

## Legislative Assembly of Alberta

**Title:** Tuesday, June 5, 2007

**7:00 p.m.**

Date: 07/06/05

head: **Committee of Supply**

[Mr. Marz in the chair]

**The Chair:** Good evening, everyone. I'd like to call the Committee of Supply to order.

head: **Main Estimates 2007-08**

**The Chair:** We have for consideration tonight the budget estimates and business plans for the Department of Education, Department of Employment, Immigration and Industry, Department of Seniors and Community Supports, and the Department of Children's Services. I've been advised that there is a 45-minute time allocation for each department.

I will now invite the hon. Minister of Education to present his opening comments.

### Education

**Mr. Liepert:** Well, thank you, Mr. Chairman. I would like to introduce the members of the Department of Education that are on the floor tonight. First of all, Lois Hawkins, assistant deputy minister; Gene Williams, who is our financial guru; and Jamie Curran, from my office.

Mr. Chairman, this is the fourth appearance for me in estimates, so I'm not going to open with any comments. Considering the time of only 45 minutes, I would be pleased to take any questions from hon. members at this time.

**The Chair:** Are there any questions or comments from any members? The hon. Minister of Environment.

**Mr. Renner:** Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I have a couple of questions that I think need to be addressed, and that is on the issue of school facilities. The minister and I have had discussion in the past with respect to some of the plans for school facilities. I know that the minister has had some discussion with school boards and, in fact, was recently in my constituency talking with school boards in the Medicine Hat area about opportunities for alternative financing in school facilities, opportunities for there to be co-operation among and between various school boards.

I have also had discussion with parents and teachers and board members, and while I think there is a sense that everyone would like to co-operate, to buy into the process, I think there is generally a feeling that this is something that is more suited for the Calgarys and Edmontons of this world, where you have private developers and much larger developments than you would find in a mid-sized city like Medicine Hat or Lethbridge or Red Deer. For that reason they have indicated that while they would be very pleased to come across with some innovative funding proposals, they feel that they are limited in opportunities. The impression that they have been receiving from the minister is that unless they're able to come forward with some innovative and alternative types of funding arrangements, there is a diminished likelihood of proceeding with some much-needed projects.

My question is very simple. Can the minister explain what his concept is on alternative funding and innovative infrastructure for school projects and how that kind of innovation would apply to

markets that are not Calgary or Edmonton but, in fact, are Medicine Hat, Lethbridge, Red Deer: still growing, still with a high degree of demand but not to the same extent as the larger cities?

**Mr. Liepert:** Well, Mr. Chairman, I think that if I left the impression that the only way schools are going to be built in the future is through innovative funding methods, that is certainly not what I believe is going to be the case. As this House is well aware, we have some \$3 billion in infrastructure needs in the province, and there's simply no way that we're going to do all of that in the conventional, traditional method of building schools. I guess what we have to do is look at some options. I think that I would agree with the hon. member that creative methods of financing new schools are probably more applicable to the Calgary and Edmonton regions than they are to the rest of the province. I hope that within the next couple of weeks I can shed some light around that.

At the same time, I think what we need to do is start to address with traditional capital methods some of the other needs that are required around the province. The reality of it is – and Medicine Hat is probably not a good example; I'll use Lac La Biche – that it's unlikely we're going to get much interest from the private sector to be involved in the building of a school in Lac La Biche, as an example. I think there are some options in the medium-sized cities like Medicine Hat, Lethbridge, Red Deer, but our first emphasis, if I might, on a new concept would apply to Edmonton and Calgary. If we can meet some of the needs in Edmonton and Calgary via that model, then I think it, actually, in the long run will free up more of the traditional dollars for other parts of the province.

**The Chair:** The hon. Member for Strathcona.

**Mr. Lougheed:** Thank you, Mr. Chairman. To the minister. I had some interesting conversations lately. Some of it started around the unfunded liability but branched into other areas of interest. Some of the messaging that we're hearing from the Alberta Teachers' Association relates to the retention of teachers and the impact of the unfunded liability on bringing teachers into the profession and also retaining them after they've started.

I think studies would probably show that teachers start their career, and if they stay for a few years, they keep on with their career right through and retire out of the profession. I would ask the minister if he could reflect a little bit upon how he views the unfunded liability to be impacting that aspect. I've been hearing from some folks in the profession that there are quite a few teachers applying for jobs these days as the hiring goes on right about now. There are many good prospects out there. We thought there might be a bit of a teacher shortage looming because the boomers are essentially retiring, and we're looking at that kind of scenario.

What are the long-term prospects for the profession, and is it going to be impacted regionally? The north has always had trouble attracting and retaining teachers. The migration seemed to be to the large cities, and even within districts teachers migrate after some experience to – I guess the word “preferred” schools could be used, in different people's minds, at any rate. There are many different reasons for that: proximity to larger communities and different kinds of facilities and different course offerings and different opportunities to grow professionally. I think one of the things that, certainly, has happened positively from the amalgamation of school boards was the opportunity for more professional development and more movement within a board, people not having to resign from one board and move off to another one to have different job opportunities within the teaching profession.

So could you comment on your perceptions with respect to the

future prospects of the profession and what it's looking like down the road for teacher supply? Does this province differ from other provinces? How is it going to be impacted around Canada?

7:10

**Mr. Liepert:** Well, a number of good issues raised. I'll try to cover them off. I guess, first of all, in a general sense our research is not indicating that there's going to be a teacher shortage. Indications are that because our enrolment has remained relatively stable – a slight increase but nothing dramatic – the universities are in all likelihood able to keep up with the numbers required.

The challenge is what the hon. member alluded to. Probably if we think about it for a minute, two-thirds of our population now live in the Edmonton, or the capital, region and the Calgary region. So the likelihood of two-thirds of the students coming out of those two regions is fairly high. Students probably would want to pursue their profession in the region that they were raised. Our challenge is to meet some of the needs in the rural, especially the northern rural. I think it also would apply to some of the areas where we've got declining enrolments and a sparser population. I can think of southeastern Alberta as an example.

There's no doubt in my mind that once someone reaches that, say, 10- or 15-year plateau, the likelihood of that teacher leaving the profession before retirement for another career is significantly less than it is if you're below that 10- or 15-year plateau. There's no doubt that the teaching profession, like any other profession today, is faced with the challenge of attempting to pay salaries that are in most cases below what would be considered, certainly, some less educated careers. I am a believer that teachers do not go into the field of education based on money. They go in for the passion of education. I think that we're never going to be able to compete in a dollar sense with the drilling industry. I don't believe that there are a lot of teachers who get an education degree and then decide: well, I can make more money working on an oil rig. But there are probably some of those.

Now, relative to the unfunded pension liability, I think that probably the first two words I heard after taking over this portfolio – three words, I guess – are teacher recruitment and retention. All of the discussions I had around that issue were relative to: what is it that we are currently doing that is deterring good, young people from entering the profession, and what is it that we're currently doing that is discouraging them from staying in the profession? Each time the 3 per cent deduction off their pay for the unfunded liability comes up. Now, I think that it is a factor, but it's probably also been, I would say, somewhat overstated in order that teachers get the attention of government to resolve this issue that I believe teachers feel has been out there for too long. I think the hon. member is quite aware of the steps that we've taken to get us to the resolution of this issue, and I am committed to doing that.

I guess there would be two other things that I would say related to teachers. There may very well be in the near term a number of teachers moving into retirement, and there are several reasons for that, which I won't get into. So we may have a number of teachers moving into retirement.

I guess the one concluding comment that I would like to make, however, is that I think that as much as all of the other issues that we've talked about, the thing that will bring and keep a teacher at a particular school is the environment that he or she has to go to work in every day. I've seen some tremendous examples in the short period of time I've been here of particular schools, be it where the board or the principal or the superintendent or whomever has created an environment that actually had changed from a situation where teachers did not want to be at a particular school. A principal has

come in, created an environment whereby he or she is now interviewing a number of candidates to come to teach at that school. Like a lot of things that we do in life, the work environment that you find yourself in on a day-to-day basis has as much to do with your enjoyment of the profession as just about anything else that happens to take place.

I think that I have answered most of the questions posed by the hon. member.

**The Chair:** The hon. Member for Lethbridge-West.

**Mr. Dunford:** Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. I want to begin with good news. I want to congratulate the minister and the staff, both present and in the recent past. We are quite aware, I think, of the achievement of Alberta students within our province, but those results, of course, transcend across the world. There are examinations that take place where Alberta students are involved in international testing, and Alberta has, in the recent past, anyway, that I'm aware of, shown very, very excellent results.

Actually, what pleases me as much as the fact that Alberta might be third or fourth in the world in some of these categories is the fact that we are ahead of Canada. It warms, certainly, my heart because those of us that have been around here since 1993 remember all of the stories about when we were trying to get rid of deficits and pay down some debt, and we, of course, believed that no department should not be touched by some of the rationalization and budget cutting. Every day in this hallowed hall we would hear all kinds of stories of gloom and doom and that the sky is falling and how 10 years on our education system would be in total ruin. Well, it's turned out to be the exact opposite. Alberta and its education system are now being held up as shining examples of what can happen.

Now, it isn't we the politicians, of course, that ultimately are responsible for that. It's the students themselves, the kind of upbringing that they've had with their parents, providing them with the curiosity and with a firm background, then, in the ability to learn, then also the excellent teachers that have remained in the system and have come into the system in, again, the last 10 or 15 years that some of us have been around.

While the published results of the international testing are very, very good and, of course, should be sent to every home in Alberta, as far as I'm concerned, it shows up in other places. One of my favourite articles that ever appeared in *Economist* magazine was entitled *Clever Red-necks*. I believe that one of the members of this House actually did circulate that article to other members, and I hope that everyone had a chance to read it. I don't have it in front of me, but my recollection, of course, is that the writer of the article began with the old criticism that we have that's just so easy, and it doesn't even need any thought in order to be critical: that anyone with the amount of money coming into Alberta could run that operation out there and that it didn't take any brains at all.

