.

Vignettes from Alberta's History

The Speaker: Hon. members, before I call upon the first of several members to participate, the historical vignette of the day. On May 4, 1910, the Royal Canadian Navy was formed. Shortly thereafter Albertans began to play important roles in this honourable institution. One example of our contribution to the Canadian naval tradition can be found right here in the capital city of Edmonton. In

1923 the White Ensign was run up the flagpole for the first time in Edmonton when a naval half-company was formed in this city.

The group quickly established a reputation for excellence, and in June of 1939 they were honoured to be posted along the driveway of the Legislature Building during the royal procession of Their Majesties King George VI and Queen Elizabeth. In 1960 they were the first naval division in Canada to win both the naval division's efficiency trophy and the Barry German trophy for the most improved naval reserve division in the same year.

This naval reserve division remains active in Edmonton and continues to contribute to Alberta's proud military tradition.

head: 2:40

Members' Statements

Multiple Sclerosis

Mr. Louheed: Mr. Speaker, May is MS Awareness Month in Alberta. That is why the hon. members of this Legislature have received a gift of a red carnation and an information piece informing them about multiple sclerosis. Multiple sclerosis is an unpredictable, at times disabling disease of the central nervous system, the brain and spinal chord. The disease attacks the protective myelin covering of the central nervous system, causing inflammation and often destroying the myelin in patches. This can result in weakness, fatigue, muscle stiffness, numbness, speech problems, memory problems, and double vision.

Canada has one of the highest incidences of MS in the world. In Alberta there are an estimated 10,000 people living with MS. We do not yet know the cause of MS, nor do we have a cure for it.

During the first week of May the MS Society will be conducting its annual MS carnation campaign. Funds raised will go to support MS research and to provide services to Canadians with multiple sclerosis. Buying a carnation can help the MS Society get one step closer to discovering a cure.

We look forward to the day when researchers, hopefully here in Alberta, discover the cause and cure for multiple sclerosis. Until then, Mr. Speaker, let's all wear a carnation in support of the MS Society.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Highwood.

Town of High River

Mr. Groeneveld: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We are lucky to be alive in a province which has two world-class cities. Calgary and Edmonton have both played host to international events, and with their populations both approaching the million-person mark, the concerns of these two great cities are often front-page news. Given these circumstances smaller communities and rural areas, which are home to roughly a third of our population, can often be overlooked.

That is why it is my pleasure to rise today and to recognize a vibrant community which is not unlike many scattered throughout the province. The town of High River has just reached the 10,000 mark for population. While this makes it a fairly sizable town, this community still retains its small-town feel and agricultural roots. The town acts as a hub for the agricultural community in the area, and some of the residents commute to Calgary. This diverse mix of residents has created a vibrant and diverse local economy, which serves not only the needs of the town but also those of the surrounding communities. High River has a history of pioneers and entrepreneurship, and this remains true to this day as many of the businesses are locally owned and operated.

In addition to celebrating a milestone for population growth,

residents of this town have another reason to celebrate. Mr. Speaker, High River's centennial coincides with that of our province, and the town has a variety of celebrations planned for both of these occasions. These include a variety of fairs, concerts, and other programs which display the real culture and the heritage of the area. One great example is the 47th annual Little Britches Rodeo and parade, held on the May long weekend. This event is open to ages two to 16, and because of this it gives many budding cowboys in the area their first taste of rodeo.

Rural Alberta and the communities you find there have a wealth of opportunity for those who wish to seek it. High River is a great example of the rural opportunity that exists in this province.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Peace River.

National Forest Week

Mr. Oberle: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This week is an important time for forestry in Alberta as we join the nation in celebrating National Forest Week. This year National Forest Week highlights Canada's boreal forest as an incredible national asset and as a sustainable forest management success story, providing benefits to Canadians and to the world.

Forestry is a major economic contributor in at least 50 of our communities, Mr. Speaker. It employs about 48,000 people and generates more than \$12 billion in revenues each year. That's quite an achievement for an industry that didn't even exist in our province a hundred years ago.

Mr. Speaker, our forests provide much more than just the economic benefits of the wood fibre that we harvest from them. They provide clean air. They provide clean water. They sustain a diversity of wildlife, and they provide recreation and tourism opportunities that make us the envy of the world. Forests are a crucial part of our history and our cultural identity, Mr. Speaker, and it is fitting that we recognize their importance through the observance of National Forest Week.

The best part of this story, Mr. Speaker, is that forest use and forest enjoyment are sustainable and renewable. One hundred years from now forests will continue to be loved, enjoyed, and used by our children and grandchildren. In this our centennial year Alberta renews its commitment to wise stewardship of our forests for our benefit and for the benefit of generations to come.

As a registered professional forester, Mr. Speaker, I am proud to join in the recognition of our forests, and I invite all to pause and reflect upon the role of forests in our communities and our lives.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Bow.

Alberta Scene Festival

Ms DeLong: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Until May 10 the Alberta arts community has taken over Ottawa for the Alberta Scene festival. The festival has brought together over 600 Alberta artists from all disciplines including theatre, music, dance, literature, comedy, film and video, culinary and visual arts. The venues for these performances range from the National Arts Centre, the Canadian Museum of Civilization, the National Gallery of Canada, to theatres, music halls, and bistros.

Alberta artists will make connections that will take their art around the world. Promoters from across Canada and a dozen other countries are in Ottawa as well, providing opportunities for festival and concert bookings and recordings and distribution deals. These artists at Alberta Scene are ambassadors who will introduce new

audiences and presenters to Alberta talent, encouraging them to see what else we have to offer.

Mr. Speaker, I congratulate and thank all of our artists who are in Ottawa as well as all their colleagues here in the province for bringing such a high standard of excellence to Alberta's arts scene. I also acknowledge and thank Alberta Scene's corporate and media donors for making this celebration a reality. Alberta Scene is an exciting way to share our centennial celebrations with the nation.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Manning.

Cattle Rustling

Mr. Backs: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Safety, security, and the ability to do business are intertwined with the need for simple trust. The police cannot watch out for everything we do. Lawyers and the courts cannot sort out our day-to-day living. We must rely on trust. Trust is especially important in the country. You trust the community when you leave your equipment in the fields. You trust visitors to close your gates so your cattle won't get out. You trust your neighbours to help you out when you need a hand, just as they trust you.

You trust your cattle to be around tomorrow when they're out to pasture. One of the worst violations of trust is the theft of animals. Feedlots are big, but cattle still graze free in unwatched pastures. These cattle might not be seen for days or weeks or even months, but when a beef producer finds that his stock has disappeared, the sense of violation, the sense of loss, the sense of breakdown in the community can be overwhelming.

It is like someone going in and stealing apples from your yard, but they take the tree with them. You can't grow the apples no more. It's like someone taking your paycheque if you work for wages, but they also take the store, and you can't go to work again. The livelihood is lost for the beef producer. How do you explain bad people to your four year old? How do you justify the lost 4-H calf to your 12 year old? It is heartbreaking to start again.

Sometimes the theft of cattle is laughed at because it sounds like something out of an old movie or cattle rustling in the Old West. Cattle theft remains a Criminal Code violation with a penalty of up to 10 years. It is a serious violation that strikes at the heart of one's trust in the community. These criminals are not drug addicts. They need equipment to haul the animals. They need to be undetected. They need to have a plan to avoid brand inspection. These criminals are organized and sophisticated. Cattle rustlers have no respect for their community. These thieves have no respect for basic human trust or the effect of their actions.

It is important for the government to properly support the investigation of animal theft and the apprehension of cattle thieves. It is crucial to provide funding for prosecutors and give them proper resources to deal with this thievery. Rustlers should be prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law. Please protect trust.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

2:50 Ottewell Community Patrol

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Ottewell community patrol has operated successfully for 12 years fighting crime in southeast Edmonton. It was formed by the Edmonton Police Service. Volunteer patrol members 18 years and over assist the police in community-based policing by providing extra eyes and ears for crime reporting and prevention. Patrol members donate their own time, their own vehicles, and pay for their own gas to patrol 16

communities and 14 industrial areas in southeast Edmonton. The patrol uses radios to report unusual or suspicious activities to the police officer assigned to work with the patrol.

The Ottewell community patrol, co-ordinated by Constable Joe Spear, really makes a difference. Statistics recorded since 1993 prove the importance of community policing. The patrol in Ottewell can take credit for 1,982 suspicious persons reported, 1,636 suspicious vehicles reported, 36 warrants executed, 97 arrests caused, 40 stolen vehicles found, 89 drunk drivers taken off the road, 190 open garage doors reported, 35 fights and disturbances reported, 22 fire property damages reported, 16 break and enters stopped, 184 other incidents, including two handguns taken off the road.

I would like to at this time on behalf of the grateful citizens of southeast Edmonton thank Constable Joe Spear, the Edmonton Police Service, and the many volunteer patrol members. The patrol has also received financial support from the Alberta Solicitor General, the Edmonton Police Foundation, and other generous supporters including many community leagues. Our neighbourhoods are safe and secure because of the time and attention donated by so many unselfish people and organizations. Their contributions do not go unnoticed and unappreciated.

Thank you.

The Speaker: I'm going to introduce the hon. Deputy Speaker at this time for a special moment.

Leah Halliday

Mr. Marz: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Members of the Assembly, I know that we usually wait until the last day of session before we recognize the great work that our legislative pages do, but for Leah Halliday, after three years of dedicated service to the members of this Assembly, today is her last day. However, our loss is Medicine Hat's gain as Leah will be moving to Medicine Hat, where she will be taking up a position with Travel Alberta, where she will be working at the Walsh information centre. Leah, although we're not prepared to provide the usual token of our appreciation at this particular time, it will be forthcoming soon. I would ask the members of the Assembly to please join me in showing our appreciation to Leah for her three years of dedicated service and wish her all the very best in her new endeavours. [applause]

head:

Presenting Petitions

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview.

Mr. Martin: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to present a petition signed by 684 Albertans who are eager to see potentially life-saving improvements to highways in northern Alberta, particularly highway 63. With today's tabling the total signatures on this petition so far are 3,481.

Speaker's Ruling

Tabling Notes to Oneself

The Speaker: Hon. members, before I call upon the first member to participate, I have a ruling. Yesterday, on May 3, 2005, the Member for Drayton Valley-Calmar purported to table a handwritten note that he wrote to himself which seemed to be a comment on a petition presented by the Member for Edmonton-Manning.

When members reviewed the Votes and Proceedings for yesterday, they may have noticed that the purported tabling was not entered. The fact that the member did not provide five copies of the document as required by Standing Order 37(3) is enough reason not to include the tabling in the records to the Assembly.

However, while this Assembly is very permissible in what is allowed to be tabled, the chair does not want to condone the tabling of messages to oneself about something said, done, or said by another member as a legitimate tabling. The Standing Orders were just amended in April to allow six members up to two minutes each and every day in this Assembly to make members' statements. This is one avenue that could be pursued by members who have a point to make. Notes to oneself about what another member did or said are not going to be allowed as legitimate tablings even if the correct number of copies are provided.

The hon. Member for Calgary-Nose Hill.

head: **Tabling Returns and Reports**

Dr. Brown: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise today on behalf of the hon. Member for Foothills-Rocky View to table the appropriate numbers of a report prepared by the University of Calgary's office of external affairs. The report summarizes the many learning innovations and research achievements at the U of C over the past several years. It demonstrates that despite a decade of financial hardship, the University of Calgary has successfully pursued innovation and excellence.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I have three tablings this afternoon. The first is a letter I received yesterday, and it's dated April 26. It is from the hon. Minister of Education, and it is an acknowledgement that one of the latest amendments to the closure of schools regulation was not on one of the department's websites.

My second tabling this afternoon is the appropriate number of copies of a document that I received from the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission. It's entitled Number of Days with Evidence of Enron Schemes by Quarter, and it includes Project Stanley, Silver Peak, Wheel Out, Non-Firm Export, Load Shift, Death Star, Ricochet, Get Shorty, among other elaborate schemes to dupe electricity consumers. It should be noted that the running tab now for all of Enron's activities for unjust and unreasonable profits is at least \$1.6 billion.

The third and last tabling I have, Mr. Speaker, is another transcript of testimony from the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission, and it asks the questions "Was Jeff Skilling involved in Project Stanley?" and "Who was the primary actor in Project Stanley?" in regard to price manipulation here in Alberta.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview.

Mr. Martin: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have two documents to table today. First, I'd like to table the appropriate number of copies of an open letter to the Minister of Education from the Greater Black Gold teachers' local 8. The letter implores the minister to "maintain local bargaining as the mode for determining collective agreements between school trustees and their teachers."

