



Province of Alberta

The 27th Legislature
Fifth Session

Alberta Hansard

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Issue 12

The Honourable Kenneth R. Kowalski, Speaker

Legislative Assembly of Alberta
The 27th Legislature

Fifth Session

Kowalski, Hon. Ken, Barrhead-Morinville-Westlock, Speaker
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Zwozdesky, Gene, Edmonton-Mill Creek, Deputy Chair of Committees

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Amery, Moe, Calgary-East (PC)	Knight, Mel, Grande Prairie-Smoky (PC)
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	Woo-Paw, Teresa, Calgary-Mackay (PC)
	Xiao, David H., Edmonton-McClung (PC)

Party standings:

Progressive Conservative: 67 Alberta Liberal: 8 Wildrose: 4 New Democrat: 2 Alberta: 1 Independent: 1

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Evan Berger	Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, Political Minister for Southern Alberta
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Quest
Taft

Standing Committee on Community Development

Chair: Mrs. Jablonski
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Standing Committee on Education

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Bhardwaj
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Legislative Assembly of Alberta

1:30 p.m.

Tuesday, March 6, 2012

[The Speaker in the chair]

Prayers

The Speaker: Good afternoon.

Let us pray. Renew us with Your strength. Focus us in our deliberations. Challenge us in our service to the people of this great province. Amen.

Please be seated.

Introduction of Guests

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Finance.

Mr. Liepert: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have the privilege today of introducing some department folks who've been on a tour of the Legislature. As I read their names, I would ask that they stand and at the end of the introduction be appropriately recognized by members of the Assembly. We have with us today Nicole Hartfield, Jennifer Hansen, Alex Gainer, Nikki Knudsen, Pam Chaillard, and Jeannie Gulinsky. Wherever they are, I'd ask them to stand. Give them an appropriate response.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Culture and Community Services.

Mrs. Klimchuk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm thrilled to rise today and introduce to you and through to all members of this Assembly two bright groups of students, teachers, and parents from my constituency of Edmonton-Glenora.

From Youngstown elementary we have 17 grade 6 students joining us today along with their teacher Ms Cindy Annala and parent volunteers. They are in the public gallery, so if they could rise, please, and we could give them a warm welcome.

I also would like to introduce to you and through you, Mr. Speaker, 21 students from the grade 6 class of St. Vincent elementary school, their teacher Mrs. Angela Whelan, and parent volunteers Mrs. Charlotte Bast and Joan Hertz. I would ask them to rise to receive the warm welcome of the Legislature.

I hope both these groups have a wonderful time and enjoy question period today.

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

Mr. Sandhu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have two introductions to make today. It's a pleasure to introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly a group of 30 future leaders in our province from York academic elementary school in my constituency of Edmonton-Manning. The students are accompanied by their teacher Ms Strasdin and parent helper Mrs. Dean. They're all sitting in the public gallery. I would ask them to please rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

Mr. Speaker, it's also my honour to introduce to you and through you to all members of this Assembly very special guests from my constituency of Edmonton-Manning: Nicola Elniski, Andrew Parker, Marion McIlwraith, Stephen Parker, Matthew Kallio, Leeroy Gentles, and Ansar Bacchus. These visitors are teachers and former students from M.E. LaZerte high school. The Member for Edmonton-Calder will be speaking more on this group in his member's statement later on today. I believe they are

seated in the public gallery. I would ask them to please rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Intergovernmental, International and Aboriginal Relations.

Mr. Dallas: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have two sets of introductions today. I first rise to introduce to you and through you to the members of this Assembly some special members of Alberta's francophone community. As our province prepares to mark the Rendez-vous de la Francophonie from March 9 to 25, it is only appropriate that we acknowledge some of the wonderful people who make up Alberta's francophone community. Earlier today I along with the hon. Speaker had the opportunity to symbolically raise the Alberta francophone flag in the rotunda of this wonderful building to kick off the Rendez-vous, which celebrates French language and cultures across Canada.

Joining us for that event and in the gallery today are representatives from the Association canadienne-française de l'Alberta: Mrs. Dolorèse Nolette, president, and Mr. Denis Perreux, executive director. Also in the gallery are a group of young adults from Francophonie jeunesse de l'Alberta, the provincial francophone youth organization that is marking a special milestone this year. Thirty years ago they helped design the wonderful Franco-Albertan flag that we raised today and in more than 25 communities across the province last Friday. Welcome to Mr. Rhéal Poirier, executive director. Finally, I want to acknowledge some staff members from my ministry's Francophone Secretariat who work to support Alberta's French-speaking community: Mr. Denis Tardif, the executive director of the Francophone Secretariat, and Kate Peters, community liaison officer. I wish these individuals une bonne célébration and ask them to please rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Legislative Assembly.

Mr. Speaker, I would also like to introduce to you and through you to the members of the Assembly my second set of guests today, students and teachers from Clé Sèniore choir. I along with many members of this Assembly had the opportunity to hear these talented young adults sing in the rotunda earlier today as part of the kickoff ceremonies for the Rendez-vous de la Francophonie. After their performance the group was given a French-language tour of the Legislature and are now joining us to watch today's legislative proceedings. The Clé Sèniore choir is unique in that it is made up of francophone high school students from two different Edmonton schools, l'école Maurice-Lavallée and l'école Gabrielle-Roy. Under the tutelage of Executive Director Véronique Duquet and choral leader Marie-Josée Ouimet these young people have the opportunity to express themselves through French language music to the delight of their listeners. I now invite them to please stand and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

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

Mrs. Sarich: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is an honour and a privilege for me to rise today to introduce to you and through you to all Members of the Legislative Assembly three guests representing the Anatolian Heritage Federation and member organizations. We had an absolutely wonderful meeting earlier this afternoon. It is my honour to welcome them, and I would ask them to please rise as I mention their names.

Sukan Alkin is president of the Anatolian Heritage Federation of Canada. The Anatolian Heritage Federation is an umbrella organization for ethnocultural institutions having ties to the geographic region of Anatolia or Asia Minor. The membership strives to promote respect and mutual understanding amongst all

cultures and faiths with a goal of influencing global peace and harmony.

Also, I'd like to welcome Ahmat Tamirci, director of the Intercultural Dialogue Institute. The Intercultural Dialogue Institute, Mr. Speaker, is an Anatolian Heritage Federation member organization. It's not for profit, headquartered in Toronto, and currently operating nine chapters across Canada with two chapters in the province of Alberta.

I'd also like to welcome Ibrahim Cin, executive director, Intercultural Dialogue Institute, Edmonton chapter, formerly of Harmony Dialogue (Group). The Intercultural Dialogue Institute, Edmonton, was founded by a group of volunteers concerned about bridging the lack of knowledge and unfamiliar traditions and beliefs so that it would act as a catalyst for mutual understanding within multicultural groups.

I would now ask my guests to accept the traditional warm welcome of the Legislative Assembly. Thank you.

1:40

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods.

Mr. Benito: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is my distinct pleasure to introduce to you and through you my visitors who are seated in the public gallery: Mrs. Lulu Bernal, treasurer of the Council of Edmonton Filipino Associations, or CEFA; Mrs. Tina Tolvay, president of the Friends of Edmonton Millwoods Multicultural Association, or FEMMA; Miss Dory Gonzales, our constituency assistant for Edmonton-Mill Woods. Miss Gonzales was responsible for opening our constituency office when I was elected in 2008.

Most of all, Mr. Speaker, I would like all of you to join me in welcoming a special visitor, who is also seated in the public gallery. As we all know, without the help of our spouses it is impossible for all of us to do our jobs as MLAs of this Assembly. My wife of 33 years, the pillar of my family, and to borrow a phrase from a religious song, the reason why I am able to stand on mountains and walk on stormy seas, the mother of our three children and my best friend: Estrella Benito.

I would like to ask all my visitors and my wife to rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

Members' Statements

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

Thom Elniski

Mr. Elniski: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is commonly believed that to succeed in basketball you need two things, height and heart. While in my family I am visibly regarded as having the height, there was another who had the heart. I speak of my cousin Thom Elniski, who sadly passed away at age 55 in 2004.

His legacy is the difference that he made in the lives of the students at M.E. LaZerte high school. Thom was more than an educator. He was a leader, a mentor, and a fine basketball coach, to such an extent, Mr. Speaker, that to this day, eight years after his untimely death, the students and alumni play an annual basketball tournament in the Thom Elniski gymnasium at M.E. LaZerte high school. This is the first year the tournament included senior teams. Senior teams were what Thom coached best.

Thom started his teaching career in 1973 at Victoria school, but his true love was the east end, the east end kids, phys ed, and LaZerte. Thom ran the phys ed program at LaZerte in the best interests of those who were the most important to him, his students. It's very easy for a kid to get lost in a school of 1,500

students, but Thom was always undeterred. His goal in all things was to help his kids, his teams be everything that they could be.

He has been described by alumni as a father figure and as a fair, if old-school, leader. Andrew Parker, one of the alumni introduced earlier, summed Thom up very well. Thom asked him: "How do you want to be remembered? Do you want to be remembered as the guy who had all the talent, got kicked out of school, and wound up doing nothing with your life? Or do you want to be the guy who went to college, went to play pro, and had his dreams realized?"

He rewarded effort, often at the expense of results, and likely never thought that his legacy in public education would go far beyond educating and focus on helping his students learn about life. As is evidenced by the group here today in the gallery, the work of my cousin Thom continues today, eight years after his death. It was nothing spectacular or calculated, Mr. Speaker. What he did, he did naturally. It's what we call heart.

Thank you.

Judicial Inquiry into Health Services

Mr. Anderson: Mr. Speaker, the Premier keeps insisting she stands by her word. That's very nice. The problem is that Albertans are wondering just which of her many words she is standing by. Is it her words during the PC leadership when she said that the health queue allegations "when combined with earlier allegations of a culture of intimidation, has provided an impetus to call for an independent inquiry?" Or is she standing by her words stated three days before the first PC leadership vote to Rick Bell at the *Calgary Sun* when she said that she would call a "full-blown probe to look at whether docs who spoke out against screw-ups in the health care system were intimidated"? Perhaps it was her word in question period last fall when asked about the alleged bullying of Dr. Magliocco and she told this House

I'm pleased to see that . . . if someone does have concerns with respect to doctor intimidation, they would be prepared to come to an inquiry. The legislation will be tabled in the House today to ensure that that can happen . . . physicians are going to be able to testify with protection.

Or was she standing by her word 10 days ago when asked by Don Braid at the *Herald* if the inquiry would include the allegations of queue-jumping and physician intimidation and the Premier answered: "It has to be."

Now, I don't know what standing by one's word means in Ottawa, Afghanistan, South Africa, or any of the other places the Premier has lived, but I do know what it means in Alberta. In Alberta standing by one's word means actually keeping your word, otherwise known as telling the truth. When you make a clear promise to hold a public inquiry into physician intimidation in order to win votes during a leadership race, that means you call that inquiry, whether it's politically convenient or not. Premier, you have broken your word and have broken the trust of Albertans. Call the public inquiry into doctor intimidation as you promised and as doctors across this province are calling for. Anything less will show just how little your words are worth.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Creek.

Edmonton-Mill Woods Persons Case Scholarship Winners

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, every year the Alberta government awards Persons Case scholarships to students who are studying in programs that will lead to the advancement of women or those studying in nontraditional programs for their gender. This year 315 applications were received, and 44 of them were awarded scholarships.

This scholarship was created in 1979 to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the Persons Case. The scholarships honour five Alberta women – Henrietta Muir Edwards, Nellie McClung, Louise McKinney, Emily Murphy, and Irene Parlby – who in 1929 achieved a very significant milestone for all women. Known as the Famous Five, these women took the Persons Case issue to the British Privy Council, where it was confirmed that women in Canada were allowed to be in the Senate and, as a result, were considered persons under the law.

The Alberta government recognizes how essential it is to support the advancement of women and the enormous contributions women make to all aspects of our society. We support a number of employment programs that, like the Persons Case scholarship, assist women in pursuing nontraditional occupations. For example, the women building futures program supports women pursuing careers in the trades. We know that supporting women in reaching their full potential is critical to the success of our province.

I would like to recognize three Persons Case scholarship recipients from my constituency: Ms Tina Cowan, who is studying for her master's in family and marital therapy at Loma Linda University's Canadian campus and received a \$2,000 award; Ms Mandy M. Kahlmeier, who is studying law at the University of Alberta and received a \$2,000 award; and Ms Gloria Leung, who is studying for her master's in engineering management at the University of Alberta and received a \$1,000 award.

Congratulations to all recipients of this year's Persons Case scholarship. In my capacity as a former minister responsible for women's issues I wish each and every one of you the very best in your education and in your future careers. You are doing outstanding work on behalf of all women and all citizens in this area, and we are all very, very proud of you.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Grande Prairie-Smoky.

Departing Thoughts from Grande Prairie-Smoky

Mr. Knight: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I rise today to recognize and thank individuals who were instrumental in my privileged opportunity to represent the riding of Grande Prairie-Smoky: first and foremost, my wife of 46 years, Diana, and our three supportive children along with 10 grandchildren and two great-grandchildren; next are two very special friends, Tony Yelenick and Rita Boyer, who encouraged and counselled me over these years; then, all the members of my constituency association and the voters who gave me this honour; once here, the support of staff, notably Miss Stacey Leighton, Jason Ennis, and Marie Buck; and so many others who made this job enjoyable.

The riding of Grande Prairie-Smoky and, indeed, all of our great province has made impressive forward strides under the three leaders I have served, and now our Premier Redford is poised to move us to even greater success. This government's support for agriculture, forestry, energy, and other industries has maintained a robust economy, allowing for the very solid support this government continues to provide in my riding in crucial areas of health care, education, and social services, and infrastructure development in all these areas is required and appreciated. A special achievement is the union of Grande Prairie Regional College and the new medical centre.

Mr. Speaker, I have come to understand that politics is a matter of physics: you have to move a mass through a distance, and it takes enormous, focused energy to succeed, in this case human energy provided by all the members of this Assembly. To their great credit

they have moved this province forward to the enduring benefit of all Albertans. It brings to mind a sign in Mr. Royce's shop: "Whatever is rightly done, however humble, is noble."

In closing, Mr. Speaker, I must thank you for your masterful management of this House. I thank all of my colleagues, the cabinet, and the caucus in this Assembly. [applause]

1:50

Oral Question Period

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

Long-term Care for Seniors

Dr. Sherman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In spring 2005 Auditor General Fred Dunn's damning report on the dismal conditions in Alberta's long-term care facilities included a warning against overmedicating residents. Enforcing Dunn's recommendations could have saved Carol Pifko, who died on May 1, 2009, after receiving several double doses of the powerful antipsychotic drug Zyprexa, which is not approved for patients suffering from dementia. To the Minister of Health and Wellness: is it government policy to overmedicate high-needs seniors with dementia into a vegetative, a potentially lethal state as a management strategy for overworked staff?

Mr. Horne: Well, Mr. Speaker, I won't dignify the tone of that question by responding specifically to the question. What I will say is that I'm aware of what has been reported in the media about this very unfortunate case. I do not yet have any facts beyond that point. I have no reason to believe that any other patients in Alberta are in danger as a result of receiving overprescribed doses of this medication, but we're certainly looking into it. This matter is also the subject of a fatality inquiry, which is under way as we speak.

Dr. Sherman: Mr. Speaker, dignity is all our seniors want, and they want to be dignified.

Given that the Minister of Health and Wellness knows full well that the number of seniors in Alberta and the complexity of the care that they will need is only going to increase, why then is it the minister's strategy to put seniors into private facilities, which provide fewer hours of care with a lower level health care provider and with no on-site registered nurses?

Mr. Horne: Mr. Speaker, it is the policy of this government to build affordable continuing care spaces for all seniors and to bring the health care to them as their needs dictate, including patients who require what is currently described by the opposition as long-term care. The reality is that we have continued to fulfill our commitment to open over a thousand continuing care spaces per year to meet our goal of 5,300 spaces in total. Many of these new spaces offer the opportunity to scale up health care provided as patients' needs change over time. This is what Albertans are asking us to do, and this is what we're delivering.

Dr. Sherman: Mr. Speaker, I'm a doctor who still works in the system. That's the problem. The minister doesn't understand it. Minister, how many more tragic stories like those of Audry Chudyk, who nearly died in her feces and still is struggling to live, and Carol Pifko must we hear before this government abandons its grossly inadequate and inhumane long-term care scheme and builds more publicly delivered long-term care spaces?

Mr. Horne: Well, Mr. Speaker, the hon. leader seems determined to continue in his practice of talking about very unfortunate

specific cases in this House and extending those to a generalization and a condemnation of all care provided in our continuing care facilities. This government will not participate in that sort of a discussion. We are happy to listen to constructive ideas about how to improve continuing care across the province, but beyond that, no thank you.

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

Municipal Financing

Dr. Sherman: Mr. Speaker, this hon. leader will continue to stand up and fight for those bullied and without a voice. Despite the government's bullying of the AUMA president, the province's municipalities have shown the courage of their convictions with an ad campaign that respectfully asks for a new funding relationship with the province. What they need is simple. They need a fix for the problem that towns and cities receive only 10 per cent of the public's tax dollars, which doesn't even count royalty dollars. They're starving for critical funding in the richest place on earth. Will the Minister of Municipal Affairs follow the lead of the Liberals and start treating municipalities as equal partners instead of children to be berated and boycotted?

Mr. Griffiths: Mr. Speaker, I've been very clear from the beginning, from the day I was appointed, that it's very critical that we work with municipalities to build better communities. That's what this is about. The Alberta Urban Municipalities Association works very hard with us to work on MSI. It helped write the formula in 2007, and right now it delivers \$900 million to municipalities in this province, unprecedented anywhere else in Canada.