7:20

The reporter went on to say, "Well, if that was the case, then how do you explain the fact that Albertans do so well in so many areas?" of course including education, and then went on again to restate the standings that Alberta students have in these international testing procedures. For an article in the *Economist*, which isn't really a hard, right-wing kind of publication, to be acknowledging the great work in Alberta I thought was quite excellent.

Now, today during Members' Statements we had another student from Alberta that was recognized. This is tremendous. I don't know if people recognize the impact of things like second place in an internationally televised spelling bee and of Alberta being second for

the second year in a row. This is quite significant. I want to congratulate the Member for Leduc-Beaumont-Devon for bringing that forward because it is very, very important and vital to Alberta's future that we start to celebrate scholarship instead of allowing American pop culture to continue to celebrate dumbing down or that it's cool to be stupid. Whatever we can do along these lines is very, very important and also significant.

I've talked about the students, again under the good-news portion of my little speech here. I want to continue by talking about the teachers. My colleague from Lethbridge-East, my colleague from Little Bow, and myself were on stage at a building at the University of Lethbridge last Friday afternoon for one session of the University of Lethbridge's 2007 spring convocation. Now, there were lots of interesting things that went on there, but I want to talk about what struck me. I've been on that stage at these convocations probably 13, 14 times. I'm not sure just exactly how many years that has happened. Mr. Chairman, I want to tell you and I want to tell the minister that I have never seen – never seen – on any graduating class that I've attended so many honour braids as were coming across that stage last Friday afternoon.

Now, as people here would know but just for the record, an honour braid at the University of Lethbridge is either in gold, which indicates great distinction, or is in blue, indicating distinction. Great distinction means that their marks are above 3.75, and for distinction they're above 3.5. Graduate after graduate coming forward with either blue or gold braids: it was a sight to see.

When one paid attention to the actual convocation book, then another thing became very apparent. There must have been – what? – 350 graduating students. I didn't count them. But do you know that the ones that were graduating with a degree in education probably made up no more than 30, maybe less than 10 per cent? Most of the people, most of them young people, that were coming across that stage were double-degree students. They had a bachelor of arts and a bachelor of education or a bachelor of science and a bachelor of education. Again, just a tremendous resource that is now coming out of the University of Lethbridge, and probably the same situation has happened at the University of Calgary and at the University of Alberta. A tremendous resource that's coming out into our schools. I have no doubt, after witnessing that, that we in fact are going to be seeing the same kind of standard of achievement by Alberta students because of the calibre of Alberta teachers that we have in those classrooms.

Now, that brings me to the issues, then, that I want to bring, and that is classrooms. I'm very, very anxious to view capital plans, and certainly as the representative of Lethbridge-West I cannot stand here and not mention the west side high school, a collaboration between the public school board and the separate school board in Lethbridge. Yes, the original . . .

**The Chair:** The time has elapsed, unfortunately, hon. member.

The hon. minister to respond.

**Mr. Liepert:** Well, I will because I know how passionate the Member for Lethbridge-West is about the high school and, I have to acknowledge, so is the Member for Lethbridge-East. I guess I could only supplement what I said earlier. We recognize the – I'll call it a backlog – backlog in school construction and some of the challenges that growth areas are facing, and I can only promise my hon. colleague that we'll be dealing with that very soon.

It would be hard not to make a couple of comments following the member relative to his praise for our students and the quality that we have witnessed. He mentioned young Nate Gartke, who is the runner-up in the international Scripps spelling bee in Washington.

I guess the thing that I find absolutely astounding is that this young student didn't come from Webber Academy or a school that specializes in high achievers. He actually went to Vic comp. I guess it used to be Vic comp. It's now the Victoria School of Performing and Visual Arts. I think what it does is it shows that for school boards who have taken the initiative to provide a variety of programming for students, it just can pay off in so many different ways.

The hon. member mentioned about the graduating class at the University of Lethbridge. I should assure him that if the recent graduating class at Ross Sheppard high school here in Edmonton was a harbinger for future students at the University of Lethbridge, those honours with distinction and honours graduates will be continuing to walk across that stage because out of 573 total grads at Ross Shep high school a couple of weeks ago, 236 were grads with honours or honours with distinction. I'm sure that's not an anomaly. I think that's happening all across this province. So I really appreciate the comments by the hon. member.

Thank you.

7:30

**The Chair:** The hon. Member for Drayton Valley-Calmar.

**Rev. Abbott:** Well, thank you, Mr. Chairman. I just have a few brief comments and questions for the minister and would just like to echo my colleague from Lethbridge-West in saying that I do believe that the minister and the department are doing an excellent job. In fact, I want to give them a chance to prove that, because I have a few questions around that.

The first one is actually a very, very general question, but I think it would be good to get it on the record. Could the minister explain or just outline briefly the total funding increases for Education over the past five years, and could he also, then, at the same time talk about the total enrolment increase over the last five years? What I understand is that we've increased our budget a couple of billion while enrolment has remained relatively flat, but I could be wrong there, so I'd like to know just approximates on that.

In the context of all of that, as we look at the 3 per cent funding increase for this year, I have heard some teachers and school boards talk about how this could affect the class size initiative. I'm wondering if the minister could explain, sort of, how the 3 per cent funding increase for this year's budget will be able to maintain or sustain the class size initiative. That's a very, very important question for many of my school boards and many of my teachers.

I did have a meeting with some teachers, actually, this past week, and they had some really good questions that I'd like to bring up and maybe just put on the record. Of course, some of the questions were around the unfunded pension liability, and I know that the minister and the department are working on that. Some teachers had a couple of suggestions. They said that they'd like to go to the weekly wage index, the same thing that MLAs use. In fact, they said that they'd like to see salaries taken right out of the instruction budget and treated as a separate line item with the weekly wage index built in as sort of an automatic trigger, which would be somewhat akin to, I guess, provincial bargaining, but there's really no bargaining to be had because it's done for us by the private and public sectors. That was one sort of question/suggestion/idea.

Also, I know that when we looked at the unfunded pension liability a couple of years ago, we did try to tie in a concept paper that had the ability to fire or remove teachers that were not meeting certain performance measures. I hope we don't lose that as we go through the unfunded pension liability review. I hope we can find some way of getting rid of lazy or poor teachers because right now it's very difficult, almost impossible, to do that. In fact, the sad

thing is that when I was a school trustee, we had to actually buy those teachers out in order to get them to retire. We would pay the bad teachers \$60,000 or \$80,000 to quit, and we couldn't reward the good teachers with any kind of bonus pay. That was very frustrating, to say the least, as a school board trustee. So some kind of a mechanism to fire or remove lazy or poor teachers would be a very good thing for us to do.

Also, when I talk to some of my teachers and the ATA presidents, they talk about the average age of teachers really going up, and I know that the unfunded pension liability would be a great tool in helping the attraction and retention of young teachers. That would be a good thing to look at.

Getting back to some more specific issues. Again, on the funding side, for the K to 12 rural schools, it would be great if somehow the rural schools could get a little bit more of the sparsity funding. Because of the class size initiative now, it's actually made it harder to fund these small rural schools. We used to be able to put, you know, 20, 23, 24 students in a class in order to be able to afford a teacher. Now that is really frowned upon by the department and by the board. I'm just wondering if there could be some further sparsity funding for some of the smaller rural schools.

A few other things. You wonder if it's necessary or if it's the best use of dollars for the review of coding. There's apparently a constant review going on of coded kids, which seems like a waste of time and money. Like somebody said: once you're blind, you're pretty much always blind; we don't have to keep recoding and rechecking that child to see if he's still blind. So for certain special needs I think that these constant reviews of the coding, maybe, are not necessary as well as some of the silly audits that are done and clawbacks by the department. Some schools and school boards are frustrated at that and would like to see some of those practices, maybe, reviewed by the department.

Also, another interesting one came up – and I guess I'm jumping all over the map – as we talked about teachers that we can, maybe, move or remove. It was interesting because one of the teachers said that it would be nice to have more mobility of teachers within Alberta. Right now you have pretty much total mobility within your school jurisdiction, within your board. We just did this big thing with TILMA, you know, where people – labour and professionals, et cetera – can move back and forth between B.C. and Alberta, yet within Alberta teachers are pretty much stuck within their own jurisdiction. Sometimes getting a change is a fresh start. Being able to maybe transfer to another division would give them, sort of, a new lease on life and a new look at things. Maybe there should be some kind of a mobility provision within Alberta for having teachers move around from jurisdiction to jurisdiction.

I know that that creates a lot of work for the boards and maybe for the department, but it might be something to keep the new and the revitalization in the classroom, which is so important. Some people like to move around Alberta, and rather than go and start at the bottom of the scale again and have to apply and get in at the beginning, it might be nice to just be able to keep your seniority as you move around.

**An Hon. Member:** Portability.

**Rev. Abbott:** Portability. That's the word. Thank you very much.

The final thing I'd like to talk about is just the school buildings. I'm very appreciative that we are inching – very, very slowly but inching along – toward getting a new Catholic high school in Drayton Valley, the Holy Trinity school. I think there are some tenders out right now or due to come back right away. Also, the H.W. Pickup junior high school is one where we would love to see

the shovels go in the ground this summer or this fall. I think those two are kind of moving along.

The one I don't have any understanding of what's happening is the replacement school at Thorsby elementary, so I was wondering if the minister could give me an update on that. I'm constantly getting letters and calls from people in the Thorsby area asking me when their new replacement school will be funded. It's already approved. It's on the list, but it just hasn't been funded yet. If the minister could just explain how the capital plan relates to individual schools that are on the approved list. Is there any new funding for schools that are already approved, or is there no new funding at all for approved schools? Why do we approve a school without funding it? That seems like an odd way to do things. So if the minister could talk about that.