Secondly, I would like to table a letter from Mr. Norman Greenfield of Calgary, Alberta. He raises serious concerns about the ability of private nursing homes to provide excellent care in the face of government interference and unpredictable funding.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Dr. Pannu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to table five copies of excerpts from the final report of the integration of midwifery services evaluation project. The report provides evidence that the costs associated with a midwife-supported birth are between \$700 and \$1,100 lower than a hospital-based birth.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Calder.

Mr. Eggen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would like to table the appropriate number of copies of a news release issued by the Alberta Union of Provincial Employees. The release warns of the dangers to livestock, endangered species, and the environment if the number of fish and wildlife officers is not increased dramatically.

The Speaker: Hon. members, before I call Orders of the Day, I'll just give you advance notice with a request. Tomorrow will be a very special day in the history of this Assembly. For only the fourth time in the nearly 100-year history of this Assembly there will be individuals permitted on the floor of the Assembly who are not elected members of the Assembly. There will be representatives from the air, land, and sea forces of the Canadian Forces to participate with us in a special ceremony on the conclusion of World War II.

3:00

I've also invited upwards of 90 veterans from around the province of Alberta. What I did was ask the three forces to provide a list of names that they wanted to have invited, and that was the protocol used. I will do a blanket introduction of them tomorrow, and I have said, all members, that if you have a constituent coming, you've got a copy of the letter from me to them. I would ask you not to individually stand tomorrow under the provision of guests to introduce these individuals. I'll do a blanket introduction for everyone so as to make sure that we're not here beyond 5 o'clock with respect to this particular thing.

I need to know, as well, from the three caucuses the spokespersons who will be participating tomorrow, and as long as I know by noon tomorrow, that's good enough for me. Remember, there's also going to be a Holocaust ceremony on the grounds of the Legislature at noon and then the reception for these veterans in the Assembly starting at 12:30 p.m., to which all members are invited. So I'd really appreciate your co-operation.

head: **Orders of the Day**

head: **Committee of Supply**

[Mr. Shariff in the chair]

The Deputy Chair: Hon. members, we'll call the committee to order.

head: **Main Estimates 2005-06**

Education

The Deputy Chair: As per our standing order the first hour will be allocated between the minister and members of the opposition, following which any other member who wishes to participate will be able to do so.

The hon. Minister of Education. [some applause]

Mr. Zwodzesky: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman and to my colleagues for that thunderous applause, most of which has to be

shared with some members of my staff who are attending this afternoon. I'd like to just quickly introduce and thank my deputy minister, Keray Henke; the assistant deputy minister for corporate services, Mat Hanrahan; his staff members Jeff Olson, the executive director for budget, school finance and reporting sector, and also Mr. Gene Williams, director of budget and fiscal analysis branch; as well as a number of other staff who are either listening and/or will be reading this later, including our other ADMs – Jim Dueck, Rick Morrow, and Lois Hawkins – as well as my own EA, Pam Boutillier, and, of course, our communications director, Kathy Telfer.

These are outstanding individuals, and I would ask the House to please join me in a round of thanks to them, especially to Mat Hanrahan and his crew, who have worked very hard through the Christmas period and on other occasions through weekends and Saturdays and Sundays and whatever. Thank you very much to all of you, Mat, to you and your staff for doing 14 drafts of this budget that we're going to be I hope approving today.

Mr. Chairman, I also want to just quickly mention that I have in mind to do some of my comments in French, and I've distributed those comments in a translated form to all members of the House. They should have them by now.

With that, I'd like to start. I want to stress how very pleased and honoured I am today to present my ministry's budget estimates and our business plan, and I want to put it in the context of our government's 20-year strategic plan. As members here will know, that plan is supported by four pillars, and education is the central component or a key contributor to each and every one of them. In fact, the first pillar is called Learning, and that pillar carries with it the long-term commitment of our government to education. Alberta's education system, of course, must provide quality programs that meet students' needs and ensure that students have the best chance for success. As a result, the majority of Alberta Education's 2005-2008 business plan and our 2005-2006 budget continue the implementation of the recommendations from Alberta's Commission on Learning.

Now, because we continue to review certain Commission on Learning recommendations, such as number 2 regarding junior kindergarten, such as number 3 regarding possible full-day kindergarten, and number 81, which recommends that we "create a new approach to collective bargaining," those particular items will not be seen in this budget today because decisions have not yet been taken on them.

However, other strategic priorities that we are addressing in this budget include: readiness to learn, which helps children before they start school; curriculum revitalization, such as the new social studies curriculum; facilitating transitions for young people who are completing high school; investing in technology to yield the greatest benefits for our students; and, of course, balancing our fiscal, human resource, and policy priorities with rising costs and ever-increasing public demands for choice, flexibility, and adaptability.

Albertans expect our education system to improve continuously, to respond to diverse learner needs, to be fiscally responsible, and to be accountable for results. This budget before us today, Mr. Chair, does exactly that because it focuses on our students and on our classrooms where our students go.

This budget provides a 7.1 per cent, or \$287 million, increase in program support for the basic education system for a grand total of \$4.3 billion. This budget also responds to many, albeit not all, of the items that were brought to my personal attention during the meetings that I held earlier this year with every single school board in our province. That, Mr. Chair, was a record, as most members of my staff will attest, but what a tremendous record it was because it gave us some unique opportunities. In fact, as a result of some of those

meetings, this budget also addresses their concerns as well as many of the recommendations coming out of Alberta's Commission on Learning, areas such as class size, daily physical activity, technology, special needs, and so on.

Before we get into the nitty-gritty of the budget, I just want to explain that the Ministry of Education budget has two primary funding streams, the first of which is what we call voted government and lottery fund estimates, which total \$2.85 billion, or about two-thirds of our budget, and which we will be voting on today; secondly, education property taxes, which total about \$1.45 billion and comprise the remaining one-third of our budget.

I wish to further explain that about \$1.28 billion of that \$1.45 billion resides in the Alberta school foundation fund, which is governed by statute, and the remainder, about \$177 million, goes directly from the local municipality to the local separate school board where we have so-called opted-out school boards. In any case, the \$2.85 billion in voted estimates coupled with the \$1.45 billion in education property taxes that I just alluded to brings the total support for basic education, K to 12, to \$4.3 billion.

Now, our voted estimates begin on page 113 of the 2005-06 government and lottery fund estimates book. Program 1, ministry support services, is the corporate function of the department. As you can see, support to this area will increase by \$4 million. The majority of this increase, almost \$3 million of it, in fact, is in support of new technology for the school system. It includes items such as provincial Microsoft licensing, supplying student transcripts, and providing other resources to advance classroom learning opportunities. The balance is for the restructuring of the former ministry of learning into two separate ministries, Education and Advanced Education, and also for staff salary supports and for meeting government's shared service agreement with the Alberta Corporate Service Centre.

Program 2, support for basic education, is very extensive and will likely consume most of our time here today. Support in this area will increase by \$234 million, or 9.5 per cent, and goes almost entirely to increased grant funding for 62 school jurisdictions, 13 charter schools, and 267 accredited private schools and private ECS operators. Together, Mr. Chair, all of these entities help educate more than 590,000 children and youth across our great province.

3:10

Support for basic allocations includes grant dollars for our renewed funding framework, which will be going into its second school year of implementation this September and will provide boards with increased funding and more flexibility to spend those funds on local priorities; grant dollars for our class size reduction initiative; grant dollars for professional development for teachers; and millions of dollars for items such as technology initiatives, teachers' pensions, accredited private school support, Alberta initiative for school improvement, or what we call AISI projects, student health services, high-speed networking to connect schools to SuperNet, learning resources centres, and amortization of capital assets, and so on.

The renewed funding framework bears some additional comment because the renewed funding framework gives our school boards greater flexibility in determining how to spend these funds to meet their local needs. Under this particular framework, Mr. Chair, support to public and separate school boards will increase by \$180 million, which is about 5.4 per cent, to \$3.5 billion in '05-06.

Highlights of the renewed funding framework include an increase of 2.5 per cent to base instruction grants for public and separate school boards, which is in response to Alberta Commission on Learning recommendation 90; an increase of 4 per cent to the rates

for severe disabilities, in response to Commission on Learning recommendation 42; and an additional 4 per cent increase that is being set aside to accommodate rising numbers of severely disabled students, in other words, volume, and this is in response to Alberta Commission on Learning recommendation 42; an increase of 3 per cent for transportation rates, which is in response to Alberta Commission on Learning recommendation 90; an increase of 2 per cent for all other grants under the framework, which also responds to Alberta Commission on Learning recommendation 90; and an 11.4 per cent increase for assistance to ECS children and for grades 1 to 12 students with severe special needs, which increases funding in this area to \$323 million, and that is in response to Alberta Commission on Learning recommendation 42; furthermore, a grant rate increase of 2 per cent for First Nations, Métis, and Inuit learners in the K to 12 system, which is an increase of \$2.5 million from \$32 million last year, and that would bring the total support in this area to \$33.5 million; an increase of 32.7 per cent for ESL, English as a Second Language, which takes funding in this area up to \$40.5 million for domestic-born and for foreign-born students living in Alberta and responds to Alberta Commission on Learning recommendation 42.

Mr. Chairman, there is also a brand new allocation of \$1.2 million in support of our daily physical activity initiative, that starts this fall. In fact, this amount will come to about \$1,000 per school to help get them started, and it commences our response to Alberta Commission on Learning recommendation 7.

My final point, Mr. Chairman, is one I really want to highlight because it's an increase of approximately \$2 million to compensate for increased costs incurred by francophone authorities to provide English equivalent programming to their students, which is referenced in Alberta Commission on Learning recommendation 90.

Et maintenant en français. Le cadre de financement comprend une augmentation d'environ 2 millions de dollars afin d'aider les autorités scolaires francophones à assumer l'augmentation des coûts occasionnés par la mise en place d'une programmation équivalente à la programmation anglaise pour leurs élèves et ce afin de se conformer aux exigences de l'article 23 de la Charte canadienne des droits et libertés.

[Translation] And now in French. The funding framework also includes an increase of approximately \$2 million to compensate for increased costs incurred by francophone authorities to provide English equivalent programming to their students in accordance with the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. [As submitted]

As a result, Mr. Chair, I will ensure that our five regional francophone authorities will receive a funding increase to address these specific costs. [some applause] Merci bien.

Les cinq autorités régionales francophones recevront un financement accru pour assumer les coûts reliés à l'offre de services éducatifs en français déjà dispensés par ces autorités.

[Translation] The five regional authorities will receive a funding increase to address the costs of offering the educational services provided in French already provided by the boards. [As submitted]

I should also emphasize that the renewed funding framework was developed by, with, and for our education partners, which includes the Alberta School Boards Association. In fact, our renewed funding framework is a living, breathing model subject to improvements. It's not a static grant formula for all time, and during my meetings with school boards it was referenced on many occasions.

In fact, there were a few school boards who felt somewhat shortchanged by the renewed funding framework, and I said that I would address that with my officials, and I'm happy that we were able to do that. The fact remains, however, that not one single school board experienced reduced funding under this framework. As

a matter of fact, within the guideline there is a component, Mr. Chair, called stabilization, and its purpose is to ensure that no school jurisdiction gets less funding under the new funding framework than it would have received under the old funding framework. That's one reason why I was happy that we increased this amount by a further 2 per cent for 2005-2006.

Now I would like to speak about some other provincial initiatives that are within the renewed funding framework but have targeted, or labelled, funding dollars attached to them; in other words, initiatives that require certain monies in specified amounts to be spent on them under program 2. I'll start with the additional \$6 million in new one-time funding that will be provided to augment the \$110 million in this budget for our class size reduction initiative. This additional \$6 million will assist with the second year of the class size reduction initiative to address factors such as improving transportation services, purchasing classroom furniture, or adjusting school attendance boundaries. In fact, these funds will be distributed to school jurisdictions on a per-student basis for grades 1 through 12. That, too, is in response to the Alberta Commission on Learning recommendation 14.

Secondly, there is a \$319 million budget item for the Alberta teachers' pensions, of which \$174 million is for current service, as you will see on page 116, and \$144.6 million is for the unfunded liability as identified under statutory programs on page 119. Now, this represents an increase of 16 per cent, or \$44 million, so it is obviously very significant, and I know that teachers will appreciate having it supported today. I should add that this is due to the additional costs associated with hiring 1,250 brand new teachers in September of 2004 as well as annual salary increases for teachers and an increase of 1.53 per cent in the contribution rate to the pension plan by both its members in general and the government, which is in response to the Alberta Commission on Learning recommendation 90. In the case of the teachers' pensions, it is the Teachers' Pension Plans Act which mandates funding responsibility by government for teachers' pensions, so it's a statutory-type provision.

Thirdly, we have a 5.4 per cent increase, which amounts to \$4.8 million, for accredited private school support to offset rising enrolment costs and increased severe special-needs funding for grades 1 to 12. This funding includes a 2.5 per cent increase in the base instruction grant and a 4 per cent increase in the severe special-needs grant. All other grant increases are going up by 2 per cent as well, and this is in response to the Alberta Commission on Learning recommendations 42 and 90.