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Sherman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It was a good start, Minister. Unfortunately, it's not working.

To the Minister of Municipal Affairs: will your ministry follow the lead of the Alberta Liberals, who believe local government is the best government, and provide the tools our municipalities need to survive and thrive by introducing a new deal for cities, by giving them a right to share in Alberta's wealth rather than being reduced to holding their hands out and depending on the tender mercies of a government that bullies and intimidates and picks winners and losers?

Mr. Griffiths: Mr. Speaker, I'm very glad that the hon. member listened to the speech that I gave at the AUMA breakfast a couple of weeks ago, where I got a standing ovation from the Urban Municipalities Association, that talked about the changes to MSI funding, that talked about a new Municipal Government Act that would deal with the challenges municipalities have, that would deal with the municipal sustainability strategy to help provide municipalities with the resources they need, and a new civic charter, all four pieces that now he advocates after I released them a couple of weeks ago.

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Sherman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given that those poor municipal leaders had to stand up and clap after his letter because they were scared of losing their grants – they had no choice – to the Minister of Municipal Affairs: now that the AUMA are

standing up to this government once again, can we expect the minister to deal with this in a mature fashion and sit down with them and, hey, you knock out a deal that's going to work best for our municipal leaders and municipalities?

Mr. Griffiths: Mr. Speaker, I met with the AUMA this morning. We met again at noon with our rural caucus colleagues – oh, they don't have any – and we talked about the challenges the AUMA has and their ad campaign going forward. There was a mutual agreement that we are going to work on MSI, we are going to work on the municipal sustainability strategy, the Municipal Government Act, and the civic charter to help address municipalities' needs. We are working together.

The Speaker: Third Official Opposition main question. The hon. Member for Calgary-Mountain View.

Judicial Inquiry into Health Services

Dr. Swann: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Doctors are not usually a noisy, complaining lot, preferring to negotiate and reach a mutual accord, one that each side can live with. Today, however, the Alberta Medical Association has taken a very aggressive, full-page ad to very loudly express its beliefs about the Premier's promise for a public inquiry that involves doctor intimidation and mismanagement. This coming just before an election should be seen by the government as a very, very ominous sign. To the minister: will the government realize that the whole world knows exactly what the Premier promised . . .

The Speaker: The hon. minister. [interjection] The hon. minister has the floor.

Mr. Horne: Mr. Speaker, we are aware of the ad that appeared today in the *Edmonton Journal*, and what I will say is what I said earlier in this House this week and last week. The government continues to be in uninterrupted negotiations with the Alberta Medical Association and Alberta Health Services toward a long-term agreement. We said when we came in here in October that we were committed to providing a stable and predictable environment for our physicians and other health care workers. To that end we've invested \$93 million to support our physicians over the next year. I have a difficult time finding anyone who wants to argue with that.

Dr. Swann: Well, Mr. Speaker, this is not about money, and this minister knows it's not about money. It's about improving access and quality of care in this province. That's what they're negotiating about. Why won't the government follow the Canada Health Act and negotiate with doctors instead of strong-arming them and imposing yet another evidence of their control?

Dr. Sherman: It's about respect.

Mr. Horne: Mr. Speaker, it certainly is about respect.

The \$93 million that I referred to, that will further support physicians over the next year, will see primary care networks get their first funding increase since 2003. That money will go to support the addition of other health professionals to work as part of the primary care teams. It will go to support additional chronic disease management and other programs that support patients and families and communities. We know our doctors are committed to that. We're prepared to continue working with them.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Dr. Swann: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. No funding increase for nine years, and suddenly we come up with this just before an election. Isn't that interesting?

I'll go back to the first question. To the Deputy Premier: will the government realize that the whole world knows exactly what the Premier promised and exactly how she's dancing around the promise and broaden the terms of reference for the Health Quality Council public inquiry?

Mr. Horner: The Health Quality Council presented a very good report. This government and this Premier accepted all 21 recommendations in that report. And, Mr. Speaker, we took a step further because the Health Quality Council actually said that no public inquiry into doctor intimidation was required because those resources would be better spent on other measures. The Health Quality Council report made that comment, but we went a step further. The Premier made a commitment to do a judicial inquiry into queue-jumping. That's exactly what we are doing. A promise made, a promise kept.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo.

2:00

Provincial Tax Policy

Mr. Boutilier: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. The Wildrose has been very clear on taxes: no tax hikes. Period. The PC government is obviously running scared. We've obtained an ad script, which I will table, for a new taxpayer-funded government ad intending to counter the Wildrose pledge to not raise taxes. This government ad isn't about a new program or a project. It's not even a public service announcement. It's a purely political ad using Albertans' hard-earned tax dollars. To the Premier: how much are you willing to spend on these partisan ads, and will you direct the PC Party . . .

The Speaker: The hon. Deputy Premier has the floor.

Mr. Horner: Mr. Speaker, I have no idea what the hon. member is referring to because I have not seen whatever document it is that he claims to have in his possession. I'm assuming that I will see it, but I will tell you this. The Wildrose went out and did a stunt. They said: oh, sign the pledge. Well, you know what? Every cabinet minister in this Legislature has signed a pledge to a budget. I look forward to those members supporting that budget in this House because there are no tax increases in that budget.

Mr. Boutilier: Mr. Speaker, I have a suggestion for you. Why don't you save Albertans half a million dollars by scrapping these taxpayer-funded campaign ads? Instead, you should simply sign the Wildrose pledge to not raise taxes. Period. I have it right in front of me. Save us a whole bunch of time and wasted taxpayer dollars.

Mr. Horner: Again, Mr. Speaker, every year that we do a budget, we spend dollars on informing Albertans of what is contained in that budget and what it means to their lives. Albertans want us to do that. The amount that we're spending represents roughly around 10 cents for every Albertan in the province so that we can communicate and have a two-way dialogue with Albertans because that's what they asked us to do.

As to the hon. member's pledge again I say: where is their pledge not to privatize health care; where is their pledge to actually do the things that they're not telling Albertans they're

going to do? Mr. Speaker, our pledge is the budget that's before this House.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Boutilier: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. He can't hear because his Q-tips are falling in. No one is talking about 2012 except for you.

Premier, it's the four years after 2012 that people are worried about. Given you won't pledge to not raise taxes if re-elected, can you at least show Albertans a little respect and intelligence and tell us how much you are planning to increase taxes? Maybe you can run some commercials about that. It would be far more informative to Albertans.

Mr. Horner: Mr. Speaker, rather than stunts and political grandstanding, what we have done is presented a three-year business plan to the Legislature in this House. We're debating that as we speak. Again, I look forward to all of those hon. members passing our budget and three-year business plan because there are no new taxes in either the budget for this year or the three-year business plan. There is a \$5 billion surplus two years out. Why would you be talking about raising taxes?

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood.

Judicial Inquiry into Health Services

(continued)

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. The Alberta Medical Association is challenging this government. It has just published advertisements in Alberta daily newspapers saying: how sick is the Alberta health care system? It's clear that doctors have lost confidence in this government over the handling of the health system. They know what we've been saying for a long time, that you cannot trust this Tory government with our health care system. My question is to the health minister. Why has this government broken its promise to Alberta's doctors and to all Albertans to hold a full public inquiry into intimidation . . .

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Mr. Horne: Mr. Speaker, the Deputy Premier has already answered this question earlier in question period today. The fact of the matter is that a commitment was made by our Premier to hold a public inquiry into queue-jumping. As we have said before, to the extent that that mandate involves allegations around physician interference, those allegations will be explored as part of the inquiry. It is an independent process, and it would be very interesting and perhaps refreshing if other hon. members would care to consider that prior to inquiring further into its proceedings.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Mason: Thanks very much, Mr. Speaker. Well, it's clear from this ad that the government has lost the confidence of the province's doctors. It says, "Alberta's doctors have been threatened and intimidated with loss of their jobs and licences to practice when they advocate on behalf of patients" and that a promised inquiry has not been forthcoming. So my question is: why has this government so mismanaged the health system as to lose the confidence of Alberta's doctors?

Mr. Horne: Well, Mr. Speaker, the Alberta Medical Association is quite capable of speaking for itself, and it has done so through the ad that the hon. member has referenced.

The fact of the matter is that over the past four months this Premier and this minister of health have been working very collaboratively with Alberta's doctors to make some specific improvements in the system that they have been asking for for some time. Those include the unconditional \$12 increase in primary care network funding on a per capita basis, a 2 per cent increase for all other physicians, and a commitment to ongoing negotiations.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Mason: Thanks very much, Mr. Speaker. Well, given that listening to this minister, you'd think they were just on a honeymoon together, it's surprising to read in this advertisement: "While the Alberta Government may not want to hear what Alberta's doctors think, we'd like to hear what you think." How can the minister stand there with a straight face and say that he's got a great relationship with Alberta's doctors when they put this out in a newspaper and pay to contradict your propaganda?

Mr. Horne: Mr. Speaker, Alberta's physicians have been without a long-term agreement since March of 2011. That eight-year agreement was many years in the making. It was the result of a lot of collaboration and discussion and vision for the future of the health care system, vision that was shared by government and Alberta's physicians. Our commitment to the next long-term agreement, which we are continuing to negotiate, is for nothing less than that.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Vermilion-Lloydminster.

Municipal Property Tax Relief

Mr. Snelgrove: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Through no fault of their own many residents of a condo in Fort McMurray have been forced out. Regardless of who's fault it is – it's certainly not theirs, and I think the municipality would be sure that they may share part of the inspection blame – the fact is that they are still required to pay municipal property taxes on property that they can't inhabit. My question would be to the Minister of Municipal Affairs. Has he been approached or would he consider action that would exempt people who are unable to inhabit their dwelling because of situations like that to be exempted from their property tax assessment?

Mr. Griffiths: Mr. Speaker, that's a great question. I have been asked by one individual, I think, if there was an option there. Currently we don't have a program in place that would provide such relief. We had one circumstance which had occurred, but again it was a major disaster in the province and fell under our disaster recovery program because the impact was so great to the municipality. Our sympathies are definitely with the people who resided in the condo, and we're working very diligently on four different options that will help make sure we improve the quality of construction so that this doesn't happen again.

Mr. Snelgrove: Mr. Speaker, I think we've seen through the news in the last couple of weeks that there may be other projects that were built in the boom times that may not have undergone the thorough inspection that was there. So my question or suggestion to the minister, maybe, is that rather than getting further along in a situation that then requires a solution, would the minister consider developing a policy that would deal with these situations before they arise?

Mr. Griffiths: Well, I think it's worth considering, and I'm willing to discuss it with those who would represent the condo owners who are in such a situation. The condo owners have to remember as well, as do people who are in this situation, that they can still work out a solution with their municipalities at the local level to deal with the challenges they have with tax. In circumstances like the situation in Fort McMurray it's before the courts right now, and I'm sure that they're going to be looking for restitution on that.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

The hon. Member for Calgary-Buffalo followed by the hon. Member for Lesser Slave Lake.

Full-day Kindergarten Programs

Mr. Hehr: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. During her leadership campaign the Premier promised to reintroduce full-day kindergarten within one year of forming a government. To the Minister of Education: six months later what are the results?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Mr. Speaker, that tells you something about the member's involvement. We're midstream, mid school year. I don't imagine this member actually expected us to start a kindergarten the next day. We're working right now with school boards, and we're looking at how this will be implemented. Number one, there are obvious infrastructure limitations. Some schools that are at full capacity right now will not be able to embrace a whole new grade level. The fact is that the intention is there to make full-time kindergarten available to all Albertans, and the implementation of it will be done in collaboration with school boards.

Mr. Hehr: Well, my follow-up question is: will you be introducing full-day kindergarten in September to keep the Premier's promise?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Mr. Speaker, as I said earlier, we will be working with school boards. The government has the full intention of making kindergarten available. Obviously, that may not be possible in some areas, where the schools are already at capacity. We will be looking at infrastructure options. School boards and this government will be working to make sure that all Albertans have kindergarten, and we will be implementing it in a way that is possible and doesn't obstruct provision of education to other students in the system.

2:10

Mr. Hehr: Mr. Speaker, I need some clarity. The minister appears to be answering a question without really answering it. What percentage of our schools will have kindergarten in them this upcoming September?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Mr. Speaker, I can't make it any more simple, so I'll say it slower. The Premier has made a commitment that children in Alberta will have full-time kindergarten paid for by the government of Alberta. I am currently working with the school boards to implement that initiative. We will be implementing it in a phased-in way because there is the natural fact that certain schools simply can't accommodate one extra grade level. It's a matter of physics. If a school has a capacity of 200, you cannot put in more students if there are already 200 students in that school. It's something we're working through, but the commitment is there and will be delivered on.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Lesser Slave Lake, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Meadowlark.

Slave Lake Disaster Recovery Contracts

Ms Calahasen: Thank you. Mr. Speaker, we have put in millions of dollars to rebuild Slave Lake and region. In this rebuild we offer millions of dollars in two-year interest-free and payment-free to help local companies to rebuild or start a new business, which is great. Then we put out contracts like the FireSmart program for our three communities, and these contracts have been awarded to out-of-area and out-of-province communities. Of course, my question is to the Minister of Municipal Affairs. What gives? What process is being awarded to . . .

The Speaker: The hon. minister, please.

Mr. Griffiths: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The government of Alberta has a \$289 million recovery plan for the Slave Lake region, and I'm very proud of the work that we've done to implement that plan. The plan also includes within it the FireSmart initiatives, and the contracts were awarded through the Sustainable Resource Development department. Those awards are essentially based on a request for qualifications and then chosen by the municipality. It's a very fair, open, and transparent process.

Ms Calahasen: Mr. Speaker, although it may be fair and transparent, local contractors use local labour and use local businesses, which, in turn, helps companies and people to get on their feet. These contracts should have been awarded to at least an Alberta-based company and preferably local. Why was that not considered?

Mr. Griffiths: Well, Mr. Speaker, let me be really clear. The process in Slave Lake is a process that's the same in any other forest protection area in the province. The FireSmart contracts are awarded in the same manner any other government contract would be according to TILMA and the New West Partnership and the agreement on internal trade. It follows the rules and the guidelines in a fair, open, and transparent process that allows contractors to bid.

Ms Calahasen: TILMA, TILMA, Mr. Speaker. Then why are our Alberta contractors being refused work in B.C. when they have the capability and willingness to do the work just like the people who come from B.C. to Alberta? To the Minister of Intergovernmental, International and Aboriginal Relations.

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Dallas: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. If there are Alberta companies that feel that they're being unfairly treated, I'd certainly encourage them to contact my office. We have trade agreements with all the other provinces to provide a mechanism to deal with Alberta companies that might be unfairly being shut out. We've been working diligently to break down trade and labour barriers across provinces. We always support Alberta companies just like we supported the Alberta CGAs in Manitoba in a recent intervention.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Meadowlark, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Fort.

Westlawn Courts Seniors' Residence

Dr. Sherman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In my hand I have a two-

page letter dated August 31, 2011, from Orlan Weber, president of the Pillar society that runs the seniors' Westlawn Courts. The letter states:

The building is now approximately 30 years old. There are some very expensive major repairs required [over] the next few years. Unfortunately, again, the government has done a long term condition report and has not allocated any funds for upgrades in the next several years.

Up until 2015. There's mould in the building from leaking water. The carpets are old, and our seniors have allergies. To the Minister of Municipal Affairs: when can you provide funding to fix this facility for my seniors?

Mr. Griffiths: Mr. Speaker, I would be happy if the member would send over the information. I'm not aware of that particular circumstance. We work very hard in Municipal Affairs, where we have housing as well, to partner with the local housing groups in the community. So if they have an issue, I'd be happy if they brought it forward so I could address it.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Dr. Sherman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In fact, here is a letter dated September 20, 2011. We did send a letter to the previous minister, at that time of housing and urban affairs, and he states in his letter that "Ministry staff is working closely with the Society to ensure maintenance and staffing issues at Westlawn Courts . . ." How can they solve these problems when they clearly state that there is no funding? We have been working with the ministry, Minister. When will you show leadership and fix this building for these good seniors?

Mr. Griffiths: Mr. Speaker, as I said before, this is a particular case that I don't have any information on. I haven't seen it in the briefing notes, regardless of what they'd like to counter. If they'd like to send the issue over, I would love to work on it because there is nothing more important than providing adequate housing, especially for seniors, in our communities.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Dr. Sherman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given that this was the neglect that I talked about that has led to a horrifying infestation of bedbugs for my seniors and my tenants, the tenants are furious after a second round of fumigation and disruption in the lives of these vulnerable people, good people. To the Minister of Health and Wellness: when can the residents of Westlawn Courts expect their unwanted and unwelcome bedbug companions to be gone?

Mr. Horne: Well, Mr. Speaker, as the hon. Minister of Municipal Affairs has just said, he would be pleased to look into this. I would be pleased to co-operate with him in that. If the hon. member opposite wishes to table the correspondence that he's presenting here today, we'd be happy to look into the matter.

The Speaker: The hon. member for Calgary-Fort followed by, if you're ready, the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Workforce Employment Services

Mr. Cao: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. Alberta is the land of prosperity. Many Albertans are taking advantage of great employment opportunities to enjoy a wonderful quality of life. But there are Albertans who, through no fault of their own, find themselves in unfortunate situations and truly need assistance before they can join the workforce and support a family. My

question is to the hon. Minister of Human Services. Minister, in your very large department what is your priority for servicing Albertans caught in difficult situations and who don't know where to turn?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As Budget 2012 says, "Investing in People," Human Services is all about serving people. We have nearly 60 Alberta Works centres across the province, located throughout the province and there to assist Albertans who are in the circumstances that the hon. member just described, Albertans who are seeking employment, seeking advice on getting a job, those who are temporarily out of the workforce. The staff can help with career counselling, can help with resumé services, can help people get a job, can help people who are unable to work with assistance to bridge their needs in their time of need.