Then the final, final thing is on transportation. Again, some of the rural boards are having trouble these days with busing costs with regard to cost of fuel and what's happening with, you know, long, long commutes between residences. The busing costs are going up, and there doesn't seem to be any kind of a formula for that to help some of the rural boards with some of their busing issues.

I think that's it. Some very easy questions for the minister to answer, and if he can't provide it now, then later would be just fine as well. Thank you.

**Mr. Liepert:** Well, I'll make a few quick comments. First of all, relative to the hon. member talking about busing costs, he's absolutely right; there are significantly increasing costs for rural boards. It was interesting because I met with the Calgary Catholic board several weeks ago, and they were trying to impress upon me all these extra challenges they have as a large metro board that rural boards don't have. So it depends on which particular member of the Legislature you're talking to as to who is in the most dire financial need.

Just a couple of things. The comments around coding. We are reviewing that as we speak, and hopefully we can streamline some of that administrative burden. Every time I meet with school boards and they complain about administrative burdens that we place on them, I say: "Give me specific examples, and we'll deal with them. Don't just talk in broad terms about, well, you placed all these administrative burdens on us. I want to see specific things." So that's what they've been given.

I'm not going to comment around the couple of comments that the member made relative to teachers, what would be a fair settlement going forward, because we have created a task force now. I want that task force to go out and hear from Albertans as to what we should be taking to the table with the ATA, so I'm just not going to comment on that.

A couple of questions relative to numbers. In the past 10 years our enrolment is actually 4.9 per cent, in the last 10 years. At the same time our funding has increased by almost double, a 90 per cent increase, and inflation has gone up 28 per cent. I think those are numbers that do need to be put on the record.

7:40

Finally, I want to also just correct a couple of numbers that the hon. member used. He talked about a 3 per cent funding increase. I'm disappointed in my colleague that he has fallen into the media trap of saying that we've had a 3 per cent funding increase because, my goodness, we had a 5.2 per cent funding increase in our Education budget. Yes, there was a 3 per cent increase in operational grants, but there was a whole bunch of other envelopes of money, including class size initiative. Our class size initiative funding this year brings our total commitment over three years for class size

funding to just over a half a billion dollars. That has provided 2,500 new teachers throughout the province. We are doing a tremendous amount to get class sizes down to an acceptable level, as outlined by the Learning Commission.

I think that covers most of what the hon. member raised.

**The Chair:** The hon. Member for Strathcona.

**Mr. Loughheed:** Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Mr. Minister, there are a couple of areas here, and there may not be much coherence to this, but maybe in order to get the questions to you, I'll just go through a few different things.

It's interesting to hear the Member for Lethbridge-West speak about the honour grades and the number of students with honours. In the whole scheme of things any of us in this Assembly, I'm sure, would not want to pit our achievement on an exam against any of the students that are out there today and graduating from either grade 12 or our colleges. The course expectations have risen dramatically. The ability of the students to comprehend and to problem solve and to go through the calculus and all the rest of it is quite astounding when you compare it to our generation, when we went through those programs.

By the same token, it was interesting that within the last week or so I did read in the paper some concerns being expressed by colleges that the professors felt set upon by their students to make sure that their marks went up and up and up. When I left the profession to come to the Assembly 10 years ago, it was a concern in the diploma exam area that there was mark creep. The marks were being inflated. The averages were getting higher. Were the capacities and the capabilities of the students increasing relative to their cohort? How does that go? It appeared to me – and I don't know whether your department has studied these things – that there was a vast difference, a significant difference, a measurable difference between the marks from the 50 per cent classroom evaluation and the diploma evaluation.

Now, I know, before anybody thinks I'm being simplistic about this, that there is a vast number of things that fall into the classroom evaluation category. You don't simply mark that based on a one-shot observation. It is complicated, and there are a lot of parts that go into that. By the same token, the capacity and the ability of one student to be measured fairly against another student in a different classroom in the same school and, even more so, a completely different jurisdiction, a different approach taken by another school district: is the department doing anything to evaluate those differences? I know at the current time we're basing scholarships and we're basing entrance on blended marks. Universities, if they deem this to be not appropriate, may have to go to entrance exams of some sort and do their own evaluations for those purposes.

When we talk about diploma exams and those things regarding evaluation, one thing that I've been interested in observing over the last few years . . .

**The Chair:** I hesitate to interrupt, but the time allocation for this particular department has elapsed.

**Mr. Liepert:** I thought we had an hour, Mr. Chairman. Sorry.

**The Chair:** Forty-five minutes for each department. Perhaps the minister could respond to the member in writing.

### Employment, Immigration and Industry

**The Chair:** Hon. minister, do you have officials here?

**Ms Evans:** I do, indeed, have officials here. As the Education officials here leave, I will begin, and then we can take it from there.

May I first introduce the officials that are in the listening audience upstairs: Dan Kennedy, Neil Irvine, Susan Williams, and Ellen Hambrook as well as Lorelei Fiset-Cassidy. They have all joined us here this evening. Then to my immediate right is Ulysses Currie, and to my immediate left is Rick Sloan, and beyond Deputy Currie we have Duncan Campbell, that I identified earlier as the person that has done so much in making sure that our figures are accurate and they're ready for you this evening.

This afternoon, colleagues, we amplified on some of the issues surrounding the temporary foreign worker program, the PNP program. We also spent some time, in response to members of the third party, talking about issues that related to the minimum wage and so on. So I will repeat none of the above and just simply say that we look forward to the questions from my colleagues.

**The Chair:** Are there any questions or comments? The hon. Member for Lethbridge-West.

**Mr. Dunford:** Well, thank you very much, Mr. Chairman, and welcome to the minister and her officials. I want to begin by saying that I'm particularly impressed by the broad spectrum now of this department. I think it makes a great deal of sense in terms of the files now that, of course, would come under one minister. I keep forgetting that I only have 10 minutes. Sometimes I get up and assume that I have 90, but I guess that's in error, so I'll try to stay within the time limit and also recognize the admonishment about relevance.

In my comments I'd like to advise the minister of how concerned I am about the rural development strategy. I want to commend her for her efforts that she is making towards that end, but we need some kind of stimulation in order for that program to keep moving forward. The \$100 million that was put aside was, of course, hard fought at various tables that the government has to sit around. We don't want to lose the opportunity, then, to have that invested in rural Alberta. For the record I want to indicate that I agree with the definition of rural within this context, meaning outside of Calgary and outside of whatever definition we can use of capital region.

In any event, the recent announcement of five programs that receive funding is very good. It's a start. I know that wherever I travel throughout the province, when the Alberta rural development fund comes up, they're asking me what I think would be successful instead of the people within the region having to look at what they know best about, of course, and that is the local jurisdiction that they live in.

7:50

Sometimes, I suppose, Madam Minister, with your approval and sometimes really on my own initiative I've been trying to find ways in which to encourage people and challenge people to come up with some ideas that might generate. I tend to spend most of my time, in thinking about this particular issue, around the high school. I know that we're not talking about education per se; we've just had an opportunity to do that. In my experience – and I say it quite often and have yet to be seriously challenged on the attitude that I have – in terms of rural Alberta, you lose your school, you lose your community. So I think it's very, very important that we maintain that as one of the focuses when we're looking at rural development in Alberta.

We've got some examples right now in terms of the hockey school at Warner for both boys and girls and also the baseball academy for boys at the Vauxhall high school, but I don't think we need to

restrict ourselves just to athletics. I recognize that there are opportunities, perhaps, in other areas for baseball academies and hockey schools. The town of Cardston, by the way, is thinking of a rodeo as a one of their activities. I've challenged Milk River with paleontology.

A couple from the Hussar area were talking to me one night about potentially losing their particular school. We chatted and talked about whether or not there wasn't an opportunity to work with Calgary developers and the lack of skilled workers that are available. You know, why didn't they go to a program of carpentry and build themselves a residence and then get into the situation similar to Vauxhall, where parents from around the province and really beyond boundaries are actually paying tuition in the order of over \$10,000 a year, at least in Vauxhall's case, for their son to attend that particular high school because of the programs that are being developed.

The fundamental, though, of what I'm saying is that we have to find ways to fund innovation and make use of that fund in order to keep away the temptation that seems to be very prevalent out there amongst not only politicians of all orders of government to gain access to that money to build a community facility, to build a road, to fill a pot hole. It is for innovative ideas and not infrastructure, and we must be cognizant of that.

In the area of labour mobility I want to congratulate the minister for her involvement in the recent MOU with British Columbia, affectionately known around here as TILMA. I hope that her officials, as we speak, are working on other bilateral agreements with other provinces. Part of the reason that I bring up this topic is that having had the experience of being a minister in charge of Alberta's portion of labour mobility in Canada, being charged by my respective Premier of the day along with every other peer that I had in the provinces of Canada, we were given a specific task and, of course, had to admit to failure when we were unable to get true labour mobility in this country by a specified date, which happened to be, again for the record, July 1, 2001.

I think the character of this nation is such that when a province undertakes sort of interboundary initiatives, we're really going to have to look at bilateral agreements and start dealing with provinces one by one by one because, in my experience, if there ever was a recipe for failure it was: we're not going to do this unless we get every province to sign on. It just won't happen in my lifetime.

On the labour mobility package I want to encourage the minister to be strident. We have given over authority and responsibility to self-regulated professions. I think that's a good thing; I support it. But like any other responsibility and authority, if you abuse it, you lose it. I think it's very, very important that we not only encourage but that we insist on some type of performance measurement from all of the different self-regulated professions as to what they are doing specifically that is allowing for more labour mobility in Canada. I would use APEGGA as an example of how to get this done. I think in my experience, although I'm dated now . . . I see I've used up my time.

Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

**The Chair:** The hon. minister.

**Ms Evans:** Thank you very much. The comments of the hon. Member for Lethbridge-West very much touched my heart, and I'll explain in a moment. Let me first give credit to the hon. member for the yeoman's service he has done since my appointment in this role to facilitate a better understanding of the rural development fund himself. The work that he did as minister along with the minister then of agriculture to define a rural development initiative that would show innovation is deeply appreciated.

What touched my heart about the comments about the schools, that when a school closes, the community closes, was that in Stavely, Alberta, when they closed the school that was named after my father and then ultimately tore it down, I had to accept the party line that if there wasn't sufficient use for that school, it wasn't economically wise for our province to keep it there. Many people had hoped I would be stronger as an advocate to retain that school because of their fear that bussing all of the children to some other point away would lead to an effective shutdown of the businesses in town. Also, the fact that we could never seem to find a reconfiguration, although it's been noted that the size of a classroom is perfectly positioned to become the size of a self-contained adult suite for retirees. It would have made an excellent community centre, and we could have put affordable housing in that place for people that need it and no doubt would have had many takers along with the other capacities. So sometimes these ambitions – we have to change the use or else destroy something that's built not because it wasn't a very adequate facility whatsoever. It didn't have asbestos in it, didn't have anything else, but it just wasn't something we were prepared to maintain for the community. As a result, if you go down the streets in Stavely, you can see a number of boarded windows, so you know what's happening there.

In terms of the rural development strategy it's my sincere hope that with the five projects that have been approved and have been announced, they will spawn some initiative.

**8:00**

I suppose the one that I worried about a little bit more than most was the one with the clerkship, placing clerks for the clerkship program, doctors in rural communities, to learn because it's perceived that they will not only learn but they'll like it there and they'll stay there. It does smack of somewhat contradicting the intent of making sure that this fund doesn't fill potholes created in other ministries where there wasn't capacity to undertake that on behalf of Health.

I'd like to reassure the hon. member on the TILMA agreement. At the recent meeting we had with British Columbia, we agreed that we would try to accelerate the approval of the TILMA from the date of April 2009 to April 2008. It may not be available to us in all the professions because the professional list has increased from about 60 to over 150. So we may not be able to achieve it, but the intent of TILMA is certainly excellent.

I think that the intent of the buyer/seller forum that has been part of this ministry's mandate and the co-operative work we've done with the minister of economic development from Ontario sets the stage for us to explore some other initiatives where we can look at not just labour mobility but a business co-operative approach that ensures that people can still sleep in their own beds at night yet work for a program in another province many miles away. That is a wonderful use of Canadians working at home to better their overall economy and better their personal economy by working in another province, even though it may be thousands of miles away.

I note that the hon. member referenced the self-regulated professions. In Ontario they have taken the stick approach. Quebec has taken the carrot approach. But insisting on performance measures is a very noble objective, and I certainly respect the hon. member's comments on that and will try to accelerate that where that becomes a barrier.

What I've been most proud of is the initiative that he started that has resulted in one act, two associations, with APEGGA. That is a group that has made considerable strides in opening its arms to others that could be supportive of the profession and make this a better place to do business on the engineering front.

So thank you. I await others' questions.

**The Chair:** The hon. Member for Calgary-Nose Hill.

**Dr. Brown:** Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I do have a couple of questions for the minister. I want to start by asking the minister if she would perhaps expand a little bit on the provincial nominee program and how that fits into the plans of the department and whether any resources are necessary to be allocated to that program.

The second item that I wanted to discuss this evening was the rural development initiative, and it's an initiative that I'm certainly supportive of. I think anything that we can do to encourage diversification in the rural areas to take some of the pressure off the explosive growth that we've seen in the large cities such as Calgary would be an excellent idea. I know that the program has had a somewhat slow start, but I understand that some of the initiatives have now been funded. I wonder whether the minister could expand on what these program parameters would entail, what's envisioned in terms of expansion of rural opportunities for employment, and in general just to give us some feedback on what kinds of performance measures or criteria would be used in ensuring that the taxpayer dollars are well spent in that program and that the taxpayers are getting good value for their money and any funds expended on that rural development initiative.

So I'll leave those questions for the time being.

**The Chair:** The hon. minister.

**Ms Evans:** Thank you very much. Earlier today I commented that the overall immigration program was going to have this year under the budget a \$15 million increase, from approximately \$54 million to over \$68 million. I think that the most exciting thing about the work that we're doing is that if you look back six years ago, you see that we had about 128 PNP nominees that were successfully admitted. You look to this past year where we have 986 and in this coming year, in the 2007-08 budget, an anticipated 2,500 members. In '09-10 we'll have about 8,000 that will be members of that PNP club.

You can see that there's an intent to really accelerate, and probably the most exciting thing about the co-operation agreement between Canada and Alberta was the agreement by the federal government that indicated that they will send letters in the U.K., for example, to everybody who applied to be a health care professional in Alberta to ask if they're still interested in being retained in that area. So that will be a very definite plus for us this year as we're looking to augment our health workforce with people from other countries, and when they are socially and culturally and linguistically aligned with Alberta, it makes it that much easier.

The other observation I would make about the PNP this year that will be unique from the past will be the initiative of trying to attract those students who have come in from other countries that may choose, then, to make a career and live in a place that they have been educated in. So that will be a little more aggression that we will bring to bear on those postsecondary institutes. On that front, I think that the PNP will be as good and as positive as we can entice the employers and the communities to arrange.

May I just make one other observation? One of the performance measures in this budget is that we would try to improve our track record of a 70 per cent retention of people who chose to immigrate here to an 85 per cent, and I believe that some of the work that we're doing on our integrated settlement services will help us with that. A mere week ago we heard and saw some evidence of celebration of the roots program at St. Anthony's school and the tremendous capacity we have to make immigrant families feel more accustomed and comfortable in their new environment by defining programs that

help parents parent, which incidentally is a good part of what keeps families happy when they arrive, if they get that additional support like the Changing Together program here in Edmonton. Many of these kinds of programs encourage the caregiver at home to be comfortable, even though the grandparents aren't there, so it's just really quite an amazing domino effect, and in November we will have a program that targets vulnerable immigrant communities. We're looking at neighbourhoods unconfirmed yet, but Calgary and Edmonton and perhaps Brooks, where we have large settlements from overseas that would appreciate, I think, some more support.

On the rural development fund the performance measures are still under development, and later on this month we'll review them. One of the difficulties was really getting off the ground on how we provided the program itself, how we encouraged the initiative of people to become really truly innovative, and a performance measure can't be the same for exactly every program. If you looked at the ones that we announced, some of them are more easily aligned with a program of supervision and evaluation of students, a student-related program. For the others like ones that connect with the SuperNet, it's a whole different criteria.

I think one of the things that's key from my point of view is that they have to identify their values. They have to identify their cost accountability. They have to identify how they hope to sustain that program even without these funds and have to work in some kind of co-operative mode. I think we really have to consider that the community itself has to give a response on the effectiveness of the program, and your acknowledgement that the larger communities that need extra support in rural Alberta of programs that can make those residents feel like they are at home and comfortable in their surroundings is a very good one. So we can certainly look at that.

Overall, I think that you've probably got other questions, so I'll sit down and take the rest. Thank you.

8:10

**The Chair:** The hon. Member for Strathcona.

**Mr. Lougheed:** Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Minister, certainly in this current economic climate we know that the demand for labour has increased. I wouldn't say exponentially because the level of employment was high already, but the demand, I guess, is maybe what's increased most significantly. There appears to be a shortage everywhere you turn. People are looking for people to fill all sorts of different jobs, whether they be professional or skilled labour or even in the service industry and not much experience is required.

For one group of Albertans, those persons with disabilities, they haven't seen that kind of increase in their opportunities. They have some increase in opportunity, but considering the kind of demand for labour, one would have expected to have seen perhaps even a quantum increase because there is so much demand unfulfilled that could be taken up by persons with disabilities.

Employers who, in fact, have hired persons with disabilities and have had them on staff for some time find them to be a real benefit to their workplace. They are loyal employees. They will be happy to work there for a long term. They aren't out looking for new opportunities somewhere, in many cases, because they're loyal to their employer. It brings stability into that workplace even. Other employees are pleased to have them in the workplace. They find them to be good to work with.

In many cases the challenges they face have to be accommodated. There are reasons why some employers think that they will have to make significant modifications of their workplace or their schedules or something. Mostly, it appears that it's a lack of understanding on the part of the employer. There's also a lack of understanding that

the modification in that workplace is, on average, less than about \$500 per workplace modification.

Some of the things that are required are perhaps flexible work hours because some illnesses require that a person is able to work a couple of days, and then perhaps because of fatigue they have to take a day or two off. So flexibility in the workplace is really important. If employers know these things before they go into the interview, it's found that they're much more receptive to employing people with disabilities.

Given that and given that the federal government has some initiatives, I'm wondering what kind of work you might be doing with the feds in that regard, what kinds of opportunities there may be to share resources and share some of the costs of moving the agenda a little bit to improve more employment for persons with disabilities.

I know also that the new federal government has recently announced changes to the tax structure that will better accommodate persons with disabilities. I've talked about a few initiatives that they're seeking to move forward. I'm wondering if your department is taking on behalf of the Alberta government any kind of lead role in this, or is another department taking that lead to interact with the federal government in regard to employment taxation issues as it relates, I guess, to employment expenses and deductions, which I think may not be directly your department but may have some spinoff onto it?

So those are questions that we know are out there, that the community is asking. People with disabilities are wanting to be more involved in the workplace. The opportunity that exists now may not come around again for a while if we don't move on this. I know that your department is doing a few things. If you'd elaborate on that a little bit and talk about that.