Fourthly, we have a funding increase of 9.5 per cent, or \$3 million, for accredited private ECS operators for a total of \$35.35 million, and this is again to address rising enrolments of special-needs youngsters. It includes a 2.5 per cent grant rate increase, a 4 per cent severe special-needs increase, and a 3 per cent transportation increase. All other grants increase by 2 per cent, as recommended in the Alberta Commission on Learning recommendations 42 and 90.

Fifthly, I have allocated \$6 million in new one-time funding for professional development for teachers. A professional development plan is currently being worked on to determine the best course of action, including working with regional professional development consortia. This is in response to the Alberta Commission on Learning recommendation 9.

Sixthly, we have the 2 per cent increase for our Alberta initiative for school improvements, which is going up by \$1.3 million to \$69.76 million.

Seventh is a 2 per cent increase for student health services, which maybe I'll comment on a little later because that's going up by \$698,000 to \$37.66 million.

Eighth is a funding increase of 47 per cent for high-speed networking, or SuperNet. Funding here will increase by \$1.9 million to \$6 million total as more school sites come on stream.

3:20

Quickly, ninth is our very popular class size reduction initiative, which will receive \$110 million through this budget in order to sustain our promise to reduce class sizes and to honour our commitment to the class size guidelines as recommended in recommendation 14 of the Alberta Commission on Learning. With these additional and/or new monies school boards will be able to hire 435 new teachers this September. They will also be able to retain the 1,250 new teachers that were hired last September.

There are a number of other items that I'd like to get to. Perhaps I will during the question-and-answer period because there are a number of other program initiatives in technology that I want to comment on, in video conferencing, which I hope some members might be interested in, and in our Learning Resources Centre, and so on.

Let me just conclude now by simply saying, Mr. Chairman, that this is an extremely vibrant education system that we have here. I'm so pleased that we have \$4.3 billion to work with to help ensure that our students are provided with consistent, good programming, with outstanding if not excellent teachers, with the best, highest quality curriculum available, with parent involvement where it's necessary, with government support wherever we can provide it so that they can consistently perform and/or outperform their counterparts in international testing and in other benchmarks that we see before us.

Thank you for your anticipated support, hon. members. This is a very significant budget for our K to 12 education system. With that, I'll look forward to any questions that might arise or comments that you might wish to make. I would just ask that if members are referencing something specific in the estimates, could they please give me the specific page number at the top of the question so that I can flip to it and be on the same page as they are. That will help speed things along and will allow more questions to be answered.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I believe my time has just about run out, so we'll look forward to questions. Thank you.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for St. Albert.

Mr. Flaherty: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. To the hon. minister, it is an honour to be able to comment on your budget. Hopefully, we can have a little discussion about some of the items. First of all, I'd like to just quote from a source before we get into some of the specifics a little later on more in a philosophical view. My colleagues will go into some of the in-depth matters of the budget, but I'll see how much time I have for that.

First of all, I thought it was important, and I have a great deal of faith in the particular author, who is a retired educator in St. Albert and very, very accomplished at writing and expressing his views. I'm sure the good minister knows about him.

Some of you will well remember the outcry in the early 1990s that Canadian students were not performing well by international standards. The response from government was to set standards even higher and to concentrate almost exclusively on academic subjects. According to the *National Post* of February 3, 2005, the push to improve standards in schools to satisfy critics "may be having an unintended consequence: increasing drop-out rates in most provinces."

So why do approximately one-third of Alberta high school students fail to graduate? Now, I'm sure that we'd get many different reasons from across the floor, and I know that I've

discussed it with my colleagues here. Here are some reasons I'd like to put forth through this article. The focus through Alberta Education is on high academic standards in core subjects. The focus fails to address the learning needs of students not headed towards postsecondary studies.

I can comment on that from being a superintendent of schools in Fort McMurray, where about 35 to 40 per cent of our population was aboriginal. I think that it was significant that when we worked through the classrooms of the two elementary schools, we found over a period of time that bringing in a learning disabled program and special-resource teachers helped to improve that situation.

The focus ignores the particular needs – and this is the testing focus – of students with special needs, English as a Second Language students, and the many First Nations and Métis students. A strong provincial economy also draws young people into the workplace before completing high school, and for nonacademically oriented students the material attractions of money and a car are incentives for pupils to leave school.

I think the important point here, to the minister – and I'm sorry that I can't go in depth about this. In 2000, according to the study produced for the ATA, \$12 million was spent on provincial achievement testing, but only \$4 million was spent on curriculum development. I think that's very significant in light of my earlier comments. I don't think, in terms of laying the foundation in elementary education, that we are doing enough work in that area. I will ask the question now: how much is being spent on achievement testing in '05-06, and how much is being spent on curriculum development in '05-06?

From my limited travels, because I don't have the luxury of a large budget – I have spent time and I have also worked as a trustee and a school superintendent and an associate school superintendent when the public system was decentralizing their budgets to schools in Edmonton. My feeling from talking to many of my colleagues, people at the University of Alberta, parents, my daughters in Calgary and Okotoks, Alberta, there is a basic need that we should be looking at in elementary education, and that's what I call a solid foundation, one in which all children have a chance for a good educational journey. I believe strongly that unless this is done, unless the foundation at the early elementary school is laid clear, it leads to poor school performance, which affects our self-concept, believe it or not, affects the dropout rate, leads to delinquency, and it leads to bullying. If you'll check with Dr. Carter's doctorate thesis at the U of A, I think you'll find what he suggests are some of the issues with that.

One of the things that I thought was interesting in regard to this and in trying to make my point – again, I have great regard for the minister, and I want him to know that. I just feel, Mr. Minister, that we must look at the elementary part of our program, that you are in charge of, sir.

I look at the quote again. The statistics can be stated that among the provinces the lowest graduation rate occurred in Alberta, where only two-thirds, 66.5 per cent, of youth graduated from high school in 2002-2003. According to the release, the graduation rate had increased; it was 63.2 per cent in '97-98. So there is an improvement going on, which is very gratifying.

So I'm really suggesting to the minister that we must look at the whole business of achievement testing, moving from achievement testing to a power diagnostic assessment process at the elementary school. I'm going to suggest some reasons and give some rationale for my statement. I think it would give us a meaningful accountability to be provided through the mandatory diagnostic testing with results reported to students, parents, and the school system. I think the research will show, if you talk to people like Dr. John Paterson,

the former associate dean of education at the University of Alberta, that a start in school is very, very crucial.

One of the things that's very, very important in the elementary grades is that we find out that a lot of kids do not succeed because they don't know what the problems are, and they need parent help. What I think would be very helpful here is a mandatory diagnostic testing where the information could be working from the school to the home, and they could reinforce where the child needs remediation and help.

3:30

The other thing I'd like to bring out. Diagnostic testing at the elementary level provides a picture of what students know and don't know and helps teachers to prescribe instruction to meet student learning needs. I think that's very, very important. Diagnostic testing helps to support new programs like early literacy and can cover more of the provincial curriculum than multiple-choice tests. Only Ontario and New Brunswick require eight year olds to complete high-stake provincial testing. Alberta students are the most highly tested in Canada. Last year Manitoba found the light and cancelled the grade 3 testing program in favour of diagnostic testing. Now, we understand that they're in the NDP government – and God forgive them for that – but I think it's important that we recognize that they've seen the light in that. Again, that to me is significant.

Now, the other thing I'd like to mention before I get into the specifics – and I hope my colleagues are getting geared up and fired up. That was my job, they said, to get them fired up, and I'm trying to do that just by talking a little longer here. [interjection] Excuse me. I shouldn't have said that. It doesn't look good, does it?

I think it's important, Mr. Chairman, that we look at what happened to me the other night in an elementary school in St. Albert, and I want to pat the government and thank them for this. I was at a DARE program. It seems to me that with this wonderful amount of money they quoted – \$4.3 billion. What a powerful amount of money. You see, I think what's wrong sometimes is that you can't always win by throwing money where there's a problem. [interjections] I think that's very, very important. I really do believe that. It takes good management. [interjections] That's the best cheer I've had since I was elected. Thanks very much. I'll stop now.

What I think was significant about this DARE program, and it was very, very good, was the amount in that school – and I want the minister to know the very high accolades he got that night – for the DARE program. I think what is intriguing about that was the involvement of police, was the involvement of FCSS people, and was the involvement of parents and how they initiated. What I would like to see is that DARE program, if I dare ask, reinforced again and brought back with a new innovation with crystal meth involved in that. I think that's wonderful.

It was also very rewarding for me when the principal of the day stood up and said: "You know, Mr. Flaherty, tell the government we're so pleased with what they're doing with this program, but we don't need more money. We need prevention." He said this: "Junior high school kids will be successful if their parents and significant others are there for them." That's number one.

The second thing the principal said is that we have to work on the area of passion with junior high schools: passion for a program, passion for a dance, passion for hunting. My granddaughter, who is going to dance for the Queen in Calgary, has a passion for dancing. Amara has a passion for dancing. He said that that will enable kids to get through junior high successfully.

Then he said a significant thing. I was told by the aboriginal affairs minister once that when you're meeting with aboriginal

people, get them to bring a buddy that they can trust. They're not going to trust you, so let them bring a buddy. Here we have the junior high school principal saying: "Get kids to have buddies that are reliable. Get kids to buddy up and like one another." They need support just like I need support from my colleagues today to do a good job on this presentation, and I think it's important. He said, "Give those junior high kids also a good sense of what you're doing with the DARE program with a sense of prevention."

I thought that principal had a wonderful message for me. You know, it didn't cost me anything to go there. I just was so taken with what happened.

Now, Mr. Minister, I know I might sound like a preacher here when I talk to you. I just want to go into one other thing, and I may be taking a little too long at this. This is the question of framework of funding that the good Minister of Advanced Education talked about. I'm wondering – and I may be bold in asking you to look at this – why we can't do something on speech therapy, to go back to my question on diagnosis work. What I would like to see, if I may be so bold as to suggest: the framework of funding that this government sets out is so important that you do that for the postsecondary students. Why can't we stipulate a specific kind of grant?

I have a background in counselling and guidance. I was lucky to take that program, sponsored by the federal government. Why can't this government do something in speech therapy by suggesting that this special grant program, because I'm asking you to look at and to consider school-based elementary speech therapy, will launch kids on a good start in that foundation in elementary school? Most superintendents and trustees, if they're honest, will tell you that that is what's lacking in our elementary schools.

So I plead with you. There's a way to deal with this problem. I agreed with the minister when he said: hard to get these people, difficult to find them. The hospital model for this – no disrespect – doesn't work in the school. That might be professional jealousies. I don't know. I just think it's a problem, and I just would ask you if we could have that considered.

The other thing that may be sensitive to the government is the question of closures, and I'm just going to quickly talk about that in the sense of school closures. We've had several editorials, and I don't know the state of some of these people, but I thought it was interesting in the ATA. Until 1984 school boards had a means of raising money for purposes that were not directly related to the program of studies and the curriculum but were nevertheless valid and valued by the local community. For example, if the people of Empress wanted to keep the local school open, they could let the trustees know, and trustees could bear the community's desires in mind and raise money to make a continued operation of the community school, having school permission to continue with government learning. But they would fund it through a requisition.

Now, the government took that, eliminated that in '94. One unanticipated outcome was that the school boards lost the means of funding decisions that used the school to represent the community development, recreational development, economic development, or social development. Alberta Learning had no mandate to provide funds for anything other than fulfilling its own mandate. Alberta Learning did not understand the other issues, and it didn't care to get involved.

I'm not going to continue reading this, but I think the message is clear. I think, and even the *Edmonton Journal* is saying to the good minister across the way: "nobody claims that job." Now she's saying: we need a white charger with the minister on top of the horse leading the charge to look at this whole idea of community schools.

I suggest to you, Mr. Minister, that we should revisit the community school concept. I was even brave enough to look at your good

colleague – and I won't mention his name and embarrass you in the House – who today suggested that there may be a supplemental budget to Education in the fall. Maybe that's a disruptive point to make, but I do believe that we should go back and look at the community school concept. I hope you can look at it.

What does it do? You had a bill here. It's called Bill 28, the Municipal Government Amendment Act, 2005, sir, and it talks about revitalization of the inner core of the cities. I can't think of anything more basic and revitalizing than the school and turning it around and using it as a community centre with all kinds of programs. I think that's essential. I think some of these schools that may be closed could be looked at. I think also there's an issue there of funding again because many school boards do not want to keep this on the books. So those are some of the issues.

Just another comment to you. I'm getting old, and I'm not just using the Learning Commission anymore as a reference. There are several other people out there talking to me. I don't have the expense account to go out and talk to all school boards, which I'm sorry I can't do. I do believe that there are a lot of people that are very supportive of your ministry, sir, but I think that we have to be open to changes. The good Minister of Advanced Education talked about changes, being open, and I hope you take this in the right spirit.