The Speaker: The hon. member, please.

Mr. Cao: To the same minister: given that Alberta is not an inexpensive place to live anymore, with ever-rising costs of food, shelter, and utilities, what is the status of income assistance rates now?

Mr. Hancock: Mr. Speaker, income supports are temporary measures to help people in their time of need. This year the income supports benefit rates will be going up by an average of 5 per cent to deal with the rising cost of living, and as our economy continues to improve and more people are able to find jobs, we do expect that fewer people will access income supports under the people-expected-to-work or working category. The benefits that we provide are very comparable to our neighbouring provinces.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Cao: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the same hon. minister: given that a number of my constituents' cases were not accepted as being severely handicapped for AISH but they are not able to work due to medical treatment for a serious illness, are there government programs to help these Albertans? If not, are you going to look into it?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Hancock: Well, yes, Mr. Speaker. One of the things that we want to ensure is that no Albertan in need falls through the cracks. So if there's an Albertan who through medical disability or other reason cannot have work, cannot do work, they can be supported under the supports for independence program. The level of assistance will depend on each person's situation, including their financial resources, their special needs, their ability to work, the number of dependents or children in the family. Someone who has barriers to full employment or is unable to work due to illness and meets the eligibility requirements will receive those benefits.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre followed by the hon. Member for Bonnyville-Cold Lake.

Residential Construction Standards

Ms Blakeman: Thanks very much, Mr. Speaker. I reviewed the exchange from yesterday between myself and the Minister of Municipal Affairs, and I find his responses quite puzzling. Now, I agree and am very grateful that the work was done on Slave Lake. It was important and urgent. To the minister. The minister seems

to be telling me that every staff member in the department spent all of their time and energy working on Slave Lake. Really? MSI grant administration, all the legislation drafters, library services, public safety: everyone was seconded to this file? Nobody was left? Come on, Minister.

2:20

Mr. Griffiths: Mr. Speaker, the dedication of the staff at Municipal Affairs to the Slave Lake issue permeated the entire staff. Many were moved to work on the Slave Lake issue, but other staff had to move in and fill the gaps. A couple of things had to be put on hold. I'm sorry the member didn't understand it. I thought I made it fairly clear.

Ms Blakeman: No. I understood it. It was just a little murky coming from you.

Well, back to the same minister. Now, given that the same laundry list that's been repeated by previous ministers even in a media release from last June, nine months ago, has the same items as the list the minister gave me yesterday – mandatory home warranty, increased fines, increasing time limits, better education for safety code officers – some fairly limited changes, clearly the department knew exactly what it was going to do. Nothing has changed in the last nine months, so why isn't it done?

Mr. Griffiths: Mr. Speaker, as I said before – and I'm sorry that the member didn't listen – the new home warranty program is with the legislative drafters, and it should be coming forward any time soon. I hope it comes forward before the election, but it may be after. But it's coming soon.

The changes to the Safety Codes Act, which increases the fines and limitations, is proposed for this fall. Because there are some other changes to the act that we also need to make, we'd like to do them all at once.

The Safety Codes Council is providing education training to the safety codes officers; 92 per cent of them have received or are in the process of receiving their training.

We've made excellent progress, Mr. Speaker.

Ms Blakeman: Well, we still don't have the legislation we were waiting for, and you knew exactly what you were going to be doing.

The final question to the minister: given the extensive consultation that the minister says was done, why does this list not include the protections that Albertans told us were most important, like an interest-free loan fund that home and condo owners could apply to if they were losing their homes, literally losing their homes because of additional assessments due to shoddy construction? I have one constituent that's been assessed \$34,000.

Mr. Griffiths: Mr. Speaker, I don't know whether it's the provincial government's responsibility to have interest-free loans for those sorts of circumstances. Our role is to make sure that we increase the quality of the production, which we're doing from the initiatives that I've listed before. That's our role.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Bonnyville-Cold Lake, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Glenmore.

Parental Choice in Education

Mrs. Leskiw: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Prior to the break we were discussing in this House the importance of choice in Alberta's education system. This importance rings very true for countless families in this province, including many in my constituency of

Bonnyville-Cold Lake that choose to home-educate their children. They can share their family values and beliefs and build a continuous learning environment in all family activities. My question is to the Minister of Education. Does this minister and this government continue to support the principle of education choice and home education?

Mr. Lukaszuk: The short answer would be an unequivocal yes. We pride ourselves in Alberta on the plethora of choice that's being offered to parents. It is one of the pillars of Alberta Education that makes our system so renowned. Not only do we want parents to have choice between a variety of schools, but we want them to have the option to home-school. [interjections] Mr. Speaker, I understand the members from the Wildrose Alliance don't want to hear my answers. Should I continue?

The Speaker: Hon. members for Vermilion-Lloydminster, Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood, Edmonton-Strathcona, Calgary-Currie, Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo, and Airdrie-Chestermere, if you want to have a caucus meeting, out, please. We'll continue with the question-and-answer period.

Hon. member, continue, please.

Mrs. Leskiw: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This is even worse than my grade 8 class.

My second question is to the same minister. Given that parental and family choice on topics such as religion and human sexuality is absolutely fundamental, can this minister assure all parents, home educators included, that they will still maintain the right to exempt their children from such programming?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Mr. Speaker, thank you. This is very ironic. The Member for Airdrie-Chestermere, who claims to be the proponent of home-schooling and religious rights, wouldn't even care to listen to the answer.

The fact is, Mr. Speaker, that it's personally important to me and it's important to the Premier and to every member of this caucus that any and all rights and protections that home-schoolers enjoyed in the past continue in the future. It's a very important pillar of Alberta Education, and nothing is to change at all. [interjection]

Mrs. Leskiw: Well, we'll talk about a detention for you later.

Allow me to ask this question bluntly and without equivocation. Is there any intention at all to change any aspect of home education in this province? Yes or no?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Mr. Speaker, no. The fact is that home-schoolers are providing fabulous education to our children in Alberta. They are enjoying the protection under the law, and this protection will remain just the same.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Glenmore, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Varsity.

Judicial Inquiry into Health Services (continued)

Mr. Hinman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On page 9 of today's *Calgary Herald* there's a full-page ad taken out by the Alberta Medical Association. There it is in black and white: "Just How Sick is Alberta's Health Care System?" In it the AMA says that the Premier's promised inquiry into physician intimidation "has been scrapped." They quote the Health Quality Council's report,

which says that doctors have been threatened and intimidated. To the Premier: are you going to deny the AMA's unprecedented public rebuke from Alberta's doctors, who are advocating for their patients because of your government's destructive political meddling and poor management of our health care system? Call a full public inquiry.

The Speaker: The hon. Deputy Premier.

Mr. Horner: Well, Mr. Speaker, I think I answered this question already today. In the Health Quality Council report they did discuss the fact that there was intimidation of doctors. In fact, in some of the recommendations they talk about how we can change the policies around advocacy for patients as well as advocacy for other doctors and their departments and their college. We accepted all of those recommendations. Those task forces will be coming forward.

As to the judicial inquiry, Mr. Speaker, the promise was for a queue-jumping inquiry, and that's what we're going to do.

Mr. Hinman: Well, Albertans and the AMA and the opposition will keep asking the question until they answer it. Given that the Premier's current terms of reference for the public inquiry is about as useful as a doctor saying, "We'll see every sick person in the province, but we won't treat them," when will the Premier keep her word and call a full public inquiry, where senior health officials will have to testify under oath?

Mr. Horner: Mr. Speaker, that's exactly the inquiry that has been called in terms of the queue-jumping, as has been alleged in the past. You know, the opposition over there is great at alleging a whole raft of things, and then when there's no proof, they allege something else, fearmongering for Albertans on this thing.

Here's where we're going with this right now. The Premier promised a judicial inquiry on queue-jumping. We're going to have one. It has already been launched. That's where we're going, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Hinman: I would call that clueless to queue-jumping. That's not what it's about. It's about doctor intimidation. Again, the Premier has clearly failed the people of Alberta by standing on her word rather than keeping her word. The cover-up, the intimidation, and the corruption are real, and they continue. Stop putting yourself and the PC Party ahead of Albertans, and call a full public inquiry, where the Premier and the previous health ministers will have to testify under oath. A full inquiry.

Mr. Horne: Mr. Speaker, what our Premier said last week and what I will say again today is that the government accepts all of the findings in the report with respect to physician advocacy. We are not putting the findings in dispute. We accept them. We recognize that they are a serious problem in Alberta.

What I find most remarkable, Mr. Speaker, is the opposition's total ignorance of all of the recommendations in the report, meaningful actions that were intended to deliver results on this issue, which is important to our physicians.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Varsity, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Mackay.

PDD Administrative Review

Mr. Chase: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Last year after significant delay the previous Seniors minister released a report on the administrative review of the province's persons with developmental disabilities program conducted by KPMG. This report

concluded that of the \$592 million then spent on PDD, \$142 million, 24 per cent, went to administrative costs instead of front-line service delivery. To the Minister of Seniors. As we heard two weeks ago during the debate on the Seniors budget estimates, current administration costs remain a whopping . . .

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. VanderBurg: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. You know, I'm very proud of the work that our PDD regions, their chairs, and their boards do around this province. There is no doubt that one of the issues that came up with the previous minister was to do a review of administration costs. I can tell you that they are valued members, and with our service providers they do great work on behalf of Albertans. I wouldn't want to be without them.

2:30

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Chase: Thank you. Awfully expensive front office when front-line servers aren't looked after.

When and what is the minister going to do to ensure that a program vital to vulnerable Albertans is, in fact, sustainable? Instead of all the money in the office, how about some on the front lines?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. VanderBurg: Well, thank you. Again, you know, the 9,600 people that we serve under the PDD file: 46 per cent, severe disabilities; 32 per cent, severe mental disabilities; many, many with both. I'm wondering if this member feels that we're better off not serving these individuals because, I'll tell you, we'll have a debate then. You and I will have a debate. These people are valued Albertans, they're vulnerable Albertans, and I'll stand up for them.

Mr. Chase: Mr. Speaker, it is the PDD clients for whom the money should be spent, not in the offices administering the programs. What steps since the release of KPMG's report has the ministry taken to enhance efficiencies to meet clients' needs, not pencil sharpeners in offices?

Mr. VanderBurg: Mr. Speaker, it's very well known that these PDD boards and regions and their valued members do great work on behalf of Albertans. One of the things that we've said very clearly is that we must make sure that whether you live in Lethbridge or Whitecourt or High Level, the services for our clients and the outcomes are the same. These fine groups of volunteers and individuals that run these organizations are striving towards that, sir.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Mackay, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Skilled Labour Shortage

Ms Woo-Paw: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. A newly formed Alberta Coalition for Action on Labour Shortages consists of more than 15 major Alberta business groups. Since a projected deficiency of 114,000 workers over the next decade represents a serious threat to the future of the economic growth of our province, my questions are to the Minister of Human Services. What is your ministry doing to more aggressively recruit the needed skilled workers locally, internationally, and from the foreign workers who are already here?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Hancock: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. That number of 114,000 workers over the next 10 years actually comes from the projections done by our department. We're working very closely with business, industry, the building trade unions, and others in the province to project not only the requirement for trades and what's going to happen as we build this province as the economy strengthens but also looking at how we're going to attract the workers. Obviously, we need to focus on Albertans and Canadians first, helping students get the skills that they need to move into the trades, but that's not going to provide all of the people we need.

Ms Woo-Paw: Would the minister inform the House of progress your ministry is making in response to the recommendation from a government of Alberta report on the impact of temporary foreign workers that calls for the development of a mechanism to work with employers in industry sectors to advocate for Alberta's labour needs and issues?

Mr. Hancock: Mr. Speaker, we have been working very closely with business, industry, and the building trade unions with respect to advocacy in this area. First of all, we're looking at our own processes to make sure that we carry out our processes with respect to temporary foreign workers and the provincial nominee program as efficiently and effectively as possible, with the least amount of red tape and the least amount of problems for applicants. But we also need to work with the federal government to make sure that our programs as part of the national immigration strategy . . .

The Speaker: The hon. member, please.

Ms Woo-Paw: Perhaps you'll have another chance to expand on it.

What is your ministry doing to advocate for Alberta's industry sector employers on reforming the screening process under the temporary foreign worker program as well as improving the efficiency of the application approval process for employers?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We're very proud of our immigration unit in Human Services. They do excellent work. In fact, while there was a review of the provincial nominee program across the country, for which the results just came out in January, and there were some concerns raised by the federal government about areas of fraud, language, and other issues, I can categorically assure Albertans that we do not have those problems. Our program is held up as the standard in the country.

Now, there's more work that we can do, but quite frankly it's not about expanding the temporary foreign workers – we have about 64,000 temporary foreign workers in the province now – but it's about finding those people who will come and make Alberta their home.

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

Revenue from VLTs and Slot Machines

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you. Since this government quietly changed the accounting method for VLTs and slot machines in 2000, \$14 billion in gross profit has been generated. These accounting changes, unfortunately, hide the fact that the government takes 30 per cent in profit from gamblers who bet at

VLTs. My first question is to the Minister of Finance, who is in charge of this program. Why are cash-in, cash-out totals for VLTs and slot machines not included in the information that's publicly disclosed in the government's books?

Mr. Liepert: Mr. Speaker, I've answered this question several times before. We account the way the Auditor General recommended, and we're going to continue to do it that way.

Mr. MacDonald: It was the board that made the changes, not the Auditor General's office.

Again to the same minister: given that the AGLC tracks cash-in, cash-out totals for each VLT across the province, why are these cash-in, cash-out totals, which tell the truth on the real government take in profit, not included in the information that's publicly disclosed in the government's books? What, sir, are you hiding?

Mr. Liepert: The member is right. It was the board that made that decision, based on the recommendation of the Auditor General.

Mr. MacDonald: I have the audit slips for the information of the hon. minister.

When will this government start telling the truth and tell the VLT players that the government takes in profit from their bets 30 per cent, not the 8 per cent that you declare publicly in the brochures to warn them of potential gaming problems?

Mr. Liepert: Well, Mr. Speaker, if this hon. member is suggesting that the Auditor General's recommendation is not telling the truth, then I think he's got a problem because, as I said earlier, the recommendation came from the Auditor General. We followed the recommendation, and if he has a question about telling the truth, then I suggest he take it up with the Auditor General.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for St. Albert and then the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Family Care Clinics

Mr. Allred: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. My question is to the Minister of Health and Wellness. During the leadership campaign last summer the Premier proposed family health clinics. How do you see family health clinics functioning as opposed to the present primary care networks?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Horne: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the hon. member for the question. Family care clinics, as they're called, are intended as an additional enhancement to primary health care delivery in Alberta. They are not a substitute for primary care networks, which have been very successful. There are over 40 of those operating in the province at the moment.

Family care clinics are, again, a team-based approach to delivery of care. They include enhanced supports that support better health for all Albertans in related sectors like mental health and addictions, housing supports, links to community organizations, and are also expected to serve as training centres for health professionals.

The Speaker: The hon. member, please.

Mr. Allred: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. They seem very similar, so I would pose a further question to the Minister of Health and

Wellness. Do you propose to continue the primary care networks alongside family health clinics, or do you propose at some point in time to amalgamate them into one operation?

Mr. Horne: Well, Mr. Speaker, we do not intend to discontinue support for primary care networks. As a matter of fact, the government has just invested \$33 million in additional support for primary care networks across the province. Family care clinics are yet another enhancement to primary care delivery options for all Albertans. As we have always said, we are interested in offering services that are unique to the needs of the communities they serve. Family care clinics will be no different.

The Speaker: The hon. member, please.

Mr. Allred: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My final question to the same minister: what are the cost implications of family care clinics, and do they fall within the 6 per cent increase that was allotted to Alberta Health Services in next year's budgets?

Mr. Horne: Mr. Speaker, the government's plan is to introduce three family care clinic pilot projects across the province. These pilot projects will be evaluated by an advisory committee that includes the Alberta Medical Association, the College and Association of Registered Nurses, and representatives of other professions. The total cost of the three pilot projects is \$15 million, and yes, it will be accommodated within the Alberta Health Services budget.

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

Revenue from VLTs and Slot Machines

(continued)

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. According to the office of the Auditor General – and this is a direct quote – the board, the AGLC, ultimately changed the accounting policy. For the Minister of Finance to try to slough this off on the office of the Auditor General is, to say the least, politically incorrect. My question again to the Minister of Finance: why does the AGLC track the cash-in, cash-out totals for each VLT across the province?

2:40

Mr. Liepert: I'll repeat again: because it was based on the recommendation of the Auditor General, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. MacDonald: That's not true, Mr. Speaker, and the hon. minister knows that.

Now, again to the minister: are commissions to the VLT licence holders based on cash-in, cash-out totals or on cash played versus cash won? Which is it?

Mr. Liepert: Mr. Speaker, the accounting of the AGLC is done based on the advice of the Auditor General.

Mr. MacDonald: I can see, Mr. Speaker, why that hon. fellow is not involved in health care anymore, and thank goodness . . .

The Speaker: Okay. Let's get on with the question.

Mr. MacDonald: My question is to the Minister of Service Alberta.

The Speaker: Okay. That concludes the question period for today. Today we've had 18 opportunities for members to raise

questions. We had – let's see – 106 minus one, the last one, so 105 questions and responses in all.

We will continue with the Routine in 30 seconds from now.