**The Chair:** The hon. minister.

**Ms Evans:** Thank you very much. I'm really glad that the hon. member has raised these issues. I think he's absolutely right; there's never been a better time to really push the frontier of employer expectations about the capacity of the person with a disability. We've got a cry for help, requiring many more people to work. Sobeys has been a particularly positive partner. But I think we can do more. The Minister of Seniors and Community Supports and his deputy and, obviously, our deputy, Currie, have equally expressed an interest in trying to identify those places and those situations in which we can give people that opportunity to work and to accommodate their schedule in a way that best suits them.

Mr. Chairman, just this Monday, speaking to people in the oil and gas and petrochemical business, I identified that we have to start looking at employment differently for everybody. The student that graduates from university today doesn't want to put in the hours that, no doubt, you did as a young dad, going many hours more than what a lot of people would have thought was wise on a health-related basis. Well, today's graduate does want a balance in both their work and their family life, so that is going to mean that we're going to have to be much more creative.

We're going to have to be more creative not only with people with disabilities, but Minister Prentice and I have spoken about those people in aboriginal communities, First Nations, either on or off reserve, in Métis settlements, how we can explore the opportunities available to them as well. For people who have traditionally either been ignored or overlooked in many of the opportunities for employment, we have to make some significant strides there. We are undertaking right now to work in a partnership. Officials at the ADM level are also working in partnership to see what we can do to

bridge some of the expectations of both the employer and the employee group as it relates to persons with disabilities. In my first federal/provincial/territorial meeting relative to labour we had discussions about labour issues, about tax credits, about some of the things that could be available. So, yes, indeed, you're talking to the minister whose ministry is the one that partners and makes those kinds of situations possible with the federal government.

I think that your comments are well observed, that the federal government has looked at a tax credit. We see some other options available, but at this time they're very much preliminary. In our discussions from our very first meeting there was supposed to be an additional meeting where the minister was to be available for touring out west, but then, as we find in a minority government, sometimes they have to change their plans. It's our intent, when we get an opportunity to meet again, to pursue that as it relates to those kinds of strategies, talking about not only compensation, health benefits, but tax credits for people where that may be prudent to do so and talking about other supports that the federal government can provide to accommodate adjustments at the workplace. I think that where these can be facilitated in a partnership with the federal government, the provincial government, and the employer, that's the very best initiative.

I'm really hoping to the larger degree that we can engage the employers because when they get an ownership in it – and I'll return, again, to Sobeys, who has an ownership in it, takes a pride in it – then we're going to make significant progress.

**8:20**

One other thing that I believe has been very positive for the Minister of Seniors and Community Supports is I understand that they're looking at different ways for accounting for all those other kinds of dollars that might be earned while somebody with a disability is employed. Rather than a monthly accounting, looking at some other options available. To me that just smacks of smart thinking while it relates to encouraging people to take the bold step of going back to work. We shouldn't make it unnecessarily onerous or encumbered by rules and regulations and red tape but make it as simple as possible for them to go back to work, to find the best market niche for their skills.

One final thing that I think you should know about. In our department our staff have all been charged with the responsibility of looking at their own area. If somebody is predominantly on the telephone, at a desk, in a government building, I think we should be saying that when that person leaves, retires, or moves to another position, that position, if still necessary, should and could be filled by somebody who is not in an office building downtown.

Consider the opportunity for us to employ many more people with a disability, allow them to work at their speed in their placements, allow us to have the benefit of not, for example, paying \$360 for a square metre of space in Commerce Place when this person could be working in a home office with a proper chair and a proper table and a dedicated line and could be working in a fashion that might be much more comfortable for them and give us a whole new opportunity not only to employ people with disabilities but to employ those people who do want to stay at home, who do want to work under those circumstances. Besides the benefit of not having that type of aggregate of people working downtown, we give them the opportunity to be there for their families or work in the comfort of their own home without the needless expense of transportation and many other things.

I believe that that initiative, proudly undertaken by our department, will be one thing that will create a whole smorgasbord of new opportunities. We do have call-centre capacity within the people



that work in our department, and I'm looking forward to us considering that that all should be jobs that could be done back at their home and not there.

I could just point out, as validation of the cost savings, that IBM has saved over a hundred million dollars, I believe, in a year by looking at this kind of option: if you will, delegating to home residence other opportunities for people to provide government support without that costly kind of situation that we currently have.

So I think we're on the threshold of opening up many opportunities, and your question gives me an opportunity to shine a little light on some of the things that we're actively pursuing.

**The Chair:** The hon. Member for Calgary-Nose Hill.

**Dr. Brown:** Yes. Just briefly, in the time available, Mr. Chairman, I wonder if I could ask the minister to elaborate a little bit on the rural development initiative and to perhaps advise what type of performance measures or criteria would be used in approving projects that would qualify under that program and what kind of criteria or performance measures would be used to ensure that taxpayers of Alberta are getting good value for their money in those initiatives that are approved.

**The Chair:** The hon. minister.

**Ms Evans:** Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Perhaps the hon. member wasn't in this evening when I did mention that, so I will just reiterate my earlier observations. The criteria for the rural development fund is currently under review, and later this month we ought to have that criteria ready for publication. It will in fact be extended to the various projects in different ways. The accountability for the dollars must be there. The accountability to the community must be there. Obviously, the accountability back to government.

We have to have different sets of criteria for the various ranges of projects. If you think, for example, about the clerkship program that is being provided, evaluating the effectiveness of that will involve the university, involve the communities, involve the health care institutions, the partners that will be involved in administering that program. Then you look at the different program linking with the SuperNet. In their review of that program they will be looking at quite a different coterie of events in terms of the training, the skills development, the satisfaction of the student, the capacity to meet the needs in that part of rural Alberta. So we'll be looking at things like whether or not this technology adapts and removes the barriers and helps the apprenticeship trades training and postsecondary education. Better access of learning opportunities: that will be evaluated. The local capacity to meet the region's needs and new connectivity applications will be part of it.

Then you look at, for example, the Killam regional economic development initiative, which has had a fund contribution for agribusiness, to help attract key agribusinesses. Their expected performance measures will include whether or not the agriculture base was generally enhanced with greater crop demand and revenue, whether there was more local economic activity and employment, whether there was secondary value-added services for local residents, and whether there was more local ownership and return on investment for regional groups. What we have to do is take the anticipated results, see if we agree that those results are sufficient, give evaluation on the basis of the results of the return, and report back whether or not that expenditure of dollars either showed in the short term or in the longer term a credible return on our investment.

Much of what is done will be performance measures that are targeted to those descriptors of the learner and achievement of the

learning results. Different communities learn in different ways, whether it's about apprenticeship or whether it's about a retraining opportunity or helping people in rural communities expand their knowledge or their opportunity for learning.

One thing I wanted to indicate is that the Sunchild e-learning community, with a fund of \$220,000, is going to be able to look at whether or not this course content as delivered is adapted to aboriginal culture and learning needs. We will be working with aboriginal communities to evaluate that particular content.

I'd have to say to the hon. Member for Calgary-Nose Hill that the performance measures will be at some degree of variance depending upon the project, and ultimately the report back to the rural development initiative will give those key indicators on each of the projects. Then, in the context of that, we will evaluate and weigh whether or not the RADF did a credible job in conducting their reviews.

**The Chair:** The hon. Member for Calgary-Nose Hill.

**Dr. Brown:** Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I wonder if the minister could perhaps consider moving some of the government of Alberta departments out to the rural areas, like the government of Saskatchewan did, perhaps using some of those rural development initiative dollars to move some of the civil service into the outlying areas in Alberta and provide some sustainable jobs and employment in those areas in that way.

**Ms Evans:** Well, you're speaking my language, hon. member. In fact, the . . .

**The Chair:** Hon. minister, I hesitate to interrupt, but the time allocation for this particular order of business has elapsed, the 45 minutes. We will now ask the officials to vacate the Assembly so that we can get the next group in.

8:30

### Seniors and Community Supports

**The Chair:** I'll now invite the minister to make his opening presentation.

**Mr. Melchin:** Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I maybe would just submit my comments from this afternoon in *Hansard* that we had as opening comments. We could certainly leave it in that respect.

I will make a few comments to introduce my colleagues that are here. To my right is Tim Wiles, Deputy Minister of Seniors and Community Supports. We have Reegan McCullough, assistant deputy minister, disability supports. To his left is Dave Arsenault, assistant deputy minister of the community support programs and strategic planning division. Then we have Chi Loo, assistant deputy minister, senior services division, and we have Susan McCulloch, senior financial officer, corporate finance.

For the benefit of those that are here, I would once again state that we are very fortunate to have the expertise and dedication and competency in this department of those that are here and many others that work for this department as well as, really, most of our departments in government: an outstanding group of professional, dedicated individuals.

We have a number of programs in this department that are fairly significant, all about helping Albertans, seniors and persons with disabilities: \$1.8 billion in the budget, a 10 per cent increase over forecast of last year and an 8 per cent increase over budget of last year.

I didn't get enough time for opening remarks to cover a few things for the record, so I won't go over some of the seniors' programs

initially. We have an Alberta seniors' benefit program. These are mostly designed for an income-based approach – a higher threshold of income will mean that you don't qualify – and targeted assistance to those in greatest need. That encompasses a large portion of what the seniors' programs are about. We have a few specific targeted ones like special-needs assistance for seniors to help with one-time emergency expenses. Then there's a dental and optical assistance plan for seniors. There's a variety of those related income-based supports.

The disability supports, \$751 million for assured income for the severely handicapped: about 36,000 individuals on AISH, and that's growing potentially to 38,900 this year. For people who have severe impairments to their livelihood, we did increase the monthly payment from \$1,000 to \$1,050. This is the third successive year of increasing AISH monthly benefits to those. There's about another \$300 or so in health benefits that are provided on average cost to those on AISH.