I don't know, Mr. Chairman, how much more time I've got. Have I got time to get into some of the nitty-gritty? No. Two minutes. Well, I know the rest of my gang here – some of them have left. I thought the Legion closed at 3.

Anyway, Mr. Minister, I'll just sit down, and I'll turn it over to them. I've got about 10, 15 more good questions, but I want you to know I sure hope you'll have a look at that diagnostic. I'd work hard with you on that, sir. Thank you very much.

3:40

The Deputy Chair: The hon. minister.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Mr. Chairman, I'll try to provide some brief answers. Those that I didn't get down or don't get to because I couldn't write that fast: we'll try and respond in writing.

First of all, I want to thank the hon. Member for St. Albert for his passion for education. It almost rivals mine. In fact, on a given day I might not want to live between the difference. It's nice to know that there are people who are former educators or were involved in the education system – and there are many in this House from all over the province who are involved in one capacity or another. I'd say most of us are parents, so we come at this from a very, very straightforward and honest position.

The comments about what occurred in the early 1990s intrigued me. How Alberta students were or were not performing in terms of international tests or in reference to the standards that were set at that time and how that may have impacted dropout rates is also interesting. I think that's one of the reasons why the department of education at that time, which subsequently became learning and is now again Education, had looked at ways of addressing that particular difficulty.

As all members here would now know, on the program for international student achievement, or the PISA test, as we call them, our students have consistently done well. Very briefly, we know that in the latest reported results in December of '04, which reflected the test written, I think, in '03, our students were number one in math or sciences – I can't recall which one it was – and number three and number four in the other, be it math or science, and in problem solving and reading and so on. The results are very, very encouraging in terms of the international picture, and that was a

repeat of the results from 2000. So I think there have been some tremendous improvements made there, and we can assert that to a lot of positives in the system that have occurred in the last 10 years in particular, I would say.

Things like a standardized curriculum across the province are very important. Things like encouraging more professional development with and by and for our teachers, who are absolutely excellent teachers in this province, things like online and other methods of learning, our improvements in technology, the AISI projects, the student health initiative projects, the ESL funding. I could go and on, hon. member. All of those things, properly done and properly balanced in the Rubik's cube, can and will impact our high school completion rates.

In fact, we know that we have some work to do on helping increase the three-year high school completion rate. We're not doing too badly, hon. members, in the five-year picture, which is up in the mid-70s. Then when we take a look at a different statistic, which is the age range of 25 to 34 year olds living in Alberta, we have an 89 per cent high school completion rate in that particular age range. So we're doing very, very well. However, we can and we will do better. It is a priority for me, I want the hon. member to know, to address high school completion rates. That's one reason why I immediately struck a task force to look into that, and we are working on that together.

The other point about the percentage of aboriginal population, which the hon. member mentioned, particularly in the north of Alberta, is something I'm very sensitive to. In fact, I didn't have time in my opening comments to get into this in any great detail, but I'd like the members here to know that a new initiative that was created just a few years ago, the First Nations, Métis, and Inuit, or FNMI initiative, is an extremely well-run initiative. It's extremely popular, and it provides an additional – what is it now? – \$33.5 million in the current budget to specifically help children of First Nations, Métis, or Inuit background, to help them achieve, to help bring their inspirations and hopes up to a higher and higher level. [some applause] I thank the hon. Member for Lesser Slave Lake for those kudos, that endorsement, because when I was in Community Development and she was with aboriginal and northern affairs, we worked a lot on these initiatives.

It's nice to see them come to be because in this current budget we will help provide support for aboriginal language courses in Blackfoot and Cree, for example, and we will help with the development and implementation of aboriginal 10, 20, and 30 curricula and with the infusion of aboriginal perspectives into other areas such as physical education, such as health, math, science, language arts, all of which are being looked at, hon. member, to reflect to the best extent possible aboriginal traditions and aboriginal values, which are very central and very important, as you will know.

I also grew up not far from a reserve, and I'm very, very tuned in, as the questioner is as well, with aboriginal issues. In fact, it's something that I referenced time and time again with other ministers of education at the national level when we met with them just – what? – two months ago or so. I can't recall the exact date. But I'm very sensitive to that.

The other point, very quickly, was a question with respect to how much money gets spent on achievement testing versus curriculum development, I think it was. I want the hon. member to know that in the current budget – and I'm going by memory a little bit here – I think we have about \$21 million allocated for curriculum development plus a further \$6 million, hon. member, for professional development, which, as you know, has to do with in-servicing and all kinds of other related issues for teachers.

I haven't got the exact thing broken out for you, hon. member, but

I know that we spent or will spend about \$12 million on achievement testing in grades 3, 6, and 9 and a few more million on top of that, probably, for grade 12 diploma testing. Or is it included in that same amount? Okay. So it's about \$12 million total for grades 3, 6, 9, and 12.

The other point was with respect to bullying. You know, bullying is something that we've taken a very serious stance against along with our violence prevention piece, and there are a number of ministries involved in this particular issue as well as with our safe schools initiative. We know that creating safe and caring school environments is critical for our students and for the families who send their kids to our schools. That's why in May of 2004 the bullying prevention strategy and the family violence and bullying conference was held, and a lot of research and initiatives were presented.

Alberta Education is part of that. We provide some funding for it. I think last year we provided about a quarter of a million dollars, if my memory serves, somewhere in that neighbourhood anyway, \$200,000 to \$300,000, and we've got more work to do, but we are undertaking that with great vigour as we speak.

Your plea, hon. member, about looking at the elementary part. I'm very cognizant of that. Yes, I will do that, and we have been doing it. I don't want to make it sound like we weren't. But specific to your questions about provincial achievement testing, you know, I have to just indicate – and I think the hon. member knows this, in any event, but perhaps for the benefit of some others. Our provincial achievement tests are not done only for the purpose of trying to assess, if you will, how our students are doing in terms of literacy, numeracy, and so on, at the grades 3, 6, 9 levels. They're done for many other reasons as well, and some of them are selfish to the government of Alberta. We want to know how well our curriculum is doing. How well is it being administered, received, taught, interpreted? Where might there be weaknesses, and so on?

So these provincial achievement tests help us with our standards setting. They help parents understand how their children are doing, and they help others monitor that progress. In the end, I'm of the opinion still that they do help motivate, perhaps, and they help to improve student learning, and in a perhaps vicarious way – and maybe the connection is vicarious – it helps prepare our students for the real world that they are going to be stepping into. So that's one thing.

But never would I expect or want a child to be put under stress or feel like this is the end of the world for them if they pass or fail this test, because we don't fail children anymore, as you know. We allow them to move on. But we have to do a better job in preparing those children who are not doing so well and who we know are not doing so well in these tests such as the grade 3 test and design a program, which I've labelled in this House as diagnostic assessment. I want to get away from the word testing, hon. member, and I hope you will, too, when we're talking diagnostic, just to draw a distinction.

We can have provincial achievement testing, and we can agree or disagree on that, but I want to talk about diagnostic assessment because to me an assessment has a much longer period of time or capability attached to it. Anyway, we'll talk more about that perhaps: why we have these provincial achievement tests and how we use them.

3:50

A number of teachers have spoken to me about some of the value to them. Others have spoken on the other side, obviously, against them. But overall they seem to be achieving what they set out.

I'll just wrap up with two final quick comments. One of them is

with respect to the DARE program that was referenced. You know, during my meetings with all the school boards and meetings with many parent groups, the home and school council groups, and superintendents, CASS, the Council of Alberta School Superintendents, guidance counsellors and work counsellors, and so on, the issue of drugs came up in almost every one of those meetings. If it didn't come up, I raised it because I'm very, very alarmed at crystal meth, in particular.

I read somewhere not long ago about some strip tests for smell that are coming in. I can't remember which hon. member in the House sent me a note on it, but someone from our side sent me a note on this. It looks like there is a relatively inexpensive way that we might look at actually determining by smell if students have been in contact with crystal meth. It's quite phenomenal – it's quite phenomenal – and we're looking at that very seriously now.

An Hon. Member: There is some technology coming.

Mr. Zwodzdesky: There is some technology coming, I know. I think somewhere it has already been pilot-tested, and it seems to work.

I certainly appreciate the comment that the hon. Member for St. Albert made: you can't win every argument, or whatever, by simply throwing money at a problem. That's absolutely true, and all members on all sides of the House – I don't care what party they're with – would all agree with that because we all know what you mean, and I know that you mean it quite sincerely. Money can help in some cases, but sometimes you have to go beyond money and get highly, highly creative and motivated and check all of the research and get passionate, as you said, and as your granddaughter is going to be for the Queen.

Why can't we do something about speech therapy is the other point, Mr. Chairman, very briefly. I've answered this question in the House before. Nothing would give me more pleasure than to go out there and hire more speech therapists, more audio linguists, more individuals who could help. The simple fact is that they're not available to be hired. We have tried. I spoke about this at the CMEC national conference, as well, with Canadian ministers of education. It's a problem. You know, hon. member, it's not a problem just in Alberta or just in Canada. It's a problem around the whole world, we found out. I've got school boards asking me. So I'm going to be working with the Minister of Advanced Education and with the postsecondary because we have to graduate more people.

Just before your time I was Minister of Community Development, and we had a similar problem in the area of caregivers for persons with developmental disabilities. We went straight to the Grant MacEwans of the world, and we started to say: "What can we do? Can we give you more money? Can we do something to design a program with you and get more people interested?" Recruitment is a problem. Retention is a problem. Then we increased the hourly wage rates, which helped.

Closures are something we can get to perhaps at another time, Mr. Chair. I just want to say this. Something was eliminated back in 1984, and I'll have to read in *Hansard* what that was because it's before my time, obviously. The part that I found most interesting was the community school concept. This is something that I'm working on with the hon. Minister of Infrastructure and Transportation in terms of the types of schools that Infrastructure will be building in the future, as soon as they get the money to do that, I should say.

Those new schools will perhaps be designed more on a modular basis, not portables but modulars, so that they don't necessarily look

like glom-ons the way sometimes portables can look. I don't mean to demean portables because I've taught in them, and so have you, and we all know that they're necessary. But new ways of designing and new ways of drawing the architecture for schools that will have a use beyond their school use is critical. However, at the same time, there might be some community applications. We should not be afraid to look at that, and I like your ideas in that regard, hon. member.

I don't know about any supplementary education budget coming in the fall. That would be a lovely thing. I don't know where that rumour got started. I'm not aware of it for Education. But there is a process in government called supplementary estimates, which we experienced about six weeks ago, which some members here would know about. Sometimes additional monies are required, and they do come forward in that form, but we don't have any contemplated at this time for Education.

So with that, I'll take my seat, just noting the member's passion about being open to change. That we have to be open to changes is something I certainly agree with. That's one reason why we have to look at things like the recommendations from the Learning Commission when they talk about possibly – I say this as potentially – looking at another way for the collective bargaining model to be done. I'm not saying that it's right or it's wrong. The fact is that I haven't seen the model yet, hon. member, but I'm open to looking at it. Under the guise of democracy, if the school boards have voted that way, I do have an obligation in following up because it was undertaken by government to do that.

Similarly, with principals. Should they be in the ATA, part of the union, or should they not? I don't have the correct answer for that yet. We'll be addressing that as well. But it's important to have the discussion because we can learn something. Whether we actually implement it or not is another question, but you can always learn something about hearing other opinions, and I hope that's what you mean by being open to considering other changes. I see you nodding, so that's a good thing.

Mr. Chair, let me take my seat here because I'm sure there are others who have other questions. Thank you.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Decore.

Mr. Bonko: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'm pleased to be able to speak on I believe one of the most important ministries of this government because, in fact, you hold the key to the future, not only for today but for tomorrow, because you have education's best at heart.

When we talk about your budget, it's \$4.33 billion, and that in itself is an enormous number. I won't deny that whatsoever. That is huge. If we break it down with regard to the amount of students out there, which is approximately 600,000 students within the province, on a daily basis it comes out to about \$23 million.

An Hon. Member: Per school day.

Mr. Bonko: Exactly; per school day. If we further break down that \$23 million on 600,000 kids, it comes out to roughly about \$46 per day, then, if I'm correct on that math there. Out of that \$46 comes the debt servicing, comes the schools' fees as well as the servicing of the teachers' salaries, supplies, and equipment. You can see how the number shrinks as it gets closer to the classroom. That's all I'm going to say on that point. I think that we still have a great bargain on our hands when we talk about \$4.33 billion to be able to educate the future of Alberta.

We're just coming out of the last hundred years, and we've got to

make sure that in the next hundred years these students are prepared to be able to carry on with the necessary means. We talk about other areas that we have shortages in, and those are some of the areas that I want to speak on.