Members' Statements

(continued)

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

Alberta Hospital Edmonton

Mr. Sandhu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Whether it's directly or through someone we know, addiction and mental illness impact us all. Alberta has been a leader in its approach to dealing with these issues. Last fall this government announced an addiction and mental health care strategy. Yesterday at Alberta Hospital Edmonton in my constituency the hon. Minister of Health and Wellness announced an investment of \$40 million in several initiatives, all stemming from the strategy, that will help some of our most vulnerable populations.

By focusing on counselling and prevention and treatment services in primary health care, we will help Albertans get the care they need up front and prevent problems down the road. By enhancing the mental health care capacity building in schools initiative, we will help increase student awareness and support for mental well-being and suicide prevention. The increased support for Albertans with complex needs offers a much-needed lifeline to those who need it most. Support like outreach workers will help clients live as independently as possible in their community.

Finally, Mr. Speaker, creating four specialized mental health inpatient units with 80 beds at Alberta Hospital Edmonton will provide the best possible services for patients with specialized needs whose needs cannot be met in the community.

I am proud to live in a province where we take care of our most vulnerable populations and offer treatment and prevention right in our communities.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

Integrity in Government

Mr. Chase: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Government thugs. This government has reached the height of hypocrisy with Bill 2, the Education Act, in which it proposes to eliminate bullying at the school level. When the biggest bully in Alberta's political schoolyard proposes to eliminate its own well-documented worst practices, Albertans must realize that this is a clear-cut case of: do as I say, not as I do, or suffer the consequences.

Over the past decade 60 children have died while in the supposed care of the Alberta government while hundreds more have suffered injury and neglect. The majority of these bullied and beaten children have been First Nations. Abuse has not been eliminated; it has simply been moved from government-controlled residential schools to government-sanctioned and -subsidized residences.

Alberta provincial government bullying begins at birth for the 73,000 children currently living below the poverty line and for surviving family members does not end with their loved one's death, far too frequently precipitated by inadequate long-term care and denied the dignity of affordable, available palliative care.

Injured workers who qualify for workmen's compensation are bullied back to the unsafe workplace where they were first hurt by real threats of having their benefits reduced or cut off by case

managers who receive bonuses for reducing their files. Farm workers in Alberta do not even qualify for workmen's compensation or safe workplaces. Teachers, doctors, front-line caregivers, public service employees have contracts imposed upon them by this government rather than collectively bargained.

The input of publicly elected officials, whether municipal or school board, is only considered if they've bought tickets to the Premier's fundraising dinners or to their local Tory MLA's golf tournament.

Seniors are about to be given a pre-election break on their property taxes so that they have enough money left to pay for their long-term care after this government removes the cap.

Apathy is democracy's worst enemy. On election day end the bullying. Cast your vote.

Presenting Petitions

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

Mr. Chase: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I have a petition with the first 91 signatures. This was prepared by Marilyn Marks, representing the Alberta Grandparents Association. The petition reads as follows:

To the Legislative Assembly of Alberta, in Legislature assembled:

We, the undersigned residents of Alberta, petition to the Legislative Assembly to urge the Government of Alberta to introduce legislation to provide grandparents with specific rights of access to their grandchildren to enable grandparents to maintain ongoing contact with their grandchildren.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Tabling Returns and Reports

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

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. On behalf of the Leader of the Official Opposition I would like to table two documents that he referred to during question period today. The first is the appropriate number of copies of a letter to the attention of Gerry LeBlanc, signed by the president of Pillar society, outlining the tenants' concerns about stains on walls and ceilings, mould, cleanliness of carpets, and allergies.

The second letter is a response from the then minister of housing and urban affairs, noting that ministry staff "is working closely with the Society to ensure maintenance and staffing issues at Westlawn Courts are resolved." That's dated September 2011.

Thank you.

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

Mr. Chase: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am tabling a further 20 e-mails, out of the hundreds I've received, from the following individuals who are seeking the preservation of the Castle wilderness, believing clear-cutting will damage the ecology, watershed, wildlife, and natural species and that it must be prohibited at all costs: Elizabeth Miller, Barbara Boettcher, Michael Haack, Jennifer Kuzmicz, Ben Murray, Brent Harris, Linelle Henderson, Monique Passelac-Ross, Olivier Graham, Patricia Cameron, Anna Cairns, Kameron Weicker, Dr. Johan Lindsjo, Michael Kolman, Leanne Anderson, Elmer Wolochaty, Beverly Kunz, Laura Hessel, Louise Broderick, and Karin Nelso.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Education.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to table the requisite number of copies of a letter addressed to myself from the Association of Independent Schools and Colleges in Alberta, representing all Christian independent and private schools, supporting and endorsing Bill 2, the Education Act, in its current form.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo.

Mr. Boutilier: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In question period today I asked the Deputy Premier why Albertans are paying for a political ad of the government. I wish to table the proposed script of the government partisan ad, that would be paid for by Alberta taxpayers rather than the PC Party.

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

Mr. MacDonald: Yes. Thank you very much. I have a number of tablings today, and they're all centred around the questions that I had asked earlier. The first is an audit report for VLT ID SO5826 from the Commercial Hotel in Edmonton. This one is dated the 18th of February.

The second tabling I have is an audit ticket from the Treasure Pot Dining Lounge & H2O Lounge. The VLT ID is W06341, and it's dated the 22nd of February. I also have one from the same establishment dated the 27th of February, and it indicates the cash-in, cash-out totals that are calculated by AGLC.

2:50

I have additional audit tickets from the Commercial Hotel for VLT ID S05826 and its cash-in, cash-out totals here as well as cash-played, cash-won.

I also have another audit ticket from the Treasure Pot Dining Lounge, this one dated the 28th of February. It gives you a cash-in, cash-out read on this VLT as well as games played, games won.

Finally, Mr. Speaker, I have . . . [interjections]

The Speaker: You have the floor, hon. member.

Mr. MacDonald: Yes, but I'm having difficulty with the behaviour.

The Speaker: No, no. You're talking to me.

Mr. MacDonald: Yes.

The Speaker: There's no behaviour problem. If you're talking to me, there's no behaviour problem.

Mr. MacDonald: Well, there still is. There still is.

The Sherlock Holmes Pub on 98th Avenue, the audit ticket for VLT ID S06083, this one dated the 26th of February, and it again gives cash-in, cash-out totals as well as cash-played, cash-won.

Then I have another one from Elbow River Casino lounge in Calgary. It's dated the 18th of February, and it again displays cash-in, cash-out totals as well as cash-played, cash-won.

Tablings to the Clerk

The Clerk: I wish to advise the House that the following document was deposited with the office of the Clerk: on behalf of the hon. Mr. Denis, Solicitor General and Minister of Public Security, responses to questions raised by Mr. MacDonald, hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar, and Ms Notley, hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona, on February 13, 2012, Department of

Solicitor General and Public Security, supplementary supply estimates debate.

Orders of the Day Committee of Supply

[Mr. Zwozdesky in the chair]

The Deputy Chair: Thank you very much. Hon. members, I'd like to call the Committee of Supply to order.

Main Estimates 2012-13

Education

The Deputy Chair: Before I call on the hon. Minister of Education, I would like to remind members that today is day 10 of the throne speech consideration, which pursuant to Standing Order 19(1)(c) means that the vote must be called at 5:15 p.m. today. Therefore, Committee of Supply must rise and report progress prior to that time.

Also, at that time all officials on the floor will be requested to leave as quickly as possible, and once the Assembly has voted and Government Motion 10 has been addressed, we will return to Committee of Supply to continue consideration of this department's estimates, at which time ministry officials will be welcomed back into the Assembly.

Please note that we have a total of three hours allocated for this department's estimates, and as provided for in Government Motion 6, the committee may continue its consideration past the normal adjournment hour until it is complete. This means we may well go beyond the normal adjournment hour of 6 p.m. in order to conclude this particular set of estimates debate.

I will now call upon the hon. Minister of Education to begin. I'll just remind people that we will be following the same procedure as previous estimates debates in terms of the combinations of time and the allocations thereunder.

Hon. Minister of Education, I would invite your opening remarks.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Well, thank you, Mr. Chairman. It's a pleasure and an honour to be here before you and before our colleagues in the committee. Joining me today in the Chamber are Deputy Minister of Alberta Education Mr. Keray Henke; Mr. Michael Walter, assistant deputy minister of strategic services; and Gene Williams, executive director of strategic financial services. Up in the gallery listening very attentively and cheering us on are Ellen Hambrook, assistant deputy minister of education program standards and assessment; George Lee, director of budget and fiscal analysis; Kenneth Poon, senior manager of corporate budgets; and Janice Schroeder, director of communications. I'd say hello to all of them.

Mr. Chairman, I would like to present the ministry's 2012-2015 budget estimates and business plan. There are five programs in the budget. Our vote estimates begin on page 63 of the estimates book. We have two primary funding streams that are important to note, the government and lottery fund estimates, totalling about \$4.4 billion, or about 65 per cent of the budget, which we will be voting on later in this session; and the education property taxes, which total approximately \$2 billion. Approximately \$1.8 billion of this amount resides in the Alberta school foundation fund. The remaining \$270 million goes to local separate school boards that choose to collect their education property taxes directly from their

municipalities. These amounts are outlined on page 65 of the estimates.

Mr. Chairman, in addition, \$26 million is allocated to a work-in-progress for Alberta schools alternative procurement, or ASAP, schools and \$327 million . . . [interjection] Did I read something wrong?

Mr. Hehr: I was just complimenting the hon. member on his tie.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Oh. He has a very nice tie, I agree, but maybe we'll focus now on Education. We'll discuss our ties later, and life will be good.

The Deputy Chair: Hon. minister, through the chair.

Hon. Member for Calgary-Buffalo, please, you'll have your turn at the appropriate time.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Just in case anybody missed it, Mr. Chairman, in addition, \$26 million is allocated to a work-in-progress for the Alberta schools alternative procurement, or ASAP, schools and \$327 million for the teachers' pension plan. These nonvote amounts are outlined on page 69 of the estimates.

When you combine the \$4.4 billion voted in estimates, the \$2 billion in education property taxes, and the \$353 million in statutory expenses, support for the K to 12 education system reaches nearly \$6.8 billion and will grow to about \$7.1 billion over the next three years.

Excluding capital, the ministry's operating budget, Mr. Chairman, increased – and I have to underline increased – by \$216 million, or 3.5 per cent, this year; \$213 million, or 3.3 per cent, the following year; and \$245 million, or 3.7 per cent, in 2014-2015. As desired by Albertans, for the first time in the history of this province we have a three-year predictable budget.

The breakdown of the ministry's five programs begins on page 64. One, ministry support services, the first program in our budget, represents the corporate function of the department. This program increases by 3 per cent due to the provision of a 4 per cent salary settlement. Two, operating support for public and separate schools, the second program: the voted portion of this program is \$3.8 billion. If you include the nonvote amounts from education property taxes and the statutory obligation for the teachers' pension plan, operating support to the public and separate schools increases by \$198 million, or, if you wish, Mr. Chairman, 3.4 per cent, to \$6.1 billion.

What does this budget provide for school boards? Well, let me tell you, Mr. Chairman. It finishes the funding commitment for the 2011-2012 school year, provides 4.54 per cent for the base instruction and class-size grants for the remaining five months of this particular school year, and provides sustainable and predictable funding. Did you hear that? Sustainable and predictable funding.

3:00

It provides grant rate increases of 1 per cent, 2 per cent, and 2 per cent for the base instruction and class size grants over the next three years. Most other grant areas will see a 2 per cent increase. It addresses enrolment growth and cost-of-living increases. Enrolment is expected to increase by approximately 1.5 per cent, or about 8,300 new students, plus we expect a 10 per cent increase in the number of students that will require English as a second language programs, a 3 per cent increase in FMNI population, and an 8 per cent increase in early childhood services, children with disabilities.

Also, Mr. Chairman, it introduces a new inclusive education grant that provides \$68 million, an increase in funding. This is the

first step in implementing a new funding model that supports inclusive practices in schools across Alberta, and it ensures that boards have the flexibility to support the unique needs of every learner in their classrooms. Funding will be used to provide the supports and services that parents and teachers identify as most beneficial to students, including instructional supports and assistive technologies. School boards will continue to have the flexibility to meet their local needs, including enhancing the availability of supports such as speech-language and physical and occupational therapies.

There is a new way of calculating and allocating funding based on many different factors. What's important here, Mr. Chairman, is that this transitional year every board will see a funding increase. Going forward, we'll see how this new model works and whether we need to make changes.

Supports for rural schools is a significant feature of this year's budget. We upped our support through a couple of funding areas. The new equity of opportunity continues last fall's \$107 million funding addition by focusing on supporting equitable access for students. The new grant has three components, the first one being a per-student component of \$156 for all boards; second, a component that addresses distance funding; the last, a component that helps remote communities.

Student transportation funding also increased, Mr. Chairman, by \$14 million, and some of this was specifically to help rural communities. In addition to providing a 2 per cent grant rate increase for transportation, grants enhanced funding in other transportation areas. The fuel price contingency program, which provides funding whenever the diesel fuel price is above 60 cents, will continue. We're expecting co-operative transportation funding to urban boards to encourage more efficient busing; in other words, fewer buses following each other through the neighbourhoods and shorter rides for children on buses.

We're addressing declining rural populations, special transportation for students with disabilities, and interschool transportation so that students can be transported to other schools if courses are not being offered in the school of their neighbourhood. As mentioned in the 10-point plan for education, Mr. Chairman, we are conducting two transportation trials aimed at reducing bus ride times and enhancing the educational experience of students on a bus by making Wi-Fi available.

Other provincial initiatives that support students continue: \$48 million for the student health initiative to increase student access to specialized support services such as speech-language pathology or audiologists; \$232 million for the small class size initiative; \$41 million for the Alberta initiative for school improvement grant to support local projects that help improve students' learning. Funding was reduced in last year's budget. This year's grant remains at the reduced level plus a 2 per cent grant rate increase.

Funding for plant operations and maintenance of school buildings increases to \$482 million, providing school boards with a 2 per cent grant increase.

As was previously mentioned, the government provided \$327 million to the teacher's pension plan, an increase of \$27 million, or 9 per cent. This increase is attributable to more teachers in the system and higher teacher salaries. An additional \$447 million will also be provided by Alberta Finance and Enterprise for service earned before 1992, which saves teachers approximately 3 per cent of their salary. In total, government support for the teachers' pension plan reaches \$774 million under Budget 2012.

Transparency and accountability are also very important. To increase transparency, we have posted detailed information about the performance and funding for school authorities.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you very much, hon. minister.

We will now go to the opposition members, who have one hour to go back and forth with the Minister of Education as they wish. We'll begin with the hon. Member for Calgary-Buffalo.

Mr. Hehr: If we can just go back and forth, hon. minister, would that be all right with you?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Actually, just in lumps.

Mr. Hehr: Well, there we go.

The Deputy Chair: Agreed. Proceed.

Mr. Hehr: If we could sort of take up where I left off in question period in regards to the Premier's promise to fully fund kindergarten within one year of her coming to office, what are your ministry's plans in that regard? What is the money allocated for this? How many additional schools will need this? I guess you could get me some background. How many schools are currently getting kindergarten, and how many will need to be addressed in the upcoming school year or school years following if we're going to see this done?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Mr. Chairman, maybe I can answer those questions by completing what I intended to say because it talks about transparency and funding and also school facilities, which, as I mentioned in question period, are important.

To increase transparency, we have posted detailed information about performance and funding of school boards. This includes information sheets that identify trustees, student demographics, capital planning priorities, number of schools and teaching staff, operating budgets, and accumulated surpluses. There's also information about high school completion performance and provincial assessment programs and parental involvement. As was requested by the hon. Member for Calgary-Buffalo – that would be you, hon. member – last year during budget estimates, we are now posting detailed funding information for every school board so Albertans know exactly how their tax dollars are being invested in education. So congratulations, hon. member.

Our third program is school facilities, which ties into kindergartens. Three hundred and sixty-two million dollars is supporting the construction of 45 new schools and 31 major renovation projects. That's part of the \$1 billion investment in school infrastructure over the next three years.

September will see 14 new schools opening their doors to more than 10,000 students. This funding includes \$96 million for infrastructure maintenance and renewal for existing school facilities. The government recognizes that communities change, and some need new or bigger schools. While Budget 2012 does not include new funding for new schools or modernization projects, we will continue to explore alternative methods of funding new schools and infrastructure.

Mr. Chairman, our fourth program, basic education, increases to \$97 million. This increase is related to the government's commitment to increase bandwidth to school jurisdictions to access the SuperNet. Increasing bandwidth allows students to access media-rich content.

Ms Notley: Mr. Chair, a point of order.

The Deputy Chair: Hon. minister, a point of order from the hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona. Citation?

Point of Order Clarification

Ms Notley: I'm sorry. I'm going to have to wing it a bit. The point of order is this. We have a very limited amount of time to ask questions of the minister. Specific questions were asked by the Member for Calgary-Buffalo. The minister has been speaking now for about four minutes. He's not yet gotten to the questions specifically asked by the Member for Calgary-Buffalo. So I would ask, moving forward, that there is more attention paid and a direction given to the minister to respond to the question.

The Deputy Chair: You're just seeking some clarification, and the clarification is this. They have one hour. They've agreed to go back and forth between themselves. They can speak on whatever is permitted under that particular agreement.

Ms Notley: Mr. Chair, I'm not talking about time.

The Deputy Chair: We will continue and let the minister finish. I'm sure he'll be brief.

Ms Notley: Could he answer the question, Mr. Chair? Could you direct the minister to answer the question?

The Deputy Chair: Hon. member, please. We've been in this House long enough to know how these rules work. The Minister of Education has the floor, and he will use it appropriately, I'm sure.