The concern is that with that number and growing numbers of people with disabilities not working, how do we re-engage to the extent possible more of them to be working, having opportunities to contribute to sustain their own lives? We're going to work very actively as a department, maybe starting with those that are more willing and able and desirous, to see if we can't build some success. Working with the Department of Employment, Immigration and Industry, we really put an emphasis upon how we take advantage of the opportunity that's in Alberta, with low unemployment rates, to let those with AISH participate in the workforce and be part of and included in the opportunities and not really be held back. There might be barriers to our programs that trap people into the concern about starting to earn some income and being cut off and losing benefits. We'll try and work on design to make sure that we don't make them worried, take away the barriers so that they might be more able to take those risks to find the work.

We have another program, Alberta Aids to Daily Living. That's part of the disability support. There's an Alberta brain injury initiative and a residential access modification program, RAM as it's referred to.

The other area of community support programs and strategic planning has to do with the persons with developmental disabilities. About half, \$519 million, of our budget goes towards this. There are about 9,100 adults that are supported, persons with developmental disabilities. A lot of those dollars are really to help for living, supervisory care, 24/7 for some individuals. So there's a lot of that expenditure just in helping them live. Some of it's to help them participate in activities in the communities. Some of those funds are to help them prepare for or retain a job, and others are for psychological and behavioural services. Even with those people we are working through service providers, the concern being, really, retention of people providing the services, wages, especially in an economy such as ours. How do they afford to attract the staff?

We brought together and had a brainstorming session among quite a few of the service providers and various stakeholders to just try and find more creative ways to deploy our dollars to give the best value, to help empower those that are receiving the services. We've increased our budget 90 per cent since 1999, a very substantial increase in this budget, and even those involved in providing the services acknowledge that it's not about more money; it's about more effectively deploying that money that could then allow redeploying those funds into even helping the savings in retaining their staff. So we're going to work substantively in that direction as well through this year.

I would say that there's also some discussion with, I got to see the hon. Member – I keep forgetting the constituency – for Strathcona,

the chairman of the Premier's council on the persons with disabilities. Really, I think our department in this business plan is encompassing some thought about how we prepare for many people, not just those that are on our AISH or PDD programs but those with disabilities that may not be funded for various supports. How do we see that there's more inclusion of all those with any form of disability and that there's that discussion on barrier-free access, inclusion in the workplace, and the like? Those are some of the things with which we were quite pleased that the chair of that council, the Member for Strathcona, is working towards and facilitating with our department.

With those brief introductory comments I'd be happy to entertain the questions from the members.

**The Chair:** The hon. Member for Strathcona.

**Mr. Lougheed:** Thank you, Mr. Chairman. With those last few comments, Minister, you've been reading my notes. I'd like to just draw some attention to your strategic priorities, listed on page 253 of the budget document, and the government priority to improve Albertans' quality of life, an admirable priority for this government and something we're really interested in. First off for the ministry: improve supports and services for persons with disabilities. In many ways I wish there was a period there instead of carrying on to complete that sentence. The first priority for the ministry is to "improve supports and services for persons with disabilities through better coordination and integration of programs."

**8:40**

The reason I think it would be good to have a period after the first part of that sentence is because persons with disabilities who are served through programs like AISH and PDD and a few of those programs, although a large proportion of the budget, in numbers only comprise about 10 per cent of persons with disabilities in this province. Across Canada, typically, those are the kinds of numbers of people that would be supported versus people who have disabilities but are not supported through any particular program like AISH or PDD.

In order to improve Albertans quality of life, it behooves us to look at all sorts of other kinds of barriers that people with disabilities would be facing as they seek to be full participants in our society and, to use their term, that's often used, to enjoy full citizenship. When I look at some of the challenges that persons with disabilities are facing, it's in my mind easiest for me to describe it in terms of access. People with disabilities want access to society and to all aspects of our society. They want access to employment and to housing. They want access to the built environment, the physical environment. They want access to education. They want access to recreation.

If we just envision that part of the access component, the physical part, and think in terms of one kind of disability, people in a wheelchair, for them even the smallest of curbs, a four-inch or six-inch curb, is a barrier that people without disabilities would have to compare to a fence or something they couldn't climb over. If you can't get over a little curb, you have to either go around it or you have to go home. That, in my mind, symbolizes the access challenges that people with disabilities face. It's simple enough to envision that for things like the built environment, where access is encumbered because of curbs or other kinds of physical barriers like that.

There are all sorts of barriers that people with disabilities face with respect to employment, whether it be employer attitudes, ignorance, or again a lack of appropriate technology that they can

utilize to overcome whatever disability they have. Another barrier to full citizenship would be opportunities in education. Maybe they are not able to access programs or to travel to enjoy different kinds of programs and take part fully in all aspects of education. Recreation may be another barrier that they face.

Housing is a huge concern. We don't have opportunity for people with disabilities to buy an accessible house because we haven't as citizens become aware of the challenges that exist and the challenges that we ourselves might face if, in fact, say, our spouse has a stroke, and we're not able to access our own upstairs in our own home. We haven't encouraged people to look down the road and think about building what's termed visitable housing in their own circumstances in order to accommodate future disabilities that members of their family might face.

Those are the kinds of things that in order to improve Albertans' quality of life we have to look at, and it goes beyond those programs that the ministry or other ministries might be providing. We have to, I think, take a look at those kinds of challenges and do our best to address them. It shouldn't be viewed as some kind of altruistic motive that we have, because the challenges that persons with disabilities face with regard to barriers and access are exactly the same kind of challenges that people will face as they age. Whatever the mobility challenge is, it doesn't matter whether it's acquired through disease or injury or some problem at birth, something that a person has had through their entire life, or whether it's as a result of aging. Those mobility challenges are the same. They're faced in increasing numbers as people age, and we're going to have to prepare for those times. We're going to have to prepare for that through the education of Albertans so that we can take those things into account as we make our plans for the future.

We have a lot of these programs that exist, but beyond that could the minister elaborate a little bit on what direction the ministry might be moving for people that are outside of the programs like AISH and PDD, what direction the ministry may be moving in with regard to that in order to address that government priority number 1, to improve Albertans' quality of life?

I have some other questions, but maybe we'll deal with those later. Thank you.

**The Chair:** The hon. minister.

**Mr. Melchin:** Thank you. With respect to the comments on the priority 1, to improve supports and services for persons with disabilities, and putting a period at that point, we have, as you're aware, a mandate letter that we've received from the Premier with respect to priorities. This is the verbiage, actually, from there without the period.

I think that's an excellent point, though, on those without support through AISH or PDD. Much of our work through the programs and services we deliver doesn't really contemplate those with a broader range of disabilities that aren't provided for through the programs that we offer. I would assess that there is, I think, some degree of acceptance that that's the right approach: how do we assist in a variety of ways those with any disability whether they're on a program that's providing funding or services?

I would also state that I don't know; we'd have to be somewhat cautious that the expectation isn't there that we should see that government as providing programs and financial supports and a variety of things to everyone. We should be encouraging everybody to focus in more on their abilities. In fact, that's one of the concepts, as we've provided and worked with service providers, that they've been talking about. They're focusing much more on the abilities rather than on their disabilities, on their interests and their talents

and their capabilities. I would agree that that's an excellent direction and focus. While we want to encompass how we can make this a better place for all people, including those with any kind of disability, it may not be through more services and programs directly of the government. I think that would be consistent with the statements that you're making.

Though it would be very good – and there's a leadership role that the government could take in helping assess. It's not necessarily a program, but it gets into standards like barrier-free access, that I know your council has been working on, and how to get architects even in design at the universities so that they're teaching architects and engineers about barrier-free access and what makes it easier, more accessible, not just in public facilities like this but even planning in your homes. Like we were talking at one stage, building a home at the present time and contemplating how can you stay in your home longer: it might just be by some few minor modifications in your home design to anticipate when you're aging or you have a disability that you can still stay in your own home.

I think there are a lot of things there that have much merit in how we could help facilitate in our thinking and our planning in structures, in regulation, in design, in our culture more inclusiveness of people with all disabilities. When we're considering how you put out a design of recreational facilities, that could go into the planning because it might be just commonly accepted and understood that we could get to that stage as to what things you would have to put in a design for recreation and how you would facilitate access for people using it.

8:50

[Ms Pastoor in the chair]

**Employment.** I fully concur. There is a broader range of people other than on AISH that need employment. How do we work with the employers? We have a great opportunity, given the low unemployment rates, to try and work with those with disabilities whether they're on AISH or not, seeing that they're more included in the opportunities that are there in the market and in that light are very much willing to accept, I would say, the consideration of our department as we work through it this year.

We've made some minor changes already in some wordage in the business plan to start considering a broader range in advocacy on behalf of our department for those with all forms of disabilities. In that I'd be very happy and pleased to work with the Member for Strathcona as he chairs the Premier's Council on the Status of Persons with Disabilities, though we might put a more focused and direct effort among his council members, among the department, and among other groups to consider much more positively the things that we as a society – individually, private sector – and those things which government could also do to facilitate more inclusion of people and access – the word they used – for all people whether they have some disability or not.

**The Acting Chair:** The hon. Member for Calgary-Nose Hill.

**Dr. Brown:** Thank you, Madam Chair. I have a couple questions for the hon. minister relating to seniors. As the minister is well aware, there are many seniors in my riding of Calgary-Nose Hill, and over the past year the inflationary pressures have been quite considerable in the city of Calgary. The consumer price index has gone up by over 5 per cent. The result for many seniors is that they're finding that their purchasing power is decreasing and, consequently, their standard of living.