I think the minister would recall perhaps in his days, way back when, when W.P. Wagner was a school that was able to capture some of the kids in the area that weren't going to be stellar students. I've got to recognize that not everybody is going to go on to postsecondary, and that's just a fact. There are some that are going to go right to the trades. I think there was a disservice when, in fact, the school of W.P. Wagner's type was taken off and eliminated. Unfortunately, we don't have that type of model. Nowadays we have something which is known as RAP, or the registered apprenticeship program. I think that's a good start. I don't think it goes far enough.

The reason I say that is that, in fact, we have trade shortages, skilled worker shortages. The temporary foreign workers initiative speaks directly to that. After we've recognized our mishap in eliminating W.P. Wagner, would it not be more prudent, maybe as a pilot, to create again a model such as that? I hear time and time again adults now saying: "You know what? If it wasn't for that school, I don't know where I'd be. That school, in fact, saved me, and it gave me direction. It gave me a career. It gave me a life." So that's just one thing to think about when we're talking about schools and innovative approaches to education. The W.P. Wagner model certainly was one that resonates in my mind as well as with a lot of other people who do recall that.

I'll talk about the utilization and the school closure policy. We met with trustees, and as a trustee I, in fact, was a little concerned with this. This would be an innovative approach, and it would I think meet all the needs as well as be able to fit the current model, but it needs some provision. It needs some tweaking there. In fact, if the minister would allow – currently, when the school boards are in fact closing a school, they have to close it to get it off their books so it no longer reads as part of the utilized space. They're being penalized for having that unutilized space. If they, in fact, were going to close a school, if they could turn it to the community and take it off their books, it would be taken out of the utilization rate, so it no longer counts against them. It still would remain in the community to be able to have community access.

4:00

When time does allow for the community to revitalize, they would have that school there in the future because it wouldn't have been sold off or dismantled in some way and taken completely out of the neighbourhood. It would still remain part of the school's inventory, and it would remain in the community. The thing is that if the community revitalized, the school boards, in fact, would be lobbying: we need this school back. They could close some of the programs or some of the community uses in the school and reopen that school again.

This speaks with regard to the Municipal Government Act that was coming from this government, when they spoke about revitalizing depressed areas. Again, we all have to work not only as municipal but school boards and government to ensure that we don't have that type of piece coming on a day-to-day basis when we talk about closing schools.

I think if you wanted that model, the community would be accepting of that if they thought that, you know: "We only have a utilization rate, perhaps, of 36 per cent. I can see the population growing. In 10 years we'll have enough to support it." If we closed it right now and, in fact, put programs to support within the community and then 10 years later opened it up, I think that would be a

palatable model by school boards, by the community, and certainly by this government. I think that would certainly be looked at.

I talked to trustees last night, and they certainly would be appreciative of something like that. Speaking as a community member whose school in the neighbourhood is being closed, I would be appreciative of that, knowing that one day that school could potentially reopen. Under the current model it completely disappears, and the community is punished not only for today but for the long term, for tomorrow, because chances of a school being rebuilt are nil.

If we talk about concerns with the ASBA, the Alberta School Boards Association, and their hand within provincial bargaining, we didn't have, when the vote was taken, 100 per cent acceptance, so that still tells me that there are boards who, in fact, still recognize the benefits of local bargaining and a local solution made right there by the locally elected officials. I think that taking that away from them further erodes that particular piece of governance, which is concerning because, again, we asked this question in the House: at what point do you find that the trustees are no longer valid because they don't have any real powers of legislation? Do you just appoint them in such a way as the health authorities?

I'm very concerned with the continuing erosion of the powers of the trustees with regard to local bargaining. Again, when you have big urban centres such as Edmonton, Calgary, and Fort McMurray or perhaps Red Deer who are able to find solutions right within their own ability, with their own bargaining and their own mediators, why would you go to provincial bargaining? That in itself is concerning.

We talk about funds. I think more funds could be directed, if we are going to find ways. We certainly did with front-line staff when we talked about teacher-librarians. A lot of schools don't have teacher-librarians or librarians, in fact, trade. Counsellors: again, we lack bodies in those areas extremely. When we had to do the cutbacks, it usually was within the front line that they deemed as maybe nonessential, such as custodians. I would argue that every individual regardless of their task at hand is essential to the overall operating and success of a school, right from the custodian to the secretary to the librarian to the counsellors to the teachers as well as the parent involvement. As we say, it takes a whole village to raise a child and make that child successful. Eliminating any key parts of it certainly weakens it.

We talk about being able to read and write, but when you don't have the people there to be able to encourage these people to take out those books, to give them the direction to what they're learning or what they're wanting to see, again, you fail in that one particular piece of that puzzle. So if we had to have tied money with regard to support staff, I would certainly encourage the minister to put it in with regard to those particular areas that I just mentioned.

I touched on the trade schools. I touched on the concern with the ASBA and with regard to the utilization. I know that there are a number of speakers, but those are specifics that I thought I should mention, just to get those off the plate so that others could get up there, that you'd take into consideration with regard to the school closure policy as well as the trades and technology school, working with perhaps NAIT and SAIT and other technology or trade schools as well.

Thank you for that, then, Mr. Chairman.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. minister.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Well, thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you to the hon. Member for Edmonton-Decore. I am aware of his background as a former trustee. I don't know how many years.

Mr. Bonko: Nine years.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Nine years. So, you know, when he speaks, I have to listen because, of course, he's got so much wisdom and experience, as has the Member for St. Albert and elsewhere.

There are many teachers, many people who are passionate about education, and I appreciate that. I agree with your opening comment, hon. member, and that is that education is truly the key to the future. We all know that, and that's one reason why we have said over and over again that education is the top priority for our government now and for many years to come. It is; it has to be; and as long as I'm here, it will be. Other members feel the same.

It's true: \$4.3 billion is an enormous amount of money. I don't know how the math works out to the per-day thing, but what I can tell you is that when we take a look at the general average, we know that we spend just under \$9,000 per student per year throughout the whole system. That is the highest per capita rate in all of Canada, and it's the highest per-student rate. Now, I am aware that Ontario just did some things, and maybe those numbers will change here soon. I'm going off the information that I had to the end of December 31, at least. Again, it doesn't mean that more improvements can't be made.

Your comment about W.P. Wagner is one I'm particularly sensitive to because I was a teacher at Victoria composite high school in the late '60s and throughout the '70s, when, in fact, students were bused from W.P. Wagner over to Victoria composite, as it was then called. They came there primarily because of our vocational wings, but while they were there, they also learned other courses. I happened to teach languages and fine arts at that time, so they were in a variety of my classes. I do remember the students going to W.P. Wagner being highly motivated in the trades area. I honestly don't know why the W.P. Wagner program was cancelled. I can tell you that today W.P. Wagner is an outstanding academically inclined high school in my constituency, by the way.

I like the idea of having some trade school opportunities for our students. I suspect, however – I'm just guessing here, and I'll say this to you privately, hon. member – that it might have had something to do with the fact that other areas might have been looking for similar opportunities for their students. When you take a look at the kind of equipment you need to run a trade school, the kind of materials you need, the kind of shop supplies you need, I mean, we're talking everything from automotives to electricity to carpentry to plumbing to whatever. It's a huge array of opportunities that we used to provide. Some of my very close friends were trades teachers, and we spent a lot of time in their shops getting things repaired around the school, for example, or work projects that were brought in from the community so that the kids could learn.

I think the RAP and the YAP programs work, the registered apprenticeship program and the youth apprenticeship program. I think they need some tweaking; I honestly do. I've spoken with the Minister of Advanced Ed. I won't get into all the details right now, but I think that there are some improvements that we could make there because that will help us not only help the students with completion rates, but it'll help us fill skilled labour shortages, and it'll help our completion rates overall, our big-picture items. So we're on that.

As I indicated to the previous speaker, I also struck a task force to look into the high school completion rates, and the trades are a central part of that because we know, those of us who have been involved as educators especially, that not every child is destined to wind up in Academia Land. Some are destined for Tradesville and some are destined for Artsville, but the fact is that they have to stay in the education system longer, I think, to benefit themselves and their chances.

Now, your point about closure procedures and the fact that some school boards or some schools feel that they are being penalized, I think you said, for underutilized space and why not have that school remain in the community somehow. That's an excellent point, and this is part of the discussions that we are going to be having. We've had a few preliminary ones, myself and the minister of infrastructure and so on.

4:10

I would agree with you, that if we can figure out a way – and I mean this as a community, not necessarily just as government or opposition members or whatever – to give more community use to schools in general and at least provide some hope that there would be a potential for a school to be reopened as whatever. I think that's the point you're trying to make. Once a school closure takes place, and there are specific guidelines as to how that happens, and it results in a closure, it's the worst decision a school board probably ever has to make. I sympathize with those you may have gone through, and I've lived through a few, obviously, as well. Knowing that there's some potential use for it surely would encourage the community to somehow rally behind it or understand: yes, this is a closure for now, but it's not going away forever. Communities do revitalize. They do rejuvenate and so on.

However, we have to move on here quickly. The point you made about the Alberta School Boards Association provincial bargaining and the fact that the model, such as it was, was not 100 per cent accepted. I'm going to be briefed on this by ASBA themselves in a few days, or the representatives, at least. I'm interested to know, for example, how the weighted ballot worked and which questions the weighted ballot applied to. I know the report was that there was a 59 per cent approval rate for the new model, so by sheer numbers of majority it succeeded. That's excellent news for ASBA and for the people who worked so hard on it, but perhaps it's not so excellent news for the 41 per cent that felt otherwise.

Still, there was one major board, as you know, I think it was Calgary public, who did not vote. I think that's very significant because if it's a weighted ballot, that per cent could go from 59 up to 67, I think. If it's a weighted ballot going the other way, it could drop closer to the 50 per cent, which would, I guess, support your point, not necessarily ASBA's, obviously, but it's something to be considered.

I heard during my meetings about the benefits of local bargaining, but I also heard what the Learning Commission said. I'll just read to you very briefly, if I might, Mr. Chairman. On page 130 of this excellent report, item 81, Establish a New Collective Bargaining Model, this is what it says:

Under the current arrangements, the Alberta Teachers' Association has a mandate to act as the bargaining agent for teachers employed by public, separate and francophone school jurisdictions. Traditionally, negotiations have taken place at the local level between ATA local organizations and individual school boards. The provincial organization has acted as the bargaining agent when local negotiations have broken down . . .

And it goes on.

In contrast, school boards do not have an effective mechanism for providing a unified bargaining approach. While efforts are made through the [ASBA] to develop common strategies, provide negotiating advice, and take a consistent approach, there is no ability to bind locally elected school boards to a single, common bargaining strategy. In fact, the Commission heard that some school boards take pride in "going their own way" when it comes to bargaining with their local teachers.

The result is an imbalance in bargaining power between a strong and effective ATA on the one hand and a loose collection of school boards on the other.

Now, I only read that for purposes of putting into context what it is that the Learning Commission researched. Earlier this week in the House somebody asked a question about research on some of this kind of stuff. There's research we can find on both sides of every equation, as we all know. What encourages me is that at least we're having these open, frank discussions with it. After I've met with ASBA and I understand that model more perfectly, I will also meet with the ATA, who have called, and they want to chat. I expect I'll be meeting with a number of others because I want to understand better what that model can or cannot accomplish.

The final comment, quickly, Mr. Chair, is with respect to teacher-librarians. This is something that I feel very passionately about because during my years as a teacher, aside from my own home teaching room, I always told children that the most important room in the school is the library. I mean that. That's not to say that there aren't other important ones, but the library at that time – now we're into computers and all kinds of other things today – was the known place of knowledge and information and peace and quiet, too, for that matter. They've changed, but their importance remains the same.

During the 62 meetings I had with all the school boards, I did an informal survey of my own because I sincerely wanted to get a snapshot of where we stand with respect to qualified teacher-librarians. I was quite surprised at how few we actually have in the system. I don't have a number tabulated for you because they weren't prepared for the question as I was asking them, but I'm going to get a little bit more information on that.

On the other hand, we have a very large number of library technicians. As we know, Mr. Chair, those aren't the same thing. They fulfill an important service, and they're equally important to the system. It's just that in my view I think we need more teacher-librarians, but I was not successful in getting that into this year's budget. I'll try again for next year because I am passionate about it, as I am also about guidance counsellors.

You know, we have guidance counsellors, Mr. Chair, and we have career counsellors, I believe. Now, to have accredited, professionally trained counsellors would be my goal. That might mean that they have to be ATA approved or whatever, and that's okay. I know that when you have a counsellor on site all day long, children feel able to come to you, especially if you as the counsellor have established a presence, at any time when their problem exists.

This is kind of like the parent who wishes that he or she had spent more time with their child and coming home and saying: "I'm here. Where are you, child?" Well, the fact is that it's midnight, and the child has gone to bed, but I the parent am there. You have to be there when the children are there, when they're ready.