Hon. Minister of Education, please proceed.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I thought we were to discuss the Education budget, and that's exactly what I was talking about.

The Deputy Chair: Merely a point of clarification. There is no point of order here.

3:10

Debate Continued

Mr. Lukaszuk: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Also, I know the member asked a number of questions during question period, so I'll address them right now, and then we'll go to more specific questions about accredited government schools. The government continues to support educational choice whether through public, separate, francophone, charter, private, or home-schooling. Our commitment to choice has helped make education, as you know, one of the best in the world.

This year's support to accredited private schools increases by \$7.8 million to \$192 million. This represents less than 3 per cent of what we spend on education, less than 3 per cent. For the 2012-2013 school year accredited funded private schools receive the same grant rate increases as public school boards, but it should be noted that they do not receive every grant that is allocated. More specifically to the member's question, the budget foresees \$306 million in total, which breaks down as \$161.6 million as base and together with ECS \$306 million total.

Mr. Hehr: Okay. Well, I asked about kindergarten, and I asked how much money your ministry expects it will take to roll out kindergarten in all our schools across the province. How much is allocated in this budget to kindergarten, and will we see kindergarten in every school system at schools out there in our province?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Thank you. Mr. Chairman, I attempted to answer that question already in question period, so let me try to elaborate here with having a little bit more time. This ministry has made a commitment through the Premier and myself that we will be implementing and making available full-time kindergarten to children throughout the province. The fact is that in order to roll out this particular program, one of the predicaments is simply space, infrastructure. When you have a school – and this member would know, being in Calgary – that is at 100 per cent capacity, adding an extra grade level to that school is physically impossible.

We are working right now with school boards on how we are going to unveil, unroll this program throughout the province to create this option for children as their parents desire to enrol them into this program. It is obvious that you just can't flick a switch and make it available September 2012. It simply cannot happen for all children, at least not in all schools. So in collaboration with school boards we will be looking at where it is possible now and how we are going to unroll it over a period of time.

The commitment remains that we will make kindergarten available to children throughout Alberta. We're also discussing the issue of choice because, as you know, not all parents may want to enrol their children in kindergarten, so we're looking at those numbers.

The number that I was initially tossing around – and it's not a guess; it's a guesstimate – was that if all children who are currently not in kindergarten were to enrol in a full-time kindergarten, it would be somewhere around \$200 million, but that will not be required for September 2012, so it's not in this budget. We will look at the figures as we unroll it progressively throughout the province.

Mr. Hehr: Well, if you say \$200 million is needed to provide this service throughout the entire system, how much is allocated right now from your government's numbers to funding kindergarten? If you guys have those numbers in front of you, I'd appreciate your getting those to the minister so he can inform me how much money in this budget is currently allocated towards kindergarten and getting this up and running.

Mr. Lukaszuk: In this current budget there is \$306 million dedicated for provision of early childhood services, and that will suffice for enrolment as it is planned right now.

Mr. Hehr: Three hundred and six million. But I'm asking for kindergarten. Can you guys break it down specifically to kindergarten?

Mr. Lukaszuk: That is kindergarten, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Hehr: Three hundred and six million.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Correct.

Mr. Hehr: And you estimate it's going to take another \$200 million to get this up and running throughout the whole system because \$306 million doesn't provide kindergarten anywhere near in the shape or form promised by the Premier. How much, then, does your ministry estimate extra from the \$306 million it would take?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Mr. Chairman, as I indicated earlier, providing that every parent would want to enrol their child in a kindergarten, above what we're currently spending, I am estimating that the cost would be approximately \$200 million additional.

Mr. Hehr: Additional. That's a significant shortfall in this year's budget if we were to be able to fulfill the Premier's promise. Is that fair?

Mr. Lukaszuk: We're getting lost somewhere here, Mr. Chairman. As I said earlier, implementation of full-time kindergarten everywhere simply cannot happen in the fall of 2012. There simply isn't enough space capacity in many of the schools. Yes, many schools would be able to implement it because they have excess space and they could embrace an extra grade, being kindergarten, in their schools. Many schools simply won't. I can tell you that in my riding I don't believe any elementary school would be able to actually fit in an extra grade level because they are at maximum.

So as we unroll it over a period of time, once we reach the maximum and if every parent we anticipate has enrolled their child into kindergartens having available space, the additional cost then would be \$200 million. However, since this possibility won't occur because there are infrastructure limitations, which we are working on with school boards, the initial cost over the next year or two won't be anywhere near that additional \$200 million. We will be absorbing that cost within current budgets.

Mr. Hehr: I guess the \$200 million is the programming cost, but have you guys estimated the infrastructure costs to get these additional spaces up and running?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Mr. Chairman, we're currently starting to engage with school boards in a dialogue on how current infrastructure could be used, as you know. For example, I'll give you a very interesting anecdotal figure. The Edmonton public school board, for example, has some 40,000 to 44,000 empty spaces in their schools. They can accommodate 44,000 extra students, but they have spaces where they don't have kids, and they have kids where they don't have schools. So school boards will be making decisions on how they want to implement kindergarten. Some school boards may designate certain buildings for kindergarten; some won't. This is a dialogue that we're engaging in right now.

Mr. Chairman, I don't believe Albertans expect that a whole new grade level, that would have curriculum implications, staffing implications, infrastructure implications, would simply be made available to all students throughout the entire province in every school as of September 2012. That simply would be unrealistic. But some robust work is being put forward to make sure that it comes to fruition.

Mr. Hehr: Well, I will point out to the minister that he's the fourth minister who's now studying the issue, so there should be some well-laid plans in the ministry going back. If you look at it, it's been well studied by the minister before you and the one before him and so on and so on.

Nevertheless, it appears that we won't have full-time kindergarten up and running in September of this year. When does the ministry expect, with the work that's in place and the deliberations that are happening, that this will actually come to fruition?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Mr. Chairman, 25 per cent of school boards by choice already do provide kindergarten, where they find that this is a program that is desired by the parents, within existing budgetary structure. Some school boards choose not to deliver it. Many choose not to deliver it simply because of space limitations. I will not put timelines on it, but I can undertake to the hon. member that the commitment is there not only from this

government but from school boards to work towards universal kindergarten being available to all students as soon as practicable.

That fact is – it is no secret to anybody in this Chamber, I hope – that infrastructure is one of the key pressures in the provision of education. While we have a 30 to 35 per cent vacancy rate in schools throughout the province, unfortunately, those schools cannot be put on dollies and moved around to places where we actually need them. The Minister of Infrastructure, myself, and Treasury Board are looking at a variety of alternative options to be able to build more schools where they are required, and that in itself, then, will allow provision for kindergarten. I can assure you that the construction of new schools will definitely already implement a provision for kindergarten within the confines of the building.

Mr. Hehr: Okay. Thank you.

I note one of the Premier's promises in her leadership race was also to allow school boards to hire back teachers and support staff that were let go when the \$107 million was cut from the budget back in I believe it was last spring. To date there are still 650 fewer teachers in our classrooms. Can the minister comment on why this has happened and what needs to be rectified, or is that a more appropriate staffing level, in his view, for what is currently needed in education?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Well, not only has the Premier made a commitment but this government has made a commitment to provide additional in-year funding of \$107 million. A promise was made, and a promise was delivered. As a matter of fact, I would venture to guess that from the day of being sworn in as Premier, very few Premiers have managed to deliver on a significant promise like this as expeditiously as this one was delivered.

However, let's not forget the fact that the government of Alberta, particularly the Ministry of Education, is not the direct employer of teachers. Teachers are hired by school boards, and 62 individual school boards make staffing decisions as the direct employers of teachers, and they decide what is and what isn't an appropriate staffing level.

3:20

Now, \$107 million was distributed to school boards in a very equitable – not equal but very equitable – fashion. Instructions were given to school boards that the dollars are to benefit children in the classroom in a very demonstrative way. A great deal of latitude was given to school boards on how the money will be expended, with the proviso that (a) a tangible learning experience improvement would be delivered and that (b) pressure spots, which the school boards haven't identified, would be addressed. Individual school boards made decisions that were most appropriate for their districts. Accordingly, the school boards have reported how they have spent every single dollar, and that was then further reported by myself to all Albertans vis-à-vis our departmental website.

So the commitment was delivered by the Premier, and the commitment was delivered by the government. School boards have done what they found to be a judicious expenditure. Now, in many cases it meant that – and don't quote me on the numbers – in excess of 800 additional teachers were actually hired from that \$107 million. But in some cases teaching aides – we should never forget about the support staff in school that make education possible – were hired; some programming supports were hired; some English as a second language instructors were retained. The list went on and on. But at the end of the day the \$107 million was expended as promised by the Premier.

Mr. Hehr: Nevertheless, there are 650 fewer teachers in our classrooms at this time. One has to assume that the boards are doing what's in the best interests of not only their students but with infrastructure needs and the like. Does that number alarm you? Is there anything your ministry is doing? With the growing population there are more students this September than there were last September, and those numbers just lead me to believe that if the system has fewer teachers, therefore larger class sizes and the like. Does the minister have any plans to rectify this trend?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Well, it's an interesting discussion, and I would actually love to spend more time sitting with this member to discuss this dilemma.

The fact is that for the first time in the history of this province we have a three-year predictable budget, which is something that school boards have been asking for for many, many, many years. I don't believe many, if any, school boards throughout the country have that available to them. So they have that predictability.

Also, let's not forget that this budget invests, not spends but invests, in education, an increase from \$6.8 billion to \$7.1 billion over the span of three years, with annual increases of more than 3 and a half per cent.

Now, in this province, like in some other provinces, we have locally elected trustees because we believe – and this member, I think, would agree – that locally made decisions are often more reflective of what the needs are in local schools, and those school boards make decisions on what is the best investment of those dollars. In some cases they choose to increase the number of teachers or staff or programs. The list goes on and on.

So to answer this member's question: am I concerned? I am concerned about the budget, which I am very happy to table today. That's one of my concerns, to make sure that the budget is adequate, and I am satisfied that, you know, this amount of money spent and invested in education is unprecedented. I am glad to see an increase. I am glad to see a sustainable budget. But the staffing decisions ought to remain at the local school board level, and they will do what is right for students. I don't imagine this member would want me to override local decisions by duly elected trustees and interfere in their personnel decisions and start either hiring or laying off teachers. That's something that we have trustees for, and as MLAs and as constituents we should be communicating with our trustees.

One thing, Mr. Chairman, that definitely allows me to sleep at night quite peacefully is the knowledge that Alberta education in all objective assessments ranks as one of the top four in the world. So whatever is happening in those classrooms must be good because our students, objectively tested by international agencies, are virtually second to none.

Mr. Hehr: Well, I take the minister's comments, but I also take them with a grain of salt a little bit. You're the organ grinder. You send the money. They just try to implement it. I think that at the end of the day you're the guy who's funding these things, and they're doing the best with their money.

Let's talk about your three-year funding agreement. In that is your base instructional grant, and your base instructional grant rises by 1 per cent in the upcoming school year. I think the ministry's own numbers said that there's going to be a 2.5 per cent increase in inflation, so based on the government's own numbers how do you square this circle in being able to keep adequate staff in our classrooms given this predicament that I just showed you?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Mr. Chairman, if one wants to analyze a budget, one cannot take one line item and look at whether it went up or

down and then judge the entire budget by one line item. I have very clearly indicated to the member, although perhaps the member didn't have the benefit of hearing it because it was interrupted by another member, that the budget overall is increasing by more than 3 and a half per cent every year for the next three years. Yes, certain components within the budget may be going up and down, but at the end of the day school boards will be receiving an increase, on average, of more than 3 and a half per cent per year every year for the next three years, which is beneficial from the fact that now they have predictability.

It's much easier for them to run an operation knowing exactly how much money they will have to operate a school system for the next three years, but they also have an increase of more than 3 per cent per year. So we can look at individual envelopes, but individual envelopes are not indicative, are not measures of what the whole budget, that we will be voting on, will be. That's a significant increase, with predictability built in.

Mr. Hehr: Actually, I think those individual line items have more importance than the minister might suggest here. If you look at the budgets in regard to infrastructure funding, it's regarding the teacher pension funding and the like, which has nothing to do with actual bodies in a classroom. I think the minister would agree with that.

If we could return to that question, given that his budget has a lot of things to do without teachers in the classroom, how does he square this circle of a 1 per cent base instructional grant, which primarily deals with our teachers in the classroom, and a 2.5 per cent rate of inflation as well as increasing numbers of students being enrolled in our classrooms?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Well, Mr. Chairman, the member also will know, because I know that he looks at Education budgets in close detail, that in our current Education structure a great deal of latitude is given to our local school boards. I often say – and maybe the member would have actually heard me in some of my communications – that even though today we will be voting on a budget and certain subcategories will be neatly put into envelopes for offset of fuel, for this and for that, the fact is that at the moment we actually transfer this budget, once voted upon, to local school boards. Local school boards will have a great deal of autonomy on how they will prioritize their spending and reallocate their funding.

This budget overall, Mr. Chairman, will give school boards in excess of a 3 and a half per cent or so increase per year for the next three years, which is 3 and a half per cent of \$6.8 billion. It's a significant dollar amount that Albertans will be investing in education over the next three years. But the line item funding, as you will note, probably at the moment school boards start tabling their own budgets will be realigned based on what the local needs are. That's when school trustees will be making those critical decisions of what an appropriate staffing level is or what additional resource money needs to be spent.

That sort of very neatly ties ourselves back into the kindergarten conversation. Right now, as the member knows, Albertans invest only in part-time kindergartens in the province of Alberta, yet 25 per cent of school boards, Mr. Chairman, deliver full-time kindergarten, which means that those school boards at a local level have reprioritized a significant amount of money and have chosen to deliver full-time kindergarten, which is fine because that's what trustees are elected to do. They are elected to reflect local needs and to provide programming that is desired by local communities. So there is a great deal of latitude within school boards.

But the increase overall will be somewhere around 3 and a half per cent per year for the next years.

3:30

Mr. Hehr: Again, I could go back to the point that the overall increase encompasses a whole bunch of things like infrastructure, deferred maintenance, computers, different grants, and the like – it doesn't deal, actually, with teachers in classrooms – but I don't think I'm going to get anywhere on that question. Hopefully, the minister understands that what I'm reading and hearing from school boards and the like is that they're going to have great difficulty being able to find enough teachers to go into the classroom at this rate of increase on your base instructional grant. I'll leave you with that thought because it doesn't look like I'm going to get an answer on it, anyway.

Let's move on. The AISI funding has been cut. This has been recognized as one of those things the school boards have been particularly happy with, and actually I believe the former minister was very happy with this program. Can you tell me: why the cut? Where is this going to be cut? Where is it going to affect? What programs are being offered? Who is doing what with the AISI program? What programs are you going to fund in AISI, and what are not going to be forwarded?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Thank you. Mr. Chairman, the hon. member, with all due respect, is getting answers. He may not like the answer he's getting, but I'm giving you an answer that is actually a reality of what is in the budget and what we will be voting on.

If the member insists on focusing on certain line items, then I will give him another line item to focus on. For example, action on inclusion increases by 22 per cent in this particular budget, so you have a 22 per cent increase on one of the line items. As I said earlier, looking at individual line items and what is going up and what is going down as the appropriation of this budget is not reflective of the entire budget. When you sum it all up – and school boards will be able then to, for lack of a better term, rejig those numbers based on their local needs – the average will be about a 3 and a half per cent increase in the entire budget over three years, from \$6.8 billion to \$7.1 billion.

Now, on the grant that this member refers to as a decrease: actually, no. There were decreases in the past, but now there is a 2 per cent increase on the grant, and also there is additional funding for equity of opportunity, which will provide school boards with money enveloped for those particular programs.

Mr. Hehr: So with the money you're enveloping for equality of opportunity, you're saying that the school boards can then pump that back into AISI. Is that what you're saying, that your budget really means nothing here, that what you've directed them to do means nothing?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Well, a very good question. Yes, if they choose to do that, they will be able to do that. That is one of the reasons why Alberta Education functions as well as it does. Mr. Chairman, we fund our children equally, but we also provide for equity because there are different costs of delivering education in different parts of the province. The fact is that each jurisdiction has different needs, and each community has different priorities. The strength of the system to a large degree is the fact that locally elected – and let me underscore: locally elected – trustees get to make local decisions. If not this member, I think a lot of members from the Wildrose Party and others would be screaming and shouting if a Minister of Education would step into a school board and start overriding their budgets and telling school boards what their priorities ought to be.

Mr. Chairman, I know you were a Minister of Education, and sometimes maybe there is that temptation. You know, we don't

always agree with every decision made by school boards and with what their financial priorities are, but at the end of the day we must respect the process. Parents and residents of that jurisdiction voted for those trustees, and those trustees get to make decisions, such important decisions as budgetary allocations.

Also, under AISI there is a \$71 increase – it's a total amount – per student for 2012-2013. This is actually one of the programs, if you ever have a chance to visit a school, Mr. Chairman, that teachers really enjoy working with. There's \$71 in funding per student for 2012-2013. For equity of opportunity, the program that I mentioned, there's a \$156 per-student allocation under this particular budget.

Mr. Hehr: Well, I guess one of my concerns – and the minister's answers here reflect that – is that I think school boards are often set up to deflect what is actually happening in education and the funding dollars that are coming from the province. Whether they're adequate or inadequate, it becomes very easy just to say: well, that's the school board's problem, not my problem.

But on the actual school boards I'll note that one of the Premier's promises in her leadership race was to roll back fee increases that parents were to receive in the upcoming school year. I also note that the minister in an article in the *Calgary Herald* stated that he was very upset at school fees and at the fact that school boards were passing these along.