Many of these seniors have concerns about being able to support

themselves and stay in their own homes, particularly from the point of view of their property taxes. I know that the minister's department has a property tax assistance program which rebates to seniors the increase in the provincial portion of property taxes on any increase over the 2004 tax levels. But given the fact that the purchasing power of their dollars, many of these seniors being on fixed incomes, is decreasing, it is becoming increasingly difficult for many of these seniors to stay in their homes.

I wonder if the minister could comment on whether or not his department has any plans to implement some sort of tax deferral program in conjunction, I suppose, with the city of Calgary, by which it would have to be administered. It certainly would be beneficial if seniors could defer some of their taxes until such time as their homes were either sold or they were deceased and thereby have some additional room for living expenses. I would just ask the minister whether or not his department is investigating that, if it's something that is feasible.

The second area that I would like to ask him about is relating to the PDD program. As he is aware, the cost of caregivers is certainly escalating, and with the employment rates as high as they are and the unemployment rates as low as they are, there is a great shortage of individuals in those fields of personal care. The result is that it's very difficult to keep people in those PDD positions. It's most disconcerting for those individuals that have become accustomed to being served by an individual. They form individual relationships with those people who are their caregivers. The revolving wheel of losing those individuals and having a constant turnover in personnel is certainly something that I think is very disconcerting to those individuals who are requisite of PDD care. I wonder whether or not the minister could comment on any funding in the budget to increase the support to the PDD individuals. I think it is certainly critical.

Also in the area of PDD I wonder if the minister could comment on the functioning of the regional boards – I know that the provincial PDD board has now been dissolved, and we now have more direct administration of the funds – and whether he could elaborate, perhaps, on some of the experiences of the department on whether or not that particular initiative is going well, whether it's proving to be more efficient in getting the resources where they're needed, on the ground.

Finally, in the area of protection of persons in care I wonder if the minister could advise whether or not his department has any plans to expand that program and the resources available in the protection for persons in care program so that it's expanded beyond the institutional care setting into the area of home care, because as the minister is well aware, we are entering an era where more of the delivery of care is taking place in the homes and outside of the institutional settings. I think it's certainly no less important that the individuals that are receiving their care outside of those institutions, like lodges and nursing homes, would also receive the benefit of the Protection for Persons in Care Act.

**The Acting Chair:** The hon. minister.

**Mr. Melchin:** Thank you, Madam Chair. First off, you mentioned the seniors' inflationary pressures. Absolutely correct: they face it along with all Albertans, everyone.

[Mr. Marz in the chair]

As I mentioned, we do provide a property tax rebate all in assessment of our first priority to help seniors, to assist them to stay in their own homes. That would probably be the best opportunity for us to assist them. In that light, that's why we did bring in the rebate

so that no increases in their education property taxes will have to be paid. That'll be rebated for any years subsequent to 2004. It's in that light, really, that we have mitigated all those cost increases for that portion of housing. We have a variety of other programs that talk about a one-time, special-needs program. If there are some extraordinary costs, they can apply and receive some one-time assistance for their house.

Acknowledging that you mentioned a tax deferral methodology, I note that British Columbia actually has a property tax deferral program where seniors can defer paying property tax until they dispose of their homes or until they're deceased. In light of that, there's a variety of options, I say, that one could consider. I guess that one could consider that thought. Our programs in Alberta, for example: compared to British Columbia, we have a more generous program of assistance for seniors in total than the compensation package that would be provided for those in British Columbia. So I guess we provide different levels of service.

One concern I might have, though, is that there's a growing number of seniors, and clearly with the baby boom generation coming up, it's going to only increasingly be a challenge to provide for both higher amounts of payments per individual plus greater numbers of seniors. There's much we could do. Where our programs have for the most part been designed is to focus a greater amount of assistance towards those in need. We still have some programs that are universal. Even the education property tax one that we have is a universal program. If it was really looking to those in the greatest of need, we might have to do some further work in policy as to who should actually receive the assistance and under what format that might best be delivered.

**9:00**

Some excellent thoughts. At the present time there's no specific plan in developing a tax deferral with the city of Calgary or otherwise. I would say that one recent advent, I guess, is that the city of Edmonton did put in kind of a cap of the increase as well. They worked it through the Alberta seniors' benefit. We have the information on seniors of low income. Through our own systems as we provide cheques through the Alberta seniors' benefit program, the city of Edmonton is actually rebating, I think, up to \$63 of their property tax increase to the low-income seniors. So there is a facility, really, with not too much additional complexity or administration, given that we have the systems already in place, to identify the low-income seniors who might qualify. Other municipalities could look at theirs as well. That is an example that I think we could show to other cities like Calgary and other municipalities if that were their wish. We'd be happy to work with them in that regard.

I might mention just for information that for the property tax year 2007 in Edmonton 9,400 senior households will receive an average of \$95 in assistance. In Calgary 17,000 senior households will receive an average of \$130 in assistance on the education property tax rebates this year.

You mentioned the other one about PDD, persons with developmental disabilities: caregivers, retaining staff, the turnover. Clearly, that's a real challenge in this environment where wage rates have gone up, finding people. The challenge is for the caregivers to retain their staff and have the sufficient funds. We did increase our budget. In the last year \$11.3 million was reallocated at the end of last year in the budget specifically to address staff retention questions. We had some funds that were in that area that were rededicated just for the specific issue of the service providers to help retain their staff. That money has also been built into this year's budget to annualize that increase going forward, acknowledging that that's not going to answer the full questions, and there will still be challenges for them to compete with the wages that they might offer.

We had a brainstorming session just a little over a week ago and brought together a number of service providers, various stakeholders, those providing the services to persons with developmental disabilities. We've increased our budget, I mentioned earlier, 90 per cent since 1999, a very substantive increase. The rate of growth is well beyond inflation, well beyond our caseload. Even the service providers are acknowledging that this isn't a matter of just more money. It's really a matter of us starting to take a look at more efficiencies within the system. There's a real range of how services are provided, the cost of those various services that are provided, and how it may be best to deliver those services. If we could gain a lot more efficiency in how we provide those, using some of the best examples that are already being tried in Alberta, if we made that more across the board and used those as templates, we could free up dollars that could be redeployed among the agencies for retaining their own staff. It won't be a function for us of design, just to cut the budget, but it will be a matter of how we help build greater capacity among the service providers to retain staff and provide the services on an ongoing basis.

With respect to the protection for persons in care I thank the Member for Calgary-Nose Hill for his work specifically on this area with the recommendation as to expanding beyond the people in the public facilities. We're in receipt of that report. We've got some more work to do on that. Specifically, I don't have any recommendations at the present time as to what course of action or direction we may take, though we do have that information, and we'll respond to it in due course as to what might be the best outcome that we could take.

We've added, for example, another million dollars in 2008-09 to address potential changes in the act such as home care, with specific reference to the protection for persons in care.

With those comments, I'll be happy to answer any further questions.

**The Chair:** The hon. Member for Strathcona.

**Mr. Lougheed:** Thank you, Mr. Chairman. The second priority for the ministry is to bring forward an updated plan to expand long-term care and improve standards of care. The first sentence there talks about improving it for seniors and persons with disabilities, but it's working through Health and Wellness in order to achieve that. In discussing some of these issues with people with disabilities, there's a vast difference between people who need care because of an injury and need to be helped out for a while, home care and so on, to move into a state of health, and people who need home care – and I know this is talking about long-term care here, but the analogy is somewhat similar – the people with disabilities who are not going to move into the ability to just be on their own. I'm wondering if there are discussions taking place that will differentiate those kinds of programs whether it be for people recovering from an accident or from an injury or some kind of disease as opposed to those who will require care for the rest of their lives because of their disability. That's one of the questions I did have regarding that.

I was talking earlier about some of the challenges and the barriers that are faced. Goal 5 for the ministry: "Seniors and persons with disabilities live in supportive, barrier-free communities and have access to the necessary supports and services to enhance independence." I think some groups in our community should be commended for the work that they're doing. Christenson Developments and the president of the company, Greg Christenson: in some discussions recently he's been talking about this very type of community. In the hamlet of Sherwood Park, just adjacent to my constituency of Strathcona, just across Clover Bar road they're building a commu-

nity, and Christenson Developments should be commended for taking the initiative in building what Greg has called a prototype community where, in fact, people will be able to age in place. They will have access to all sorts of the community facilities in the immediate neighbourhood and be able to get about the community whether they're ambulatory or whether they are in a wheelchair.

In recent discussions with Jayman Master Built the same kinds of things: a huge amount of interest on their part to move towards incorporating these kinds of designs. These kind of builders in our community should be commended for the leadership that they're showing in these kinds of endeavours and the initiatives that they're taking.

I did have one question with respect to PDD, and that would be whether the ministry, in looking at the PDD-funded services, has in their performance measures and their satisfaction measures noted any kind of difference in the type of organization that's delivering the services, whether there's a difference between, you know, some of the for-profits and not-for-profits or whether there's any kind of variance in approach that leads to a higher sense of satisfaction from clients than is just represented in the blanket statement here.

Thank you.

**The Chair:** The hon. minister.

**Mr. Melchin:** Thank you, Mr. Chairman. With respect to long-term care our priority 2, to bring forward an updated plan to expand long-term care and improve standards of care: in the long-term care area and a lot of the housing issues with respect to seniors I would concur that there's much work yet to be done in developing how we, one, maybe help people age in place first in their homes all the way through the various forms of facilities.

**9:10**

One of the issues in particular that you addressed is younger people in long-term care and how we can maybe provide some choice of facilities for them other than these facilities that are predominantly seniors, where they might have some choices to be with other individuals closer to their age. A specialized service initiative funding of \$6 million allocated in '06-07 is in the budget to provide people who are currently in long-term care with choices for community involvement to counteract the isolation experience as a result of these living conditions. The budget was also intended to prevent premature admission to facilities and to increase the housing options available for adults with disabilities in the community. There is some more work, obviously, yet to be done on that, but it is an issue that has clearly been identified, and some progress is being made.