It's the same thing with guidance counsellors. You have to be there and be available when that child is having a problem, not necessarily two or four or six hours later or a week later. Now, I'm talking in an ideal, perfect sense, but the point I'm trying to make is that I'm very aware of this, and I'm working on this and toward it because these items were also referenced by the Learning Commission. I don't want to build too tall a mountain that none of us will be able to climb, so we're going at it slowly, trying to chip away at this to increase exactly what has been referenced. I hope that we can get that done.

I'll close by just saying, Mr. Chair, that within the renewed funding framework and the additional dollars that we've put there, school boards do have that flexibility now to hire more school librarians if they want and to hire more guidance counsellors, ATA accredited and so on, if they want. But they would probably come back and tell you that their dollars are being used and used well in other areas and that they don't have enough in these other areas yet.

With that in mind, I'll take my chair, knowing full well that this is an issue that will come back again. I agree with your comments about getting SAIT and NAIT more involved with the trades that you closed with, and that's why I'm working with the Minister of Advanced Ed to get some of those things done.

Thank you.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview.

Mr. Martin: Well, thank you, Mr. Chairman. Let me start. This is a big portfolio, and in 20 minutes you sort of have to pick areas that you want to go into. I'm not saying that a lot of the other areas that are being discussed aren't important, but I'd like to take a general look first, if I may.

The \$4.3 billion was alluded to. You know, when it gets into billions, people's heads spin because it sounds like a lot of money. I think the minister has said – and we probably agree – that it's still the best single investment you'll ever make. We can argue whether it should be \$5 billion or whatever the case may be, but it's most important. The key that I think the minister would agree with is that this is not an expense, that we have to use the word "investment" because that's what it is. It's an investment. It's an economic investment, well-documented. It's a social investment, you know, for the high-needs kids. If they don't get an education, we know where they're going to end up, and we'll end up paying in a different way. We certainly know that it's an economic investment. So I think the term is more important. I'd maybe suggest to the minister that rather than using "expense," we say that it's a \$4.3 billion investment.

I want to just talk in a very general sense about what I see happening, and I admit that this is not very scientific. It's a discussion I've had with three high school principals in Edmonton, and I think that the minister would be interested in this. I agree with the focus of getting the class sizes down at the K to 3 level. That's absolutely crucial. The bang for the buck we know is greater – and I'll come to that – but we can't forget the high schools. We've been talking about RAP and that, but in talking to three high schools, while there has been an increase in funding, three big high schools in Edmonton are probably going to lose staff. Now, in one case the population projections may be down slightly, and AISI money is not coming. You know, there are a lot of those programs, and maybe that's another thing the minister might think about. There are maybe too many tied-in programs.

4:20

The big thing is that a lot of the high school teachers are at the maximum on the grid, and the salary increases from the collective agreement have basically taken up the bulk of the money. So I think there is some concern. I mean, they're not complaining particularly. They understand, you know, the money being shifted to K to 3, but these three schools – I'm not saying that this is scientific across, but in all three of these cases, the principals I know do expect that their class sizes might be a little higher than they were last year. So I pass that on to the minister. He might want to see if that's generally the case in the high schools throughout the province or not. I don't know.

Because we do have limited time, I want to just come very quickly to one of my favourite topics, as the minister knows. The minister quoted the Learning Commission, and I'd like to come back to junior kindergarten and full-day kindergarten, not quote it, because I don't have it here, but I want to come at it from the perspective, Mr. Minister, of the high-needs students because I think that's where

it's crucial. The minister will correct me if I'm wrong, but my understanding is that they said: start there; you don't need to go to a universal program right away, but you have to start with the high-needs schools.

Having also been a former trustee, as the minister is well aware, one of the groups that I represented in my ward was the city centre project. I know that the minister is aware of that because one of the co-ordinators, Sandra Woitas, is working in his department right now. It's interesting. They've done excellent jobs. The minister is aware that the Edmonton public school board at least – and I'm not saying that we're the only ones – saw full-day kindergarten as so crucial that we took money out of our budget to put into the 18 high-needs schools, the 18 highest rated schools because we thought it was crucial. That's money, of course, I guess you could say that comes out from other places, but it was just a priority that the school board I was a member of decided we should do.

It was interesting that after the arbitration, all of the fights that we had and the rest of it, when we had to cut back, it was said to those people – they were doing extra things in the city centre project, and in a couple of schools there's junior kindergarten, and we could talk about that. There's full-day kindergarten in all those schools and reading recovery. They were asked: "Well, we're going to have to do some cutbacks. Where should we do it?" This was back, you know, after the audit and the rest of it. In all cases the schools in the city centre project said: we'd rather have class sizes slightly higher than give up full-day kindergarten and junior kindergarten. I mean, it wasn't a pleasant choice. It's, you know, like: do you want to get shot or hung? But that's what they said. That's how crucial they think full-day kindergarten is, and they're all high-needs schools.

The junior kindergarten. There are studies. I mean, to the minister: the research is all over. I know people can argue: do we need it? Okay. In the suburban areas and that, I don't know. In Massachusetts – I think I mentioned this when I was on the board – the business community is pushing for full-day kindergarten for everybody there because they think it's an investment again. I know how crucial it is with the high-needs schools, with the high-needs students.

We have a fast-growing aboriginal population. We have in those schools a lot of kids, recent immigrants coming in from some really tough backgrounds and places around the world that are in rough shape, to say the least, so they need that extra help. The sooner we can do that, the better. I mean, there are problems later on in junior high, but I'm concentrating on this.

I would really strongly suggest to the minister that, in particular, those are, I think, two very important recommendations from the Learning Commission that should be looked at. If we can't do it universally, I understand that, but I really would suggest that it's a crucial thing in the high-needs population. If we don't get that, it's like I said, you know, the old advertisement: you can pay me now or pay me later. If they don't get that sort of background then, their chances of success I believe get very diminished down the way. I mean, we know the research about junior kindergarten and kindergarten is pretty universal, that especially with high-needs kids it's important.

The minister is aware, I'm sure, of Dr. da Costa's studies on the city centre project and the junior kindergarten. Here's one copy of it here. He's done some excellent work there, and I'm sure the minister is aware of that. If he isn't, he can let me know. We'd certainly get it to him. We have our own local research to show how important these programs are. I have a feeling that the minister agrees with me, but he may have some convincing to do in caucus. I would hope that we would move on that very quickly because I think it is extremely important.

Mr. Speaker, going along, before I run out of time, I know it's been discussed, but it's a bugbear of mine, as the minister is well aware: the school closure process. One of the reasons, the major reason, I ran for the school board was that I tried to put an end to school closures. I think that along with my colleague here we had some success. I'm not sure the Minister of Education liked it at the time. We were told in the audit that they didn't. It is absolutely divisive, and we see it now that this has ended up in the courts. No matter how that works out, it tears the communities apart. In the cluster groups at the school board, of course, it pits one principal against another. It's just a very bad process, and I think the minister understands that. But there are things that we have to do. The minister has already alluded that there's discussion going on – and I'm glad – with the minister of infrastructure.

I want to review a question period that we had about Ontario. They were going through the same processes, and they found that the process was not working. The communities were up in the air, the rural and all the rest of it. So they said: we have to find a better way, part of the closure process, beyond, you know, what we do with the schools. They came to a different perspective. I said to the minister – and I believe it's true – that the process we have now is a how-to guide to close schools down because of the utilization. It hits, and it's quick, and it just doesn't work.

In Ontario – and this is a source I mentioned from Ontario Education: Excellence for All. I believe it was back in 2003 they developed guidelines. These guidelines require boards to develop their own school evaluation tools that weigh each of four sets of considerations about the school. I'm talking about the school closure part of it here. One, its value to the student – they're talking about the school – its value to the community; its value to the school system; and its value to the local economy. This is where I feel we're at right now provincially in terms of our closure process. They say that in the past

there have been "rewards" in capital funding for closing schools which has distorted facility considerations. Some boards felt compelled to close schools in one area to be eligible for new schools in another, even if the sites were far apart. Some boards closed schools prematurely to become eligible for new replacement schools. The ministry will no longer recognize closed schools as creating eligibility for new school grants.

That's precisely, if I may say, what's been happening in Alberta.

It plays off, again, the inner city against the suburbs, and it creates a mess. The demographics, the minister himself said: how many people are going to keep being able to afford homes out in the suburbs? There is movement back to the inner city, and I think it will continue, but if you close the school down, it's not a big reason for people with small children to move there. So the closure process we have to look at. Then the minister said that the two ministers will be looking at the whole utilization. The minister knows I've talked before about the old schools. I know it's in the other ministry, but if you're working together, I just want to stress it.

4:30

One of the schools being closed or potentially being closed, North Edmonton school, is in my constituency. The provincial utilization has a rate that says a capacity of 448, but that includes the corridors. It includes everything else. It doesn't include instruction areas. If they included just the instruction areas, the board's figures say 350. But I've been in that school when there's 200. I don't know where they'd put them all because all the classrooms are being used. So the utilization rate punishes old schools dramatically. I'm glad that they're looking at that.

I agree with the previous minister of infrastructure across the way: we did the right thing with George Nicholson school. In other

words, we are bringing the community in. Capital health and the Y are there, and that makes absolute good sense to me. The school is part of it. I guess I would say: if that works well in new schools, then surely there is some consideration that it should be used in old schools.

Other people have alluded to it, but I really want to stress that we should move back. It was very prominent at one time that the school was the community centre. Because all of us are the same taxpayers. If it's seniors using it or daycare or whatever the case may be, that should be part of the school utilization rate, it seems to me, if we think again of the school as a community centre, especially elementary schools.

We've talked about it before, Mr. Minister. If you're looking at it, my understanding is that in British Columbia they actually count community uses of the school in their utilization formula. They acknowledge that schools are the heart of a community, and they try to maximize that community use. In fact, they even have school co-ordinators trying to bring community groups in. I think that's very healthy for the community. I think it's healthy for the kids. I think it's healthy for everybody. It would require some co-operation from various ministries here, but surely that's doable.

So, Mr. Chairman, I hope that this is an important issue because it is divisive. I've gone through it as a school board trustee, and I've gone through it now as an MLA. I think we really do need some drastic changes there.

Centralized bargaining. I won't say much about this. Within ASBA there are the urban boards and the rural boards. It's a catchphrase for all of them. I believe in local bargaining, but I think local bargaining was made harder when the school boards lost their right to taxation back in '94 and '95. I still think it provides the best way. It certainly has – and I don't want to say that for all of rural Alberta it worked well. I was on the negotiating committee at the local level in Edmonton, and I know that the Edmonton public does not agree with this.

It seems to me that there's a problem here, though. If we're going to move to provincial bargaining – if we are, and I'm not saying that we should – it seems to me that the government has to be at the table. It cannot be a group like ASBA in between. The people that are negotiating have to be the people that have access to the purse strings, it seems to me. Wherever I'm aware of, there are mechanisms. Wherever they have provincial bargaining, the government is at the table. Now, there are mechanisms for local bargaining in some areas. I won't get into that. It doesn't make sense to me to have sort of a provincial group trying to negotiate for Edmonton and Calgary and rural Alberta and not have access to the purse strings. I think you would find in almost all cases where they've gone to provincial bargaining, the government is at the table.

I leave that sort of rushing quickly here, Mr. Chairman. I'd just say quickly that there's one thing in the Learning Commission that I would not touch. The minister alluded to it. I think principals have to be part of the bargaining unit. I think in our model in Alberta it's worked very well. There's a collegiality model between principals and their staff. Almost anybody that I've talked to, principals, at least in Edmonton, believe that it works well the way it is. I think the point that I'd make: in British Columbia, a former deputy minister, Mr. Dosedell, whom you would know, I think told the Learning Commission – and they didn't take his advice – don't go there because we have the principals outside the bargaining unit in B.C., and it's a mess. It's an absolute mess. So that's one I might bury. That's my advice, for whatever it's worth.

The only other thing I have to mention very quickly is that we had a good motion, Motion 505.

Be it resolved that the Legislative Assembly urge the government to consider the benefits of requiring five credits in fine arts as a condition for high school graduation in the province.

It was by the Member for Calgary-Egmont. It was agreed to.

I think it's a good motion. I think you as a former teacher at Vic comp would probably think that's good. But the problem – and I think the minister is well aware of this – is that there's such a limited time in high schools right now. Where do you put all these things? It's problematic. There are some very good ideas out there, but maybe that means that we have to take a look at – and it comes back to testing and that – what education is all about. Certainly, testing is part of it, but I'm wondering if the provincial testing is testing a relatively narrow aspect of what education should be. How does it test things like citizenship and our fluency in the arts and second languages and these sorts of things? I think we have to take a look at that.

I know that I'm almost out of time, so I will close there, Mr. Chairman. Thank you very much.