From the stats I have, I think the average Alberta parent receives a bill for \$190 a child when they come into school every year. Maybe you have different statistics. What are you doing on school fees? Is this a school board problem as well, or is this something your ministry is looking to address? What's the deal here?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Well, Mr. Chairman, it's very difficult for me to fully appreciate what this member is getting at. I don't want to put words into his mouth, but what he's really telling me, what I'm hearing, is to start overriding locally made decisions. "Never mind the school board and the trustees. You are the boss of education. You step in, and you right the wrongs if you perceive something to be wrong." It's not blaming. It's not setting up school boards for failure. They are capable politicians that have been elected as trustees, and their electorate expects them to have the autonomy that the act allows for. I think you would hear a great deal of discontent from Albertans if the Minister of Education would override locally made decisions simply because it doesn't meet the minister's priorities or the ministry's priorities.

The member keeps talking about the number of teachers. Is there an adequate number of teachers? Well, let me tell you, hon. member, in the entire system how many teachers there are. Again, from school board to school board those numbers may vary because local school boards will have made different decisions. Our class size guidelines: for K to 3 the guideline is at 17 students in a classroom. We are now on average at 19. For grades 4 to 6 the guideline is 23 students. We are now actually below that, at 22. For grades 6 to 9 the guideline is 25, and we're below that. We're at 23. For grades 10 to 12 the guideline is at 27, and we are now at 22. Frankly, when you look at it, there are enough teachers in the system, but how individual school boards decide to allocate staffing is an individual decision. Now, do I have the opportunity to perhaps override their decisions? Maybe, but the fact is that that is why we elect local trustees.

Now, relative to school fees – the member knows because I've spoken publicly on it – I personally am not very comfortable in a public system with parents receiving excessive bills, particularly for items that perhaps we will be voting on today that should be

paid for under the provisions of Albertans' public purse. So I have asked my department to contact all school boards and receive itemized lists of what it is that school fees are being charged for. If we find that there is an issue where in some instances perhaps parents are being charged for items or programs or for certain provisions that are already included under public funding, we will be acting accordingly. I will be looking at some form of synchronizing what is allowable and what isn't allowable, and if you choose to discuss that with me at a future date, we will be looking at it.

The fact is that there are situations where school fees are appropriate when a child is provided with over-and-above services that are simply not included under the provisions of public education or with certain transportation to a program of choice where other programs are available in the neighbourhood or in a nearby school – those are justifiable – or for lunch programs that students may be provided with, and the list goes on and on. We will be looking at whether there is any double-charging, where the taxpayer pays for a certain program and then a parent pays again. We will be rationalizing them if there indeed is a problem.

Mr. Hehr: That's a good start, but I think it's also incumbent to realize that some of these charges that are going for core things that we believe should be taught in the education system are not simply a matter of you having allocated the dollars and the dollars not being adequately allotted by school boards. It may actually be a funding issue from this government. So I point out that that may be an issue.

If we get back to also the school fees – it was important enough for the Premier to talk about them in her leadership race, and it was important enough for you to address it in the *Calgary Herald* – do you think these will be resolved this upcoming school year?

3:40

Mr. Lukaszuk: Which?

Mr. Hehr: The school fees and your analysis of what is being charged.

Mr. Lukaszuk: I certainly hope so. We are now in contact with school boards, and we will be reviewing school fee practices and making a determination on what is and what isn't appropriate. I'm not suggesting that there are fees charged right now that aren't, nor am I confirming that all of them are. I simply haven't had a chance to make a judgment on this as I haven't yet seen the breakdown of school fees. But if indeed I find that there are fees that are inappropriate – and I'm underscoring: if I find that they are – then indeed we will do our best to make sure that those inappropriate fees are removed by September 2012.

I would also like to go back to the preamble of the comment that the member made, insinuating that simply the total of the budget may be inadequate; that is, the \$6.8 billion, growing to \$7.1 billion over the next three years. Well, Mr. Chairman, I have to tell you a few interesting comments. Actually, you know, the chairman of the Treasury Board is over here, and he can confirm these numbers. Over the last 10 years the student population in this province has grown by 3 per cent. Over the last 10 years, the very same 10 years, the teacher population has grown by 12 per cent. Quite reasonable because we've been looking at classroom sizes and all that. Funding for Alberta Education over the last 10 years has grown by 71.6 per cent. Mind you, it's not adjusted for inflation, but even if you were to adjust it for inflation, I have to tell you that Albertans make education their priority. Their investment in education has been phenomenal over the last 10

years, particularly in this budget and for the next three years. So the question is whether there indeed is enough funding.

You know, the hon. member's leader, from the Liberal Party, and I were having a very interesting discourse over Twitter over the last few weeks. As I'm listening to question period and questions posed by the Liberal opposition, frankly by many members of the opposition, to individual ministers, today we were going to build additional nursing facilities for every senior that needs one, we were going to hire a lot of doctors and pay them what they want because, apparently, they have ads in the *Calgary Herald*, municipalities are going to get more than the unprecedented amount of money that they get under MSI, and now this budget is not enough. I have a simple question to the leader of the Liberal opposition. What is your prediction for the oil price for the next year or three years? It must be somewhere around \$300 per barrel if you're really planning on delivering everything that you're saying now, pre-election, that you would do.

Going back to the Education budget, Mr. Chairman, the increase from \$6.8 billion to \$7.1 billion, with the predictability built in, is a phenomenal investment in education. Now what we have to do as members of the opposition and definitely me as minister and my colleagues is to make sure that that money is spent in such a way that as much of it ends up in the classroom and that children benefit from those dollars as much as possible.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you.

Hon. member, just a reminder that there are about 23 minutes left in this particular exchange.

Mr. Hehr: I thank the minister for his comments. You know, I think that's part of this, to put the comment back on his comments, which are related to educational budgeting but, I think, also more to his government's budgeting on the whole. Part of having predictable, sustainable funding is not having to rely on oil and gas revenues to fund every last thing that comes up from the purse. I don't know if the minister was in the House, but I did a parable of the family farm, where we say that right now we're relying on fossil fuel resources to pay today's bills, which is akin to a family farmer selling off a piece of land to pay his bills. Eventually it's unsustainable. We should be asking the citizenry to actually pay for things like public education, public roads, and the like. That would allow us to have predictable and sustainable funding in order that you don't have to jump up and down and cut things and start things.

Why we have a fiscal sustainability deficit of \$11 billion that we spend on oil and gas revenues every year to fund daily operations is beyond me. Why we tax people \$11 billion less than B.C. is beyond me given that we are putting future generations at peril by not saving and by not having consistent, predictable, sustainable funding.

I hear the minister's comments, but I think it would behoove this government to ask people to pay for the public services that they use. I think that is a much more conservative principle than blowing every last dime that comes into the public purse.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Perhaps we're straying a little bit from the Education budget, but I think this government has tabled, not only for the Ministry of Education but all ministries in this House, a very responsible budget based on very small "c" conservative revenue predictions to make sure that we don't overpromise and underdeliver, which I'm hearing a lot of on the other side. The fact is that this government has been loud and clear that we don't need to dig deeper into Albertans' personal pockets and tax them more to deliver adequate services in this province. The fact is that we have a sustainable financial plan that is based on taxation.

Let's be honest over here, Mr. Chairman. The majority of our taxation comes from small business. The reason we have such a vibrant small-business community in this province and the reason why we have attracted 128,000 new Albertans last year is not because we're increasing taxes. British Columbia is not attracting those numbers. There's a reason why, actually, British Columbians are moving to Alberta. It's because we have a friendly business environment. It's because we have an environment where Albertans can actually have a job, and they can work hard, and they can keep most of their paycheque in their pocket and while doing so still receive one of the best education systems in the world, always within the top four in the world.

I'll leave the Liberals to themselves and let them devise their own numbers. It's obvious and clear that they would have to probably increase taxation by some \$5 billion or \$6 billion just based on what I'm hearing in question period that they would deliver over the next year or two. I'm not sure if we would have to worry about building more schools, Mr. Chairman. Maybe that's the method to the madness: increase taxes so high that Albertans will move out to other provinces, and you don't have to worry about building schools. Well, it may be worth considering but not by this government at this time.

Mr. Hehr: I hear the hon. member saying that people are coming here from B.C. for the low tax regime. It would behoove the hon. member to know that we have 97 per cent of Canada's oil resources located right here in Alberta, with many projects going ahead up there in Fort McMurray and the like. So I think it's ridiculous, his assumption that they're moving here for low taxes. They're moving here for jobs, and they'd be willing to pay, actually, for schools in their neighbourhoods.

You know, there was a day and age in this province when, if a neighbourhood needed a school, we built it. We didn't look at oil revenues and the like. We could get into the thick of things, but I think your hon. Premier actually recognized that in her throne speech. After this election, when you're done with the bluster, we're hopefully going to return to a day when we'll actually get to financial accountability, when people pay for what they use. I think the minister would agree that paying for what society uses would be much more practical than using other people's money, future generations' money, by blowing it all at once, okay?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Well, Mr. Chairman, you know, you can paraphrase what the member is actually saying in a more colloquial term. He's saying that Albertans are freeloaders, that they are receiving services that they don't pay for. I would disagree with you. They are not freeloading. New Albertans are coming to this province and long-term Albertans are in this province – why? – well, because there are jobs available. Yes, it's based on natural resources, but those natural resources were in the ground for thousands of years. Our province next door actually had almost the same quantity of natural resources as the province of Alberta. It took a new government a few years ago to revive Saskatchewan and give it an opportunity, where they're actually starting to get investment from outside. They have for the first time in decades positive population growth in that province, and the economy is starting to chug along to where we were as Albertans for a number of years.

So, no, I don't believe that Albertans are freeloading. Albertans are investing in what is important to them. They're investing in education, and they're paying taxes at a rate that is competitive. By doing so, they enjoy a much higher quality of life than they would anywhere else. That's one of our advantages, and this government will maintain it.

3:50

Now, Mr. Chairman, this member is trying to read between the lines, but the fact is that, no, there is no plan to increase taxes by this Premier or this government. As a matter of fact, every minister on this front bench has signed a three-year business plan, and that's what we will be voting on right here, a three-year plan. This combined business plan of all the ministries will not require and will not be calling for any increases in taxes. So as much as the Liberal opposition wants to increase taxes by some probably \$4 billion to \$6 billion, and they feel that Albertans are freeloaders and that it's time that they start paying for what they receive, I will say that there is significant investment . . .

Mr. Hehr: Point of order.

The Deputy Chair: I hesitate to interrupt the hon. Minister of Education, but the Member for Calgary-Buffalo has a point of order. What is your citation, please?

Point of Order
Factual Accuracy

Mr. Hehr: The minister has now said twice that I've called Albertans freeloaders.

The Deputy Chair: What is your citation?

Mr. Hehr: *Beauchesne's* 23.

The Deputy Chair: Standing Orders 23(h), (i), and (j)? Is that what I hear you saying?

Mr. Hehr: Yes.

The Deputy Chair: Proceed.

Mr. Hehr: Clearly, I've never said that Albertans are freeloaders. I've never once said that. What I'm talking about is our tax system and our ability to provide predictable, sustainable funding to things like education and the like. At no time did I say that Albertans were freeloaders.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you. I don't recall you having said that either, hon. member. I've noted here with Parliamentary Counsel the decorum in the House to this point, and I would ask that we continue on that vein and ask the Minister of Education to please clarify his remarks and we'll move on.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Well, of course, Mr. Chairman. That's why I was very careful to say – I never said that the member said that. I'm very careful, and check the *Hansard* if you wish. I said: to paraphrase what the member has said and to use more colloquial terms, Albertans are freeloaders. I would never insinuate that he has actually said it. I'm just paraphrasing what I'm hearing into a different language.

What the member is saying is that Albertans are receiving benefits for which they are not paying.

The Deputy Chair: So, hon. members, we've had some clarification here on this matter. Whether you're quoting someone or paraphrasing someone, let's be careful to keep the debate at the high level. Let's carry on.

Hon. Minister of Education, you did have the floor at the time of the point of order, so if you want to conclude that point, we'll get back to the hon. member and continue debate.

Debate Continued

Mr. Lukaszuk: Thank you very kindly. Mr. Chair, to conclude my answers, I believe that Albertans are investing in education at a very appreciable rate. I believe that there probably aren't any jurisdictions in Canada other than the Northwest Territories that invest more in children and education on a per capita basis, and the Northwest Territories is obviously because of the sparsity and lack of critical masses that they have. I believe that this budget is definitely reflective not only of Albertans' priority in education but this government's priority in education.

Mr. Hehr: Well, continuing on this point of predictable and sustainable funding for education, I think the minister will admit that there have been fits and starts over the last 20 years in terms of hiring teachers, laying off teachers, and the like not only in his department but everything else. The evidence stands clear. We spent \$250 billion in petroleum revenues over the last 25 years and have not saved a dime. Some of that has come from going to a flat tax, which is not a fair taxation system, that does not allow for our wealthy to pay more into the public purse to ensure that there's predictable, sustainable funding and ensure that some equality of opportunity exists.

Would you not agree that going back to a progressive income tax system would allow us to have more predictable, sustainable funding?

The Deputy Chair: Education is what you're talking about. Is that correct?

Mr. Hehr: Yes.

The Deputy Chair: Because we are debating the estimates of Education.

Mr. Hehr: I know.

The Deputy Chair: Please always tie your comments in with Education, and then we won't have any relevance points.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Well, I was just wondering if the hon. member wants me to defend the estimates for the ministries of Finance or Treasury Board, which I'm quite prepared to do if he wants me to do so. But I will try to tie it into Education.

Mr. Chairman, as I indicated earlier, the numbers simply don't add up. I told you what the population increase of students and teachers was vis-à-vis the 71.6 per cent increase in education funding, obviously showing significant year-to-year increases in funding for the Ministry of Education, being the children in the classrooms.

The member brings up a very valid point. He talks about the fluctuation in funding and the lack of predictability. That was one of the problems that educators and particularly school boards always struggled with because they never knew how much money they would have beyond this year. It was very difficult for them to plan programs and definitely very difficult for them to make staffing decisions and particularly to extend continuous contracts to teachers not knowing what their financial position would be beyond this fiscal year.

That is why, Mr. Chairman, I'm very proud of this budget. Not only because of the quantity of it but also because of the fact that for the first time in the history of this province and, I believe, unprecedented anywhere in Canada we are providing three-year predictability to school boards, which will now do away with this on and off of hiring, as the member refers to it, or perhaps laying

off of teachers. School boards will be able to make a more meaningful long-term commitment not only to staff but also to programs within their jurisdictions.

Mr. Hehr: And the hon. minister is doing it by spending every last dime of fossil fuel resource that comes into the public purse.

Moving on, let's look at maintenance. Right now the Calgary board of education has reported deferred maintenance bills of over \$800 million; Edmonton public schools, \$242 million. That's a billion dollars. We brought up Grimshaw. Obviously, that adds to the bill. There are a large number of schools that are in need of repair. It looks like in his budget – and again it's looking at a line item – there is no funding increase for repairing or maintaining schools. How does the minister expect this backlog ever to be rectified?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Well, \$482 million has been added to operations, Mr. Chairman, so that is not entirely correct. Also, the fact is that, yes, I have been the first one to say that in this province, and not only in this province, frankly, in every growing jurisdiction, one of the problems that comes along with success is the fact that you have a population that not only grows significantly; you have a province that attracts young families over here, workers with families. Unfortunately, none of them bring their schools with them. Also, what you have is migration of population to centres where the economy attracts families. You end up with the net consequence of having schools, as I said earlier, where you don't have kids and having kids where you don't have schools.

Mr. Chairman, I am very cognizant of the fact that there are very significant pressures in some jurisdictions requiring new schools, where all the schools in the jurisdiction are at their capacity. The chairman of the Treasury Board and myself and the Minister of Infrastructure are working right now, as we're speaking, on means by which we will be able to build more schools in this province to meet those critical demands because to continue providing this high level of internationally renowned education, we also need facilities that are reflective of the excellence that happens in the classroom.

Having said that, we also have a certain contingent of aging infrastructure, and because the pressure was always to build more schools, sometimes the priorities were more to just provide space to children than perhaps to retrofit existing buildings. So what we will be doing as part of our plan is looking at the state of infrastructure overall in the province of Alberta relevant to schools and looking at where some of the schools can be rationalized. You know, the cost of retrofitting an old building often is very close to building a new school, and in certain parts of the province you will have a large pool of aging buildings that, in order for them to stay and remain as schools, would have to be retrofitted. Often, there may be a good not only financial argument but educational argument to perhaps do away with some of those buildings and build one new school somewhere in the centre of the older facilities. Those are the types of analyses that we're doing right now.

The Grimshaw situation – if you want to delve into it, I gladly will – is a unique circumstance, but I think it's a circumstance that presents itself to us as a learning model because here we have a school that was built in three stages. I'm not sure if it's the only one of such type or if there are many others throughout the province; it's something we're looking at right now. The oldest part is about 50 years old, and the newest part, I believe, is less than 20 years old, yet the entire building is in a state of disrepair.

I want to find out – and we have instigated research into that – whether our schools initially, at least during that time period, were

built to such engineering standards that they were to last longer than this, because I think that the taxpayers of Alberta expect their buildings to last longer than 20 years or even longer than 50 years, and also look at maintenance protocols for schools in Alberta to make sure that we allow those schools to remain functional for as long as possible.

4:00

You know, there are schools in Alberta that are much older than 50 years, and when you actually walk into those buildings, they're a pleasure to look at. They're properly restored, retrofitted, and even though the architecture very much resembles the time during which they were built, they are very functional, esthetically pleasing, and definitely functional buildings, so something to learn from. We will be looking at this, and we will be sharing what we have learned from this particular circumstance with the House in due course.