You commented on this prototype kind of community that some of the private developers are putting together and developing. I would concur that it would be useful for us to further explore to see what they're doing. How do you replicate that? How do you get that more commonly thought of in various developments that are going on throughout the province: to increase the accessibility question once again in designing communities where all people can participate and live and enjoy the quality of life in that community regardless of their abilities and/or disabilities? So we look forward to working with the Member for Strathcona in following up on some of those. I know that we've talked previously on that specific point and, out of interest, look forward to seeing what some of those prototype kind of communities would look like, what interesting concepts they've brought forward, and what we might do as a department to help facilitate that thinking or correlate that with other departments.

That said about all those things, part of the challenge and focus of the department is that you can't spread your resources too thin, so we'll have to see, out of all the ideas that come forward, those that we can act upon quickly versus some that might be a longer term priority. As you were mentioning previously, there are strategic priorities that have been listed that we are going to continue to focus on. Sometimes the accomplishment of the strategic priorities is to the exclusion of other issues so that while there might be interest and desire to do many things, you have to be careful not to try to accomplish too many and spread your resources too thin and too defused to actually make headway in some key strategic areas.

With respect to the service providers for persons with developmental disabilities, the difference is in types of organizations, for-profit versus not-for-profit and their effectiveness or their efficiency and/or creativeness. I guess we'd only have some anecdotal information. We're not aware specifically that there is a substantive difference in the form of structure, like for-profit or not-for-profit. One organization could be profit or nonprofit due to the expertise or the creativeness or the innovation of some of them. Some of them are actually accomplishing and focusing more on outcomes, and it's in that thought that I would agree about where we ought to start pushing some of the next steps.

What do we desire to be appropriate outcomes for those persons with developmental disabilities? We need to start thinking about who's identifying them, to begin with. What are the appropriate outcomes? How are they measuring those? How are they delivering the services to accomplish that? What are their successes in achieving those results? We have obviously provided many services based upon inputs: so many dollars for so many people for so much time. Much of this is related to people, some of whom need care 24/7. They don't have the capacity to be on their own, so some of it is about just trying to care for a person, be it in a homelike setting where they might be safe and secure. Others would be services to help enhance that experience of their inclusion in the community or their development as an individual. But I don't have anything. We talked about it some in the brain-storming session we just had. Maybe along with the service providers and ourselves developing a web-based . . .

**The Chair:** Hon. minister, I hesitate to inform you that the allocated time for this order of business has elapsed. We will proceed with the next department. So if I could invite your officials to retire from the Assembly, we will have the opportunity for the next department, Children's Services, to come in.

### Children's Services

**The Chair:** We will start by inviting the hon. Minister of Children's Services to present us with her opening comments.

**Ms Tarchuk:** Great. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Before I get started, I'd like to introduce the ministry staff here with me today. Sitting in the House we have Maria David-Evans, deputy minister; Shehnaz Hutchinson, director of financial strategies; Niki Wosnack, ADM, community strategies and support; and Gord Johnston, ADM, ministry support services. In the members' gallery we also have Mark Hattori, acting ADM; Sheryl Fricke; David Wilson; and Neris Havelock. I would like to say that these are just a few of the thousands of dedicated staff who work in our ministry committed to improving the lives of children, youth, families across the province. I would like to say for the record that their passion and hard work each and every day is what makes the ministry the success that it is.

Seeing that this is my third time doing estimates and the hour of

the day, I think that rather than going on at great length talking about all the wonderful things we're doing, maybe I'll just hand it over to you for questions. We'll endeavour to answer what we can. Anything we can't, we will get back in short order with fuller answers.

Thank you.

**The Chair:** Any members who wish to participate? The hon. Member for Calgary-Nose Hill.

**Dr. Brown:** Well, thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. I do have a number of lines of inquiry that I would like to delve into, and the first is relating to the daycare situation and the shortage of workers. I know that there is considerable difficulty in recruiting people into the daycare field as there are in many of the other services industries. I know that there is strong competition for those individuals and sometimes a tendency for them to take other jobs that may be higher paying. I wondered whether or not the minister could elaborate on what steps her department is taking to deal with that shortage of workers and the ability to remain competitive in the job market.

9:20

Another area that I would like to inquire about is relating to the recruitment of foster parents and what can be done to enhance that program, whether there are any other additional resources that her department is utilizing to address that shortage.

The third area that I would like some comment on regarding resources in the budget and the programs of the ministry would be relating to the provision of before and after school care for working parents. Particularly of great concern are those areas of the workforce that may find that they are in difficult straits regarding the availability of workers, and I'm thinking particularly in the area of the health care fields and whatnot, where the provision of before and after care sometimes becomes critical to the number of hours that nursing staff or other medical professionals are able to dedicate to their jobs. I know that's a great concern presently because we do have shortages in those particular fields.

I will allow the minister to make some comments on those, and then I may have some further follow-up questions later on.

**The Chair:** The hon. minister.

**Ms Tarchuk:** Thank you, Mr. Chair. I'm glad that the hon. member brought up some of the child care issues because that is one of the mandated priorities as given by the Premier this year. A lot of my time and effort in the last couple of months has been to meet with stakeholders involved with child care and to take a look at what was working well, what's not working so well, and get some ideas from them as to a number of things, ultimately how to create capacity in the province. But the number one issue that was identified over and over during the discussions and the consultation was the attraction of staff.

Before I specifically get into some of the initiatives that we announced that directly impacted the staff and specific to the attraction of staff, we did through the budget process get endorsement, well, first of all, committing to the five-point plan, which was huge, as well as enhancing the five-point plan. Specific to some of the strategies to help out with the workforce participation issues, we committed \$9 million to fund a 40 per cent increase to staff wage top-ups. We are putting \$1.5 million to fund a new child care leadership bursary, and that will help staff in child care programs continue their education and help them offset some costs. We also increased subsidies for parents and introduced funding to help cover

the start-up costs of creating more child care spaces across the province, and that was looking at \$1,500 per space created. We also put \$400,000 towards establishing a staff attraction incentive for child care programs to recruit back workers who agree to sign a two-year return service agreement. As well, we put together a \$1 million package to take care of some specific child care issues up in Fort McMurray. The total funding for child care is \$134 million, and that's \$16 million over and above last year. I can tell you that the response across the province has been very good for those initiatives.

I can tell you that we have put another \$7 million into our foster care. I know that we can see during question period that foster care happens to be one of the favorites to talk about and whether or not we have enough foster care parents in the province. I've pointed out several times that our ratios are actually fairly good when you're looking Canada-wide. Having said that, we know that the more foster parents we have, the better able we will be to match the needs of kids. Those efforts are ongoing. As well, this year we're putting in an additional \$350,000, so we're actually looking at \$650,000 that will be committed to recruit more foster parents and aboriginal caregivers for the children in government care.

The other comment that I wanted to make. When I talk about the increase to \$7 million, just to let you know, the ministry and the Alberta Foster Parent Association negotiate on an annual basis the foster care compensation rates and allowances. In meeting with that organization last week, it appears that it's a very positive relationship that we have. Certainly, they are very enthusiastic people about the work that they do, and they have a positive relationship with this government.

The last question, regarding out of school care. Again, I know that I've talked about this lots in the House, but very simply right now we do not have the mandate to deliver services for out of school care for children ages six to 12. We do have the mandate for zero to six. We do license zero to 12, and that is the extent that we are currently involved with out of school programming outside of the fact that we fund FCSSs. In fact, this year to the tune of \$71 million we are funding FCSSs. If they determine that out of school care is a local priority, they can deliver that service, and many of them do. I think that out of close to 300 FCSSs, we have 45 programs in the province.

Having said that, we also just finished an FCSS review, that was conducted throughout the year last year, and have just taken it through the approval process. The good news with the review is that it identified for us that FCSS is probably one of the best examples of partnerships in this province, a very well-respected program. Hundreds and hundreds of locally driven, really good preventive programs have come out of that program, and it is certainly one that

we will want to continue to support. In the review we are following through on all of the recommendations. There was one that we pulled aside for further review. They had identified that the out of school program needs to be looked at.

The out of school programs across the province are experiencing similar difficulties that the zero to six programs have, and the FCSSs and the municipalities where the FCSSs are have been asking for us to take a look at the out of school program. So I have committed, actually, to all Albertans and in this House that I will work with all of our stakeholders, whether it be businesses, municipalities, the child care community, and take a look at what's working well, what isn't, and see if we can come up with some solutions.

**9:30**

**The Chair:** Are there others? Seeing none, I will now invite the officials to leave the Assembly so that the committee may rise and report.

Pursuant to Standing Order 59.02(9)(c) the Committee of Supply shall now rise and report progress.

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

**Ms Pastoor:** Mr. Speaker, the Committee of Supply has had under consideration certain resolutions for the departments of Education; Employment, Immigration and Industry; Seniors and Community Supports; and Children's Services relating to the 2007-08 government estimates for the general revenue fund and lottery fund for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2008, reports progress, and requests leave to sit again.

**The Deputy Speaker:** Does the Assembly concur in the report?

**Hon. Members:** Concur.

**The Deputy Speaker:** Opposed? So ordered.

The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

**Mr. Stevens:** Well, thanks, Mr. Speaker. Obviously, the ministers tonight faced some gruelling questions but conducted themselves most admirably, from my perspective, particularly in terms of being efficient in the time allocated to the answers. So I would move that the Assembly do adjourn until tomorrow afternoon at 1 o'clock.

[Motion carried; at 9:32 p.m. the Assembly adjourned to Wednesday at 1 p.m.]