The Deputy Chair: Hon. members, I have a long list of members who wish to speak or ask questions. At this stage I recognize the minister for his response.

Mr. Zwozdesky: I'll be very brief. I just want to thank the Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview, who has also spent several years, I believe, at the school trustee level with Edmonton public, wasn't it? Yeah, three years. He has some insightful comments that he's put on record, and I'm sure he has many more.

I agree with him: the best decisions that we can make are for our children, and I certainly consider that to be an investment. I was reminded of a phrase, which I can't quote verbatim, but it was something like: if you think education is expensive, you should cost out the alternative. I think we all know what it means. So we're with you on that one.

I will look into what you said about the three high schools and the class size monies. Let me just say in a general sense that the class size monies are for the most part enveloped, but they're enveloped with great flexibility. School boards and individual schools, as they look at their class size numbers – you know, a class of 21 in, let's just say, grade 6 might sound like a large number to some people. If those 21 students are all more or less at the same level of learning capability, it's a lot different than having a class of 21 with children that have enormously varied and diverse and multilevel needs. So that point has been left to the local schools to deal with. We have said: spend these monies at whichever levels you think you need them.

The Learning Commission encouraged us to look first and foremost at the preliminary grades: kindergarten to grade 3. So that's where the first envelopes of dollars were targeted, and I would say that they almost all were used at that level. There might have been a few cases where they were used at 4, 5, and 6, and they will be distributed along the way.

The AISI comment you made is a very good one, and it's been increased a little bit. In fact, innovative programming, which we all know is a school jurisdiction's responsibility, we talked about a great deal. The fact is that our experience tells us that there is more innovation in our school system now than ever before. So we now have about \$70 million going into that one project alone, and we fought very hard at our treasury tables, shall I say, to ensure that it stayed there because we needed to encourage other innovative projects.

4:40

The junior kindergarten program. You know that that recommendation is still under review, but recommendation 2 is the one you

were looking for, hon. member, and it did say to make this “available for all children from the age of four, but given limitations on resources and space, the first priority should be on providing junior kindergarten for at-risk children.” Now, if that particular recommendation succeeds, then fine; that's what will happen. If, on the other hand, it doesn't succeed and government doesn't embrace it, then we will look at other ways of trying to still get to the root of the recommendation, and that is to help those children.

The fact is that by the time we get to kindergarten – and the member would know this, Mr. Chair – 95 per cent of all age five children in this province are in a kindergarten program. Those who are in the prekindergarten year – and we do have several prekindergarten programs. Junior kindergarten is here, and we fund it, but it's up to the local school boards to provide it and make that decision. The fact is that we would get a significant backlash if we were to make it mandatory, so I have to weigh that out in this equation as we consider this one. It's a tough situation to tell a parent that they must give up their children to the school system at age four, but the fact is that if there is a child with a special need or an at-risk child that we know could benefit from it, we provide that kind of funding through PUF, program unit funding, as you're well aware, and that's been increased.

At any rate, the issue, quickly, about other points of support for junior K or whatever. I value what the member said when he indicated something like, “If we can't do it universally, I understand,” or words to that effect. We have to still solve the difficulty, though, of identifying those children whom we know we can help.

The school closure process. You know, this is one that is obviously garnering a lot of attention and a lot of press. I do have that example you gave from the Ontario model, and we are looking at that, but this is going to take some time to address if we're going to do it and get it right. I don't like a lot of the current utilization formula, frankly. The way it sits right now, I don't like it either. That's one reason why we're revisiting it.

At the time that formula was brought in, it was what was thought to be just and correct, and it has served its purpose, so to speak. But I have been reminded through these meetings with school board trustees and their officials, superintendents and so on, that areas like stage areas in schools or storage rooms or other areas that sometimes might be used for instruction but not always: is it fair to consider them? Similarly if some schools have wider hallways than do others. There are simple things like that. I think you mentioned corridors being the same sort of point and the value that these schools have to community.

So we'll definitely be looking at all of that because I would agree that having to close schools shouldn't become an incentive to have new ones built. There's got to be a way that we can work in and with that but still leave those decisions at the local level. I still like to believe that the trustees, who are elected just like all of us in this House are, are just like we are in that they have a job to do, and we have entrusted them – hence the word “trustee” – to make those decisions. So we have to work that one through. I will look at the B.C. example that you gave. In fact, I'll ask my staff, who are here listening, how it is that they use community use as part of the utilization calculation.

I won't comment on local bargaining because I already did, but there is a section called 119, as you know, in the School Act that allows school boards to band together should they wish to do so. I don't know if that's been exercised lately, but I think it was at one point.

The issue of principals we've talked about.

Finally, on Motion 505, which was brought forward by Calgary-Egmont. It passed unanimously. I did speak in favour of it, but I'm

well aware of how crowded the curriculum day is already, I'm well aware of the need for additional teachers were it to come forward and be acted upon too quickly, and I am well aware of what it is that our provincial testing does or doesn't do in terms of testing for citizenship, I think he mentioned, or arts, fluency, or whatever it was. So we're looking at all those issues as we speak.

Thank you.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Cardston-Taber-Warner.

Mr. Hinman: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Well, it's been a very open and good discussion so far this afternoon. One nice thing about being fourth or fifth: you can cross a lot of things off. So I, like the minister, will not bring up some of the good points that have been very well related today already.

I do want to comment on the \$4.3 billion and to recognize what a tremendous investment we are making into the future. It's 17 per cent of our budget approximately, and we are putting our money where our mouth is. I am proud to be an Albertan and to be able to say that we are looking to the future of our youth.

I just want to touch briefly on the school closure utilization formula as well because it's very critical in my area in rural Alberta, with shrinking numbers, that they go after that. I would urge you also to continue looking at community use and other ways in which we can keep those areas open and not be penalized because they're not using it. The letter of the law cutteth, and the spirit of the law can add light, and I hope that we can add some light on this school utilization and benefit the rural areas especially. It sounds like it's a major problem even in the cities here. On turning the space over: I know that there are communities that have asked in my area to use that space, so that would be a great movement forward.

I want to talk a little bit about extracurricular activities if I could. It hasn't really been touched on today. Right now – and I'll use the minister's words – we have Artsville and we have Sportsville. I think that it would be nice to open up and have Tradesville and perhaps some other areas for extracurricular activities. It kind of goes, I guess, to the area that I wanted to focus on the most, and we've talked quite a bit about it today, about RAP and YAP. I think it's really important that there is a high percentage of students that don't go on to further education and feel that they're done at grade 12, and I think most of us would agree that it's very much to their detriment.

What I wanted to talk about is the fact – and the minister has mentioned this – of the expense of vocational classes and to be able to get the teachers there. One of the ideas that I've seen in rural Alberta is work experience and the fact that in the evening time or whatever perhaps some ticketed journeyman could be employed to help keep kids off the street and have activities that they enjoy, whether it's mechanics, electrical, carpentry. All of the trades are there in our local communities, and in the apprenticeship program 80 per cent of the time is spent with those journeymen apprenticing.

We seem to be focusing all the time on the classroom at NAIT and SAIT, and that has to be there, but if we could somehow start to include kids at a younger age and more of them and not at a high expense to the school boards by using journeymen in their local areas, I think that would be a huge asset that we haven't tapped into that would be of great benefit to the youth. I'm a very big believer in what I guess you'd call a liberal education or a broad education.

An Hon. Member: Small "1."

Mr. Hinman: Yes. I hope that's on the record. Small "1."

Too often in society we're getting to where people are becoming

so highly specialized that perhaps the only thing they can do is brain surgery, that they can't even come and fix something on their own car. We need to be able to have those opportunities, and it's very engaging for the youth if there are those opportunities there and, like I say, even if it has to be extracurricular ones, where we can involve the community and have those kids doing more things. So I hope that we'll really continue trying to be innovative and thinking of ways to engage our youth in more areas than just Artsville, Sportsville, or Academiaville. We need Tradesville.

It's something that people can do in their own home, to do their own repairs, and it's an advantage to everybody to have those. I also think it's exciting that a lot of those kids when they're 18 and they're just so happy to get out of high school and go to work, if they've had three years of different opportunities, it's one more area when we talk about trying to let kids have an idea of what they want to do in life. If, in fact, they can come out, perhaps be an electrician, a welder, or something else, they can go and work for four or five years and realize: you know, now I do know what I want to take at school. But they were earning a decent income instead of one where they have no benefit to be able to go on.

I wanted to talk a little bit about the DARE program and the problem of drugs in the schools. I'll open this up; I'm very intrigued. Are dogs not able to pick up crystal meth? Another area I'd like to have the answer on. I've gone and I've witnessed the DARE program. I'm just curious about the answer. I would think they could be trained. They're very good at it.

4:50

The program I wanted to go to or refer to is on the positive side, like DARE is. How would it be in our schools if we were to indeed have a mascot dog that was a drug sniffer in every school and that perhaps some of the special-needs kids and things are looking after? If everybody in the school knew that there were one or two or three of these mascots in there, what effect would that possibly have on the drugs in our schools and not at a great expense? I think there are some new areas that we could look at and really benefit our schools if, in fact, we could reduce the amount of drugs that are in there.

The Deputy Chair: Hon. members, the level of chatter and noise is on the rise. We have a Confederation Room behind the Assembly. If any member wishes to converse loudly, we invite you to leave the Assembly.

Hon. Member for Cardston-Taber-Warner, sorry for the interruption. You may proceed.

Mr. Hinman: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Anyway, I just think that drugs in our schools is a major problem. In my small rural communities we have volunteer policing, and they do a great deal of work. I think that we could work something in on a volunteer basis with animals that would really be a benefit to our schools.

I want to sidetrack here just for a minute about bullying. Perhaps many of you are aware that Taber is in my constituency. There was a problem, and they've worked very hard there. They've got some good programs on it.

I want to go back, and I've forgotten now which member it was the other day that referred to bullying and a comment that, I guess, I want to refer to. I'm almost embarrassed at times during question period with some of the comments that are made back and forth across the floor. I had students here, and I know that if that behaviour went on in their classroom, they'd have made a trip down to the principal's office and had to be held accountable for it. I think that we need to up our standards here, especially with the number of youth that come into this building and with question period being

televised. Perhaps we should have that education in here so that when we make comments that aren't appropriate, we're held accountable for it. Bullying is a problem. I'm grateful that we're working on that area, and I hope we'll continue to focus on it and remove it from our schools.

I guess I want to comment a little bit about value-added in Alberta. There is a Harvard graduate – and I think maybe I've referred to this before – who in the late '50s went back to Singapore. Singapore was destitute. They couldn't afford their police force or anything. They asked the places around: "Who would adopt us? We need to get absorbed in somewhere." Nobody wanted them. A Harvard graduate went there and said, "Look at our assets." Everybody said: "What? What do you mean?" He educated them. Look at what Singapore is today.

In Alberta we have the assets here in the youth. We have the money, and I'm excited about that. I think that we can put not necessarily more money but continue to focus, to really give our youth the opportunity for the next generation. I'm grateful for the Internet that's has gone out and all of those things that we are doing to give them the benefit of the future.

Referring to that, I guess, and going back again to rural schools, for many of my communities the two core things that have kept them there are the schools and the hospitals. We've cut back on the hospitals. They've closed them down, and they're looking at closing the schools down. With the Internet and those things that are available now, there are many businessmen, I guess, if you want to call them that, and entrepreneurs that are looking at going out to some of these rural towns. When they see what's happening to the schools and the opportunities that are there, they say: "Well, no. I don't want to go there."

One of my motions that I have, that won't make it in there though, is that as MLAs we've addressed it, and we realize that the rural areas have some difficulties to deal with. We've put the MLAs on a matrix, and there's a wide variance in the amount of money going to the different areas, depending on how they fit in that matrix. I would very much like to see a matrix for curriculum for rural Alberta. Many of the small schools really struggle in offering the curriculum that the larger schools do. Somehow I feel that we've got to give that opportunity to rural Alberta by some matrix program and not saying, "\$9,000 per student, and here it is" but really looking at and benefiting those rural areas. If we do that, we will have people moving into those communities because of the special things that are offered there.

The little town of Warner is one that's just awesome. That school was going to be closed down. They put their heads together, a very small community: what can we do? Years ago the Alberta government allowed them to build that arena, and they've done a great job. They've raised hundreds of thousands of dollars. We need to be innovative with these small towns. What other ideas can we have going so that people will want to move there or actually people will send their kids? We have kids from all over the world that come into the little town of Warner. I think there are 89 homes there, but because of that work, they still have a high school.

I've brought it up several times – I'll bring it up again – that it would be a tremendous investment for a centennial project to look down the road to having a world-class hockey school for girls in Warner, that right now is struggling to stay alive. I really would ask that the ministers put their heads together again and look at that. It is an opportunity, a centennial opportunity, and the people there have put their effort into it. Over 10,000 volunteer hours have gone into that community to try and make that hockey school float, and they're really putting their effort into it.