In the meantime my priority is the children. I want to make sure that children are not only in safe buildings – obviously, safe buildings – but also in buildings that are conducive to education.

Mr. Hehr: Now, obviously, I don't want to prejudice your negotiations with the ATA. I realize they're difficult. Coming to an exact number is awfully difficult, and I understand that. Nevertheless, you've budgeted 1 per cent, I believe, for salary increases. The contract comes up in September of this year, and the school boards are going to be on the hook for whatever deal you sign. Are there plans in place, if the 1 per cent doesn't come in, to get that additional funding to school boards to recognize whatever deal this provincial government comes to?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Well, Mr. Chairman, I have to be very cautious when discussing this particular topic because, indeed, as the member indicated, I do not want to prejudice the outcome of negotiations. The fact is that what will happen – let me retract a little. My communication has been very clear for a number of months. When I say something, I mean it. My encouragement, then, to government negotiators but also school board negotiators and ATA negotiators was to hammer out a deal before the budget was tabled because that would inform the process of the budget.

What needs to be said here, Mr. Chairman, to put things in perspective, is that over the last 10 years I was giving you the numbers of 3 per cent for students, 12 and 71. Ten years ago the split between all salaries in the system and the actual provision of education was 60-40. Sixty per cent was salaries and benefits; 40 per cent was programming and operations. Now we're at an 80-20 split. Eighty per cent is salaries; 20 per cent is provision of services. When one is crafting a budget for a ministry of \$6.8 billion, it would have been good to know what that 80 per cent of that \$6.8 billion or so would be. It would definitely inform the crafting of the budget.

Unfortunately, a deal was not reached at that particular time, so I did not have the benefit of knowing what the numbers would have been in crafting the budget. I have asked the ministry to do an analysis of trends throughout the country of a variety of indicators, and numbers had to be put into the budget because at the end of the day the budget had to be tabled. The numbers that have been put into the budget right now, without the benefit of having a deal ahead of the budget, are 1 per cent, 2 per cent, and 2 per cent, and not necessarily all of that is for salaries.

I still expect that we will negotiate a good deal. I know that I have well-intentioned partners around the table. I don't question the good intentions of the school boards, the ATA, and definitely my ministry, who's there sitting at the table representing the best

interests of the kids. I have full confidence that a deal can be reached that will benefit children at the end of the day.

Mr. Chairman, one thing needs to be highlighted. The last four and a half years of the long-term agreement that was reached four and a half years ago were probably the best four and a half years in Alberta education since past my memory. For the first time in a long time as partners in education we were able to talk about just that, education, and what's important for children: curriculum, pedagogy, and all that. We were not distracted by labour disputes.

I'm hoping that we will be able to reach this agreement. I'm having very good meetings and constructive meetings with the ATA, with school board associations, and with individual school boards. From time to time we will agree to disagree, but one thing, Mr. Chairman, that is unquestionable in my mind is that all of those individuals around the table are focused on what's good for the kids, and when you have that underpinning, I think a deal can be reached.

Mr. Hehr: Well, I think that goes without saying, you know, that everyone wants the best for our kids. It's nice and refreshing to hear you say that, but it doesn't mean a lot.

Nevertheless, let's look at sort of the numbers you quoted, that 80 per cent of the budget is going to teachers' salaries. I would note that the ATA does take some issue with those numbers. You may have read their report on that, where it says that it's closer to 65 per cent. Some districts say that it's as low as 52 per cent of money that actually goes to teachers' salaries. Maybe the minister would like to clarify those statements as to whether he actually believes that 80 per cent of it is going to salaries.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Well, I actually quite strongly believe that what is best for the kids matters, and it matters a lot. I think that is something that should be preoccupying all of us no matter whether we're discussing money or policies.

The fact is that what the member is stating doesn't pertain to all teachers' salaries. The simple fact is this. Our teachers in Alberta are doing a phenomenal job in the classroom, and that is shown in the outcomes that we have vis-à-vis the performance of our system as compared to other systems. They are also very handsomely remunerated compared to any other jurisdiction in the country of Canada. Yes, they need to be remunerated to reflect the quality of work that they do.

School boards have a task of running a very complex education system that has pressures from time to time, and so does this ministry. But at the end of the day, because it matters, Mr. Chairman, what is best for our kids, I know we have the resources in this budget and I know that we have a basis of salaries which teachers are being paid right now and the goodwill of the school boards that will allow us to reach a deal within the parameters as set out.

Mr. Hehr: I think I'll talk to some of the minister's comments there. Sometimes things cost more in Alberta for a reason. We're competing against an oil and gas sector that reimburses employees relatively well. I don't begrudge those people at all, but it drives up salaries and drives up costs in his ministry and other ministries that are sort of just one of the good fortunes of being an Albertan. I do know that. So I recognize that cost structure and why it's there, and I don't fault the government. It's just the nature of being in Alberta and running a department in Alberta.

I do take some umbrage when the minister sets up an equation where he says that 80 per cent . . .

The Deputy Chair: Thank you very much. The chair enjoyed listening to that first hour of debate, and hopefully it will continue in an enjoyable fashion.

We will now move to the next section. The next section will be with the member for the Wildrose, and that would be Airdrie-Chestermere. You have 20 minutes with the minister. Decide how you want to use it.

Mr. Anderson: If you'd like, we could go back and forth, Minister. It doesn't matter.

The Deputy Chair: There seems to be agreement. Proceed.

Mr. Anderson: Okay. Obviously, we don't have a lot of time. We only have 20 minutes, so we'll get right into it. I want to ask questions of you today, Minister, on this priority list. Now, you said something very interesting yesterday in question period, and I was excited to hear it. When I asked about the need for a priority list for new school infrastructure, a publicly listed priority list that put out from highest priority to lowest priority all the different new schools, infrastructure upgrades, all that sort of thing, you seemed to indicate yesterday in question period that you were arranging to do that or that you were in the process of doing that. I just was wondering if you could update me on that. I'd be very excited to know.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Well, Mr. Chairman, a topic definitely worth discussing because this particular member has been insinuating in question period and outside of this House that this government has a secret list. Well, this list must be so secret that even I don't know about it, but oddly enough this member does. I think I have figured out what that secret list is, and I am making an undertaking – and it's the same undertaking that I made in question period – that within probably the next couple of months I will be releasing the secret list of infrastructure priorities throughout the entire province.

4:10

The reason, Mr. Chairman, that I will be able to release that secret list is because all of the school boards in the province of Alberta will be presenting me with their individual capital plans that will be listing their priorities for (a) construction of new schools, (b) renovation of existing schools, and (c) attaching portables to existing schools. As those are accumulated, I will be making them available, and the member will be able to see what each school board's priority is for new infrastructure.

Now, the member knows very well that with the current funding model and in order to not be criticized for deficit spending and going into debt, there are only so many schools this government and Albertans can build paying cash up front. What happens is that, obviously, not every school board's number one priority can be built because there would be 62 schools just for the public and Catholic school boards, not including francophone and others. So, obviously, some prioritizing has to take place. In the prioritizing, Mr. Chairman, first we look at the safety of existing buildings. Are there any buildings that are simply unsafe, that need to be either repaired or, often, replaced? Then we simply look at the numbers.

[Dr. Brown in the chair]

I'll give you an example. In Fort McMurray there is a school right now that, I believe, has somewhere between 23 to 27 portables attached to it. There are more children in portables than there are actually in the school itself. Well, some would say that these portables are actually not bad, that they're very nice classrooms. The problem is that the core of the building can't handle that many students. You are running out of bathrooms, you are running out of space for parents and buses to pull up, your

staff room or the library is not designed for that many, and the list goes on and on.

So when all those capital plans come in, you look at the priorities. Since school boards change their priorities every year because their pressures change as well, there is reprioritizing every year. I have to assure you, Mr. Chairman, that those decisions are difficult because you wish you could actually build every school. That is why the chairman of the Treasury Board and I are looking at the possibility of finding different vehicles by which we can finance schools so that we can build all those schools that they need. Frankly, those decisions are very objective. I wish I could build more schools.

That is the secret list. It's composed of 62 capital plans, which the minister has to look at every year de novo because their priorities change and decide who gets a school and who doesn't, a difficult decision to make because I don't question any school board's sincerity or any school board's need. They actually need those schools, but there are financial limitations on how many we can build.

The Acting Chair: The hon. member.

Mr. Anderson: Thank you. Okay. Let me see if I understand this. As you pointed out clearly, the boards every year set their priorities, and they submit those priorities to you, right? I'm not talking about that list. I understand that every board across the province says: "These are our top five, 10, 20 schools, whatever it is. These are our top maintenance needs, et cetera."

They send you all of their lists, and then you've got these 62 lists – I'm not saying that you keep those lists secret. That's not the list I'm referring to. But at some point you have got to take the \$300 million or \$400 million or whatever you budget for new schools and upgrades and you have to apply it to those 62 lists that you got from the boards. So at some point you have to make a decision: "We're going to give Calgary Catholic X amount, we're going to give Edmonton public X amount, we're going to give Rocky View X amount, Fort McMurray, whatever." That's the list I'm talking about.

Once you get these 62 priority lists, then you have to say, "Okay; everyone has got their priorities; we can't fund everything," like you absolutely correctly stated. How do you go and say: "Look, we're going to put the three top priorities of Fort McMurray here. The five top priorities of Edmonton are going to go here"? How do you make the decision? How do you take those 62 priority lists that you get from the boards and then condense it into: "Okay; as we see it as a province, these are the top priorities, one to 1,000, of school needs in this province"?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Well, Mr. Chairman, we cannot make such a list. That's why the secret list, by virtue of the fact that it would be impossible to compose, doesn't exist. Every year every school board sends its capital plan with its priorities, and every year individual school boards' priorities change. What a school board wanted as their number 1 priority this year may be their number 3 priority next year, and they bumped up another one or perhaps even created a new school that they needed in a new subdivision or a new neighbourhood. So there is no such list because it changes every year.

What the Minister of Education has to do is take every year's capital plans from all of the school boards, look at their priorities, and then decide what from this year's capital plans as accumulated will be funded. The criteria that are being used are that, number one, you look at enrolment numbers, current and projected enrolment numbers. Second, you look at existing capacity within

the district and within a reasonable geographic area where kids can be transported to schools. And last, but not least, you look at health and safety, whether the current buildings the school has, even though we may have capacity, are healthy work environments for teachers and learning environments for students and whether there are any safety issues.

Those decisions are made annually de novo from a new set of sublists that are provided by school boards. I wasn't being facetious when I was answering the member's question in question period. Having a rally and bringing parents from Airdrie onto the front stairs of the Legislature to communicate to the minister that we need a school – I don't question the fact that Airdrie needs schools. It need schools badly. But rallying will not change the decision because the decisions are objective and not subjective and are not subject to political pressures.

What we need right now, Mr. Chairman, is actually some co-operation from the opposition to work with government in finding new funding mechanisms because right now we're paying for every school with cash up front. For me to build another school in Airdrie – although Airdrie is, I believe, getting three over the next year or so – I actually have to find the dollars in this year's budget. I estimate I will need 400 new schools over the next 10 years. I will never reach that number paying cash up front for every school. Obviously, we need some alternative financing methods to be able to build the schools that the school boards need so badly and to provide to those schools on objective terms.

Mr. Anderson: Well, thank you for the explanation. I guess I don't think it is impossible to create this list that we're talking about. I mean, this is pretty basic. You would have to update it. You would have to update it every year, for sure, based on the input that you got. But, I mean, any corporation, any business that runs has to update their budgets quarterly, even monthly. So if you're getting these once a year, all you would do is just simply re-input that information into whatever criteria you use to arrive at what your final priority list is for that year.

The point is that you would be able to see from year to year if there was inconsistency. So, for example, if Rocky View has – well, let's use a different example. Let's say that Calgary public has the top two priorities on your new schools priority list. Number 1, number 2. Then all of a sudden, magically, they resubmit their priority list the next year, and these two schools are still their top two priorities, but on your list they go down to number 5 and number 6 or number 10 or number 11. All of a sudden they're not a priority for the provincial government anymore.

There would have to be an objective reason for that happening. That might be the case. There might be nine new schools that became more of a priority than those two, but at least we would have some objective criteria that we could look at and say that the reason the government has moved them down, the reason they're not in the top 10, the reason that, say, Airdrie doesn't get a fourth school in the next five years or something like that, if that's what happens – there's an objective reason for it. It's because their student-to-school ratio isn't as bad as, say, in Fort McMurray or Beaumont or Edmonton or wherever. The point is that we'd be able to see that. We'd be able to see the criteria, and we would be able to see if the schools are being moved around on the list based on politics rather than on criteria.

I want to believe you. Trust me. I want to believe that these schools are handed out completely based on objective criteria. So just make it easier for all of us in the Assembly by posting the objective criteria, the formula, et cetera, and then have the list adjusted every year, year to year. That transparency will give

parents, I think, a great deal of confidence in your government with regard to knowing that you're not using education as a political football. I'm not saying that you are. I'm just saying that the transparency will help with that.

4:20

Mr. Lukaszuk: Well, Mr. Chairman, we're getting somewhere because we started with an insinuation over the last few days that this government has a secret list, and now we're at a point where the member is stating that it is possible to create a list. So at least I'm absolved of the fact that I don't have a secret list, which is good. That's good. That's progress.

I agree that the funding of schools should not be political football. It never has been, and it won't be with this government. The only reason there are political-in-nature discussions about building schools is because – the member brings it up. Frankly, I have listed the objective criteria. So perhaps it's worth writing down, or maybe I should post it on our website. The objective criteria are: enrolment numbers in the jurisdiction and projections of enrolment, existing capacity within the school district and within reasonable distance geographically, health and safety in existing buildings and, obviously, the physical condition of the existing building.

It is not as simple, Mr. Chairman, as to just adjust numbers and adjust buildings from year to year and have a consistent list and have things bumped up and bumped down. It wouldn't give the viewer of such a list, if such a list existed, any predictability because the changes are drastic. Let me give you the example of a local district here in Edmonton since we happen to be here in Edmonton. One of the school boards, for example, has decided to close a school, a very large school, which would significantly impact their enrolment rates and capacity. They had the school slated for closure. As a matter of fact, if they sold the school or if they turned the land over to the city, that would actually even realize income for the system. But for one reason or another – I'm not questioning the reasons – the school board decided to keep that school. So that sends a chain reaction through the entire system of what their priorities will be when the system bumps a whole bunch of schools from one place to another.

Even further, now that they've decided to keep this enormous school open – and it's a very old school – they will be sending, probably in the next capital plan that will be coming over the next couple of months, an amazingly large bill to the government of Alberta to retrofit that school, which will probably be the equivalent of building two elementary schools anywhere else in the province. So that's how fluid the situation is in the system. Even though one may want to insinuate, for a secondary gain, that there are politics played with it, the fact is that, no, the situation is that fluid that school boards make autonomous decisions.

Now, in Airdrie the situation is rather simple. Airdrie needs schools. They don't need to close schools. They won't be thinking about closing schools for decades. They just need more schools, and they need more schools fast. So their number one priority can remain their number one priority for two or three years, although the community grows so fast that another school may become the priority.

In areas where there actually are surplus buildings, in areas where you have schools where you don't have kids and you have kids where you don't have schools and you have older buildings, school boards are making decisions on an ongoing basis. Today I was speaking with a chairman of a board who is going through a consultation on closing one school, moving the population from that school to another, and then unloading another. That's how fluid the situation is.

I'm glad the member acknowledges finally that there is no secret list. He still believes that one could actually compose such lists, and we do every year de novo, and every year that list will continue to change.

Mr. Anderson: I guess you publish the list of schools that you're going to build that year, obviously, but you don't publish what is coming after. If you did, then after those first schools in the queue got out, we would be able to see whether there was political manipulation going on after that. Those schools would necessarily probably be near the top the next year, and if they weren't, there would have to be a reason, which we would know because there would be objective criteria. I'm not just talking about – you listed some criteria. That's great. But I'm talking about actual numbers here, an actual formula. I'm not talking about safety. That's great. That's a great consideration. What in safety? How do you weight the system? How do you weight safety compared to student population? All of those things, a very simple, independent formula so that we can see it.

With regard to your note that schools have never been handed out politically, that's where I disagree with you. I don't say that you've done it politically, and I'm not even going to say that your predecessor did it either. But when I was still a member of your government, I had a sit-down with the executive assistant to the Minister of Education and was told flat out that the reason – I came to him before the 2008 election with numbers that showed the growth in cities like Airdrie and Calgary and Edmonton and so forth. If you looked at the way they were handed out, a public school board, for example, that had actually declined in enrolment over the last five years got the same amount of schools as a public board in another city of relatively the same population that had increased significantly in student population. They got the exact same number of schools. I asked the executive assistant after showing him the Airdrie numbers, which was one school in the last 10 years despite doubling in population: "How do you explain this? What's the deal here?" He said, "Well, they were political reasons." Those were his words, not mine. You know, maybe he was lying to me. I don't know. But that's what I was told, and the numbers backed it up.

Now, that was not a decision made by the previous Education minister nor by you. But there's no doubt in my mind that that 2008 announcement of schools was not apportioned based on some formula; in fact, it was apportioned based on politics. Edmonton got the same as Calgary. Regardless of what the student populations were and what the growth patterns were, they got the same amount because, God forbid, we wouldn't want to actually do it by formula because maybe Calgary would gain a couple of schools more than Edmonton would, and then – who knows? – there'd be a political price to pay. That's wrong. That's an example, one of many, where politics has been played with regard to schools.