There are so many innovative and good ideas out there, though, in

our education system that we can and we should continue to explore, and it's exciting that we have the money that we can invest into it. So let's make sure those dollars are going into the very best areas possible.

I want to refer just for a few minutes to the bargaining also. In our area the teachers and the school boards have gotten along very well, but it was disheartening a couple of years ago when the ATA told them that, no, they weren't allowed to settle. I think there has to be an opting out, that when a group is happy, whether it's a school board, the teachers, or whatever, they can make a settlement. I think they should be allowed to. Why stir the pot and divide and conquer when, in fact, a group is working well? The principals there want to be part of their union, and things are working well in my area. I would just encourage that somehow choice is there. Once they've settled, let's not say: "No. You know, you're part of this. We've got to be collective," that the rest can go on. There's a huge difference in the needs of rural communities and their teachers and those in the cities, and one size doesn't always fit everybody. So I'm concerned about that.

I guess I'll quote a new quote that I got last week from the hon. Member for Lac La Biche-St. Paul. He says: let's not think outside the box; let's throw the box out. When it comes to collective bargaining, when it comes to ideas, let's throw the box out and put all the ideas on the table, like we are today, and pick the best ones and go forward because Albertans will benefit from that.

I'll see if there's something else here on the list. I guess that in closing, what I want to do is to give my thanks and appreciation to the government on their budget and the money they're putting in there.

I really want to comment on and thank the teachers. They're hard working, they're innovative, and they're deserving more recognition for the dedication towards our youth. To me it would be very fitting. We have rewarded excellence for our students, and I would like to see more rewards of excellence for our teachers. We have outstanding teachers, and whether that's all of the different areas – academics, extracurricular activities, and those areas – I would like to see them somehow rewarded and have that desire to become the best of the best. There's nothing more exciting, as I think back in my education, than those teachers that were passionate and got you engaged in things.

I had a biology teacher that was phenomenal. Everybody in my small, little town came to biology, and they were engaged in there, and we need to have more teachers like that. We need to have them come to their full potential and be exciting. We can and we should do it. So I'd urge this government to somehow give more rewards of excellence to our teachers, who are looking after the future of our youth.

With that, I'll sit down. I know there are lots of other good ideas out there. Thank you.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. minister.

Mr. Zwodzesky: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. Briefly to the Member for Cardston-Taber-Warner, thank you for your comments.

I agree that \$4.3 billion is a huge amount of money, and it's a significant investment. A significant amount of that does go to rural Alberta, and we're very sensitive to the points that you made about rural Alberta. In fact, I don't have it just handy here, but we have a program called small schools by necessity, which is another way that we channel monies out to those areas where, in the case of rural areas, a school may not exist for a span of 25 kilometres. In the case of more populated areas I think it's down to 6 kilometres. Whatever the exact numbers are, we do provide extra monies for that. I'm

quite certain that in the current budget there are increased monies for that. Is it 2 per cent or thereabouts? Yeah, it's about 2 per cent. We could all use more, but when you have a lot of children to feed, you've got to give them all a little bit. But it's there.

5:00

So, too, is there a transportation rates increase of about 3 per cent. So, too, is there more flexibility, in other words more money, in many other different envelopes through the renewed funding framework, which I alluded to. There's quite a bit more there overall.

You know, the member who spoke before you made an interesting point, and that was that there are so many teachers who are now in that upper echelon of the grid. Whenever we get new monies, sometimes so much of it goes – I'm not saying that they're not worth it. I'm just saying that it's a fact that we have teachers who are in their 50s, perhaps, or 60s who are at the maximum of the grid both in terms of education and years of experience, so there's a large consumption of dollars for salaries still, even when these increases come.

Your points about work experience and using tradesmen and journeymen in the community are very valid ones. We are talking about that right now and the ratios – 3 to 1, 1 to 3, 1 on 1, whatever it's going to be – to help make more opportunities available to engage our youth, I think you said.

The point about drugs in the schools. The DARE program and its success have been covered many times. We will be coming back with some more information on that. I hope to do it reasonably soon. I just don't have it all together yet. You'll have to wish me some luck in succeeding with it.

Volunteer policing, bullying, and antibullying initiatives are also on our drawing boards.

Your points about comments in the House during question period are very valid. I've sat in this House for 12 years, and there are comments that come from both sides of the House that sometimes many people regret having said. I won't go any further with those.

The value-added, however, is an interesting point. You know, we have four pillars for our government's business plan: leading in learning, unleashing innovation, competing in a global marketplace, and making Alberta the best place to live, work, and visit and so on. So when I talk about or you talk about giving youth more opportunities, I think we're very much on the same page. Obviously, it starts with having the best education available for them.

In that vein, your point about school closures seems to be a popular subject today. I grew up in a small rural community of about 200 or 300 people. I know exactly what you're talking about. Schools and hospitals are very important attractions, but they're not only important in rural Alberta. They're also important in our cities and our towns and other locations. Keeping rural communities open or viable, I think is the word you said: I'm well aware of the role those schools can play in doing that.

I think schools more than hospitals are probably a larger attraction for getting the next generation to move there or for the current generation to stay there. Why would you move into a small town if that school is closing? You might as well move to the place where the school is staying open. That's part of the dilemma in Sangudo and Mayerthorpe and I think Valhalla, Beaverlodge, Hythe, Sunset House, Bruderheim. There are a number of these, which are very difficult, difficult decisions. So we're studying this. I don't know what the answers are going to be yet.

On the rural thing I'll just close out here quickly, Mr. Chair, by saying that we also provided a brand new initiative here called video conferencing. Now that we have dozens and dozens of sites already

set to go and hooked up – and we'll have them all, I hope, done by the end of September – you will see many, many more opportunities for a lot more course selection, a broader range of courses to be selected, and a step up, I think, for certain of those courses to have improved quality of education provided for kids through video conferencing. I can't remember how much it is. Is it \$6 million for video conferencing that we just put in? That's over and above some monies that I announced a couple of months ago, wasn't it? Yeah, about the same amount, coincidentally, or thereabouts. A huge amount of money to help these schools.

Not only that, hon. member, but we're also going to be providing up to \$500 per month per site to help schools cover the costs of the monthly hookups, so that will help a great deal to use that. I think rural Alberta will light up – literally light up – because not only will the schools use these, but a lot of the community groups will perhaps rent them for a couple bucks an hour or whatever it's going to be. [interjections] It's very good. Yeah. It's very good stuff. So we're increasing the monies there, and that's ongoing money, by the way, to help out.

I'm sorry. You did mention the Warner example. I can't remember, but I think I actually sent a letter of support for that one because it sounded like a good project, and I heard a lot about it from your local school board down there. You talk about it being a good idea. We have so many good ideas here that we are really leading not only the nation, but we're leading the world in many ways.

I was quite surprised to hear this, but let me share it with you. When I took over the portfolio, one of the things I wanted to do was exactly what is happening today by way of a symposium on health. I wanted to do a symposium on education, so I said to our team leaders: why don't we do that and bring in some experts from around the world and really learn what's going on in education that maybe is, you know, the next best mousetrap and the next best bread-slicing equipment and so on? The room went dead silent, and they looked at me and said: "Well, that would be a good idea, Mr. Minister, except you need to know that we are the best in almost all of these areas, and those people come here. Those people come to Alberta." I didn't know that, hon. member, and I suspect a lot of people here don't know that.

I don't say it to brag or to complain. I say it only because there is tremendous respect for what we're doing and for some of the calculated and researched risks that we sometimes take. Charter schools: we're the only jurisdiction in the whole of the country that I'm aware of, that offers charter schools. Unarguably, in my opinion, they're a great thing. That's where you were coming from with the Warner thing.

Your point about the ATA not allowing local settlements, I guess, makes the point that the Learning Commission was trying to make; that is, you know, there has to be some degree of parity that the Learning Commission had in mind when they crafted that recommendation. If a local ATA makes a deal with a local school board, you would think that the ATA at the provincial level would be honour bound to see it through. They have their reasons why they don't always agree with that because they as an ATA have the broader picture in mind, and it's a different game, as we all know. Similarly, ASBA wants to have that kind of impact as well. So it'll be an interesting discussion we're going to have.

My last comment, Mr. Chair, and I'll take my seat, is that I certainly agree with his comment about the outstanding teachers that we have. We are recognizing some of them here within the next week or two. There are more things that we could do. In fact, if you check *Hansard* over the years, you'll find a few places where I've talked about some things they do in Germany to show the kind of

value that you talked about, to show the kind of reward, if you will. I'll give you one quick example, and I'll take my chair because there are teachers here.

When I was a teacher, I did a lot of marking in my home. In fact, I had a study. Well, it was not quite that fancy, but it was a little part of the house that I called my study. That's where I did my marking, I kept the students' stuff, I did instrument repair when I was teaching music, I had my collection of books, and so on and so on. In Germany – and I don't know if they still do this because this was a few years ago – they actually allowed that part of the house to be written off on your income tax. Now, it's a small thing, but I'll tell you: that's a few hundred bucks that a teacher can save. There's another part, too, where teachers are spending money occasionally out of their own pocket on materials, which we've all done. We buy little stars or little stickies or whatever it was.

Let me take my seat and allow other members to ask some questions, but I'll go to the wall to make some of these discussions happen to show some of that value.

The Deputy Chair: Hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods, we only have about three minutes.

Mrs. Mather: I know. I respect the hon. minister for many of his skills. I wish I could have some of the skill that he has in speaking so quickly.

I have some points to make. I wanted to talk about the importance of education, but I'm obviously speaking to disciples, and that's great. I have a passion for education, and I'm proud to say that I've had the opportunity, the honour of learning and working as a teacher, counsellor, and administrator.

There are many facets to consider. I want to say that I support what's been said ahead of me, in most cases very strongly. This is an important budget. What we do affects everyone in this province, and I'm proud of the commitment to the investment in education. I want to thank the minister and his department for the hard work that's gone into this. I've got about seven points. I'll go as fast as I can.

5:10

Number one, they need to provide adequate funding for education infrastructure. I know this is another department, but I want to take this opportunity to say that schools, especially the aging ones, are not getting enough funds to meet the school maintenance needs. The maintenance allocations are based on the size of the building and enrolment and not on the school age or individual needs. Using this formula, new schools are left with surpluses and maintenance allocations, and older schools can hardly keep up with maintenance like plumbing, electrical, and so on.

The other very important issue I'd like to talk about is from the senior high school perspective, and that's the methods used to allocate funds. High schools have to set up completion targets every year. The funds then are allocated based on projected credits as of September 30. If at the end of the school year the targets are not met due to dropouts, the school is hit with huge funds being taken out in August. As such, it's almost impossible for high schools to plan budget spending, and many high schools end up in deficits. This practice is leaving our most needy high schools with the least funds. High schools in poor neighbourhoods or with significant immigrant populations are the ones affected most because of the lack of school attendance and so forth. In irony, they are the ones that need the funds the most to provide these students with extra help. In other words, poor schools are getting poorer and rich are getting richer.

On that same point I wanted to say too: is there a way we could push for a funding formula where there's a base figure for each student that is realized on September 30 and then give us money based on completion? You know how many resources are put into place, I'm sure, and the student doesn't finish the courses. But the work has been there: the counsellor time, the administrator time, and certainly the teacher time. It's hard to expect schools to plan and provide good programming when there's no stability in the enrolment.

The other thing I wanted to touch on – and I said there are seven, but I'll go to this one right now because nobody has.

The Deputy Chair: I hesitate to interrupt the hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods, but pursuant to Standing Order 58(5), which provides for the Committee of Supply to rise and report no later than 5:15 p.m. on Tuesday, Wednesday, or Thursday, I must now put the question after considering the business plan and proposed estimates for the Department of Education for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2006.

Agreed to:

Expense and Equipment/Inventory Purchases	\$2,726,068,000
Nonbudgetary Disbursements	\$1,000,000

The Deputy Chair: Shall the vote be reported? Are you agreed?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Deputy Chair: Opposed? Carried.

The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I move that the Committee of Supply rise and report the estimates of the Department of Education and beg leave to sit again.

[Motion carried]

[Mr. Shariff in the chair]

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Whitecourt-Ste. Anne.

Mr. VanderBurg: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Committee of Supply has had under consideration certain resolutions, reports as follows, and requests leave to sit again.

Resolved that a sum not exceeding the following be granted to Her Majesty for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2006, for the following department.

Education: expense and equipment/inventory purchases,	\$2,726,068,000;
nonbudgetary disbursements,	\$1,000,000.

The Acting Speaker: Does the Assembly concur in the report?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Acting Speaker: Opposed? So ordered.

The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I move that we adjourn until 8 p.m., at which time we return in Committee of Supply.

[Motion carried; the Assembly adjourned at 5:15 p.m.]