Now, I'm not saying that I'm going to stand here, Minister, and say that this community – you know, Airdrie-Chestermere needs more schools, but I know that there are other needs around. I'm just one MLA advocating for my constituency. What would make it easier for all the MLAs in this Assembly would be if you would, like I say, publish every year after you get the 62 board priority lists, 1 through 500, whatever, just prioritize every single one of those on your master list, publish it publicly every year. On your master list this is 1 through 1,000 of what our priorities are for new schools and schools maintenance. We're going to fund these top 30 because that's the money we have. You take those out, you fund them, and then we can all look at it and see very transparently what should be there for next year subject to changes

that will occur. I understand that. Why couldn't you publish not just what you're building that year but what the priority would've been had you had more money going forward? Would you be willing to do that?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Well, Mr. Chairman, what the member is in essence asking me to do is to produce a list of schools that we didn't build. I think the parents in jurisdictions where they didn't receive a school and have a gaping hole on land with no school on it are pretty well aware of the fact that they didn't get a school. I don't think I have to produce a list to confirm for them that they didn't get a school.

The Acting Chair: Hon. minister, the time has expired. Thank you very much.

Hon. members, may we revert briefly to Introduction of Guests?

[Unanimous consent granted]

Introduction of Guests (reversion)

The Acting Chair: The hon. Member for Lesser Slave Lake.

Ms Calahasen: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. I had the great pleasure of joining some of my constituents in a meeting with the Minister of Intergovernmental, International and Aboriginal Relations and the Minister of Sustainable Resource Development this afternoon to discuss some very crucial issues regarding traplines. They are members of the Driftpile First Nation trapline holders. I'd ask them to stand as I introduce them: President Raymond Giroux, Vice-President Earl Giroux, Director Bernard Giroux, and, of course, Lawrence Willier, Denise Giroux, George Giroux, and Perline Schaseas. Also with them is their secretary, Lana Bellhumer, as well as councillor representatives: from Sucker Creek, Lavern Willier; from Swan River, Kevin Twin; and from Sucker Creek, Russell Willier, who is already standing. These individuals from the Driftpile First Nation trapline holders have come to present their issues to these ministers. I'd ask this Assembly to please give them a huge hand for coming today.

4:30 Main Estimates 2012-13

Education (continued)

The Acting Chair: Hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona, do you care to combine your time, then, with the minister?

Ms Notley: Yes, I do. As the previous speaker noted, we have a very, very short period of time.

The chair that's in the chair now was not there previously, but to refer back to my previous point of order – I didn't have it in front of me – it was 23(b)(i), that a member would be called to order if they were speaking to matters other than the question under discussion. That was what I was referring to at the time. It seems to have improved somewhat in terms of the specificity, so I'm hoping that we'll get some pointed back and forth specifically answering the questions I'm asking because, as I say, I don't have a great deal of time.

[Mr. Zwozdesky in the chair]

I'm going to focus in on issues around special-needs education because we haven't had a chance yet to talk about that in a great deal of detail. My understanding is that there was a \$68 million increase to special-needs funding this year, and I believe that brings the total amount dedicated to special-needs funding to

roughly \$370 million. I'd like to start by just pointing out that it was a little bit frustrating that my office tried to get the specific number dedicated to special-needs funding, and it took them two and a half weeks to get that answer out of the Ministry of Education. To me, that should be a separate line item, and the fact that it's not a separate line item is really a problem.

Having said that, we're at \$68 million this year. I assume – and I'm hoping the minister will correct me if I am incorrect – that that \$68 million is in addition to the \$12 million that happened last year and that the combined \$68 million and \$12 million is now \$80 million, that is dedicated to the process of implementing setting the direction or inclusive education or whatever it's being called right now. So my first question is: is that the case?

My second question is: out of the remaining pot of money that is dedicated towards special-needs education, could you break down for me the amount that is spent on those special-needs children who are coded as severe, so the amount that the ministry transfers to the school boards collectively on a province-wide basis for those who are coded as severe out of the remaining \$370 million, and then also whether or not the moderate and mildly disabled students and/or the ESL students are also included in that \$370 million figure? If so, if you could just advise me specifically what their breakdown is in terms of the line item. I'll just start with that question.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. First of all, I must take umbrage with the member's suggestions that I wasn't staying on the topic.

An Hon. Member: Umbrage?

Mr. Lukaszuk: I love that word. Isn't that a great word, umbrage?

I thought and I continue to think that I have been on the topic throughout my entire discussion, but I guess it's for her to judge.

A couple of things, Mr. Chairman. If the member wanted to find out what allocation for special education was given to school boards and how the money was divided, it was very simple to do because, actually, on the day of the budget, the moment money was wired to school boards, we posted that detailed information on our website. It is available. It has been up since budget day. So I would strongly encourage that the member go to the website. I'm surprised that she's been trying to find that information for two weeks. All she really had to do was get on the Alberta Education website, and that information is very clearly and specifically posted. I have made a commitment to continue posting information in more and more detail so that not only members of the opposition but, frankly, parents and educators can look up the number.

The second reason why I'm very surprised that the member would say that she could not receive an answer on how much was transferred is because we have met. My department and my office staff have met with her staff, and that particular question was never asked by her staff. If she really wanted to know, all they needed to do is ask that question, and they shall receive the answer.

To answer the question more specifically relevant to what the facts are, the member should know – and I think we have briefed her staff on this particular item – the fact that we are actually moving away from coding children. The whole idea is to move away from coding individual children and attaching dollars to particular codes, and there are a number of very good reasons for it. She will be, I'm sure, following this exchange, checking on a computer what the funding is if she isn't right now.

Also, Mr. Chairman, I have to tell you that ESL is over and above. The dollars that she meant for special needs are being combined, so yes, it's \$80 million altogether. ESL, English as a second language, is funded above that as a separate envelope, and it is up 11 per cent – 11 per cent up – to a total of \$83 million per year.

Ms Notley: Okay. Well, first of all, my staff did contact your office. If it was so easy to find, I question why it took them two weeks to give us that information. That's the information that I have. However, that being the case, I'm still looking for the answer from you.

I understand that you are moving away from coding, but I also understand that at this point money is still going to school boards for severely disabled children. I would like the minister to please provide me the answer to the question that I asked. What is the global amount going for children who are severely disabled? What is the global amount going for children who are mildly and moderately disabled? If I could please get that answer, I would really appreciate it.

Mr. Lukaszuk: I won't even comment on the preamble, Mr. Chairman, but one thing I am very proud of is not only the department staff that are here and up in the gallery but also my office staff. If a question is asked, the question will be answered expeditiously. I will be making sure, as I have in this case, that more and more of that information will be on our website so that, frankly, no one needs to ask those questions.

Nonetheless, the manner in which supports, dollars, are being distributed is in a variety of categories. It's under instructional support, assistive technology supports and maintenance, learning coaches, literacy/numeracy support services, community support services, counselling support services, speech language support services, physical therapy support services, occupational therapy support services, mental and other health support services, and vision/hearing support services. Dollars are allocated based on forms of disability and the services required. Overall, Mr. Chairman, the goal of the system is to provide a welcoming, inclusive environment for all children in all schools at any time, making sure that all schools within all school boards can develop the capacity to provide superior services to children with special needs, and that goes away from coding.

Very often we know, actually, that children in socioeconomic strata/neighbourhoods who probably most need the support often don't have the parental and community support that would actually get them coded. Kids who really need financial support and extra help don't have the coding, so the dollars don't reach them, and others could.

A second issue, Mr. Chairman, is that there are many children that have special needs that simply are not coded. For example, exceptionally gifted children pose special needs and special challenges to teachers. This new funding formula will allow us to direct money to all school boards and allow all school boards to develop capacities to deal with needs. Currently the dollars have been distributed as indicated. For more detail I would encourage the member to look at our website.

Ms Notley: Okay. Mr. Chair, it's now eight minutes and 34 seconds, and I've not been able to get the minister to give me the numbers. I don't know if you don't know the numbers or what the problem is, but I'm looking for the numbers.

Now, I would like a yes or a no, if possible, from the minister. Is the coding finished now? The profile that applies to each school board for the number of children coded severe in each school

board: is that profile now abandoned, and is there no more funding in this budget based on the profile that has been in place for at least the five years? Can you tell me: is that profile there, or has it already been abandoned for this budget year? Yes or no?

4:40

Mr. Lukaszuk: This is not a yes-or-no question, so there won't be a yes-or-no answer. If the member actually wants information, I will give her information at length. If she wants a yes-or-no answer, go on our website and get your answer.

The answer is this, Mr. Chairman. Per-pupil funding continues, and we are now migrating to a new funding model. We will be using the higher of the two. School boards will be funded this year, in a transitional year, with the higher funding of the two. I listed the old model of how the dollars were distributed. The new model will be looking at variances in: if a jurisdiction is below average income, percentage of homeowners, mother's average education, percentage of lone-parent families, percentage of non degree/certificate educated parents, low-weight gestation period for the child, FNMI/aboriginal children, refugee, children in care, and distance.

This year, Mr. Chairman, we're using the higher of the two criteria. The member should know how the dollars were divvied up in the past. With the combination of the new criteria, whichever is higher, that's how the school board will be funded. From now on we will be moving into the new criteria, which is much more equitable for all children in the system.

Ms Notley: To clarify, then, based on that criteria, which was going to be my next question, to get those criteria that are in place, I'm still looking for the answer – it's not on your website, by the way – to how much money last year was given for severe special-needs kids. I'm still looking for it. If it's on your website, then I invite you to give me the website address, to send it on over to me, and you can do that. I'm looking for how much money went last year per school board as well as globally out of that \$370 million to severely disabled special-needs kids.

Now, is the minister telling me that in the interests of equity money that was previously going to children who were identified as having severe special needs will now be shared with those students who are actually also experiencing mild or moderate special needs, including low income, low birth weight, those kinds of issues? Is that what the minister is telling me now?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Should I give you a yes-or-no answer? I don't think so. Mr. Chairman, the member seems to be very energetic today, and she wants to get me maybe a little bit more engaged in a bit of a debate, but there is no debate. I will give her answers to her questions. Unfortunately, she's asking very complex questions about a complex system, and there won't be yes-or-no answers.

We're here to discuss this year's budget, but if she wants to look at last year's budget, last year we spent \$270 million. This year we have upped the funding by \$68 million to a new total. From last year the member should know the distribution. She's been in this House for a while. She knows how the \$270 million was distributed. This year we will be looking at whichever is higher. So this additional \$68 million added to the \$270 million will be distributed either by the new formula or the old formula, whichever is more advantageous to the school board. In the following budgets we will be completely switching to the new formula, which will be using exclusively the criteria that I have listed, which is birth weight and many other socioeconomic indicators that allow for school boards to provide inclusion services in all of their schools.

Ms Notley: Thank you. Well, you're starting to get almost close to answering the question.

Last year a portion of that \$270 million, which you talk about, was still going to kids who were profiled with severe special needs, and that money was going to boards based on a profile which had been frozen for the last four years. My question at this point, then, which you didn't answer yet, is: going forward, is that profile now abandoned, and is it the case that the criteria will have the money that was previously specifically directed to severe special needs now be shared with a larger group? I think that's a yes-or-no question at this point. I don't know why the minister is struggling to understand the question so much.

Mr. Lukaszuk: I don't feel like I'm struggling, Mr. Chairman. Do I look like I'm struggling?

Ms Notley: You sound like you're struggling.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Mr. Chairman, I cannot be more clear. Yes, in the past children were funded on a case-by-case basis based on the severity of the disability. This year in this budget children will be funded on a case-by-case basis only if it's advantageous to them in dollars. So if that generates more dollars, then the new formula for that particular child – that's how the child will be funded plus 2 per cent. If the new formula is more advantageous to the child, the child will be receiving the new formula. I don't know how much it will generate, but it will generate more, obviously, because it's advantageous.

The year after this all children will be funded on the new criteria, which, obviously, will continue to be advantageous to those who are on a per-file basis, and it will capture more kids because some kids simply were not coded and now will be able to benefit simply from the fact that they meet the criteria that are set out. That means that they either fall above the standards that are set out to be, quote, unquote, normal or below. So kids who are exceptional and kids who are disadvantaged by their disability or a variety of other factors will receive that extra funding.

Ms Notley: The reason I ask these questions – you know, I'm not trying to be intentionally antagonistic. The fact of the matter is that the only meaningful funding that comes from the ministry for children with disabilities in most cases is the funding that goes towards kids who are coded as severe. The other kids who are not coded as severe, who are acknowledged to have a mild or moderate disability, receive virtually no extra support in the classroom. The only way the parents, the teacher, or the administrator can touch or feel or see that additional support is by having the kids who are coded as severe and then having certain measures in place.

Now, if the money stays the same or about the same and it starts going in different ways, maybe you're making it more equitable, but what you're also going to do is make sure that that severely coded child no longer has an aide. So that's the problem that I'm trying to get at, and I still need to get the answer about how much was spent of that \$270 million last year so that we can track it. That's all I'm looking for because I didn't have it last year.

However, before we get to that, the other question I want to ask before we get to the point that this is over is: the \$68 million plus the \$12 million, the \$80 million, is that dedicated towards bringing into place the setting the directions framework? Is that what it's dedicated towards, or is any of it going directly to school boards for the per capita or per-child or per-profile basis, whatever the rules are, to go directly to fund up front? It appears from your press release that it's going to a sort of bureaucratic retooling to move towards setting the directions.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Mr. Chairman, first of all, relative to the initial comments of the member, the member insinuates that if a child was coded, that child actually receives the benefits of those dollars. Well, that ideally would have been true, but the member as an MLA who deals with parents would have known that that was not always the case. School boards always have had and always will have the ability to reprofile dollars. The fact is that even under the new formula, locally elected trustees will be able to reprofile those dollars as they see fit.

So just because a child was coded with a severe disability and a certain pocket of money was allotted to that particular child, that did not necessarily mean that the child in a tangible sense was receiving additional benefits by way of teaching assistants or aides or others equivalent to that dollar value. Those decisions often were made at a local level, where school board trustees were able to reprofile. That ability to reprofile dollars will remain.

To answer the member's second question, these dollars will be transferred to school boards based on per-child allocations based on the new criteria. Having said that, school boards will continue to have the ability to reprofile the dollars, but all of the dollars are intended to go towards providing additional special-needs services to children.

I believe I've answered the question. I think it's rather simple, but the member appears to be still dissatisfied. Maybe she should ask one more question.

Ms Notley: The fact of the matter is that often it did go to the children, but that's a whole different issue. We can have a discussion. You're right; it was totally up to the school board, and there was a relationship between the school board, the principal, and the parents in that decision. Now that's not there anymore, but that's not the point.

My question now is about the \$68 million. How is that being used? The previous minister said that there would be a rollout of a framework and an accountability guideline and a structure for how that money is going to be used. I'm looking for an answer for how that money is being used. Is it in addition to the \$12 million? So are we really talking about \$80 million at this point?

4:50

Mr. Lukaszuk: The entire amount, Mr. Chairman, will be rolled out to school boards for the provision of additional special-needs services for children.

I don't know why this member would say that the relationship between school boards and principals and parents is gone. It seems to be slugging the school board day today. It appears that the members are not happy with any decisions school boards are making, yet our education seems to be firing on all cylinders. The fact is, I think, that the relationship between school boards and principals and parents will remain, and the new school act actually strengthens that.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you. The chair hesitates to interrupt the minister; however, we must proceed.

The chair does have an allocation here for a member from the Alberta Party or the independent member to join in if they wish at this time.

If not, then we'll proceed to any other members who wish to join in the debate. The first one that I had up was Calgary-Buffalo, followed by Edmonton-Strathcona. If any member wishes to speak, please indicate, and I'll add you to the list.

Calgary-Buffalo, please proceed.

Mr. Hehr: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Chair. I think one of those things that our education system is going to have to continue

to adapt to is the increasing number of English as a second language students in our system. If we look at the government's own numbers, we'll need 100,000 more workers in this province in the next 10 years, many of them from out of province and out of country, and many times they're going to bring their families here. There's going to have to be a real concerted effort by this ministry to look at that.

If we look at the statistics coming out of Canada, people who do not have English as a second language skills or are coming from out of country are not doing as well as people who are more fluent in the language or were born here. Could you explain to me what our ESL funding is, what the percentage increase is, and what your future plans are in terms of continuing to support this endeavour?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Mr. Chairman, this member is entirely correct. This province has and will continue to attract immigrants.

An Hon. Member: Because of our low tax rate.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Because of the low tax rate that we have; that's right. Thank you for reminding me, hon. member.

Last year between immigrants and migrants to Alberta this province attracted some 120,000 newcomers. I have to tell you, Mr. Chairman, a bit of Alberta trivia that all members should know. Alberta has the highest rate of retention of migrants that come to Alberta. It's at 85 per cent. So 85 per cent of people who come to Alberta even for a while end up staying in Alberta permanently.

The number of children that we will have entering our schools who don't speak English as their first language, obviously, will continue to grow. That is why this ministry is increasing funding for ESL by 11 per cent, from \$75.4 million to \$83.9 million.

Mr. Hehr: How does that break down at the actual schools? If a person comes over here in grade 3, how many years of block funding does that person receive, and is this sufficient? I believe that program was reduced a couple of years ago, the amount of years they were supported. If that's not true, you can tell me, and we'll go from there.

Mr. Lukaszuk: The member would be correct. Some supplemental funding was removed at a certain point in time, but by far right now it's outstripped by the 11 per cent increase.

When a child is identified as an English as a second language learner, that child receives ESL funding for seven subsequent years. That funding follows the child within Alberta Education for seven years. It's a standard number that's being used. Some children acquire proficiency of the English language faster than others. Some would argue that having been in Canada for over 30 years, I could probably still qualify for English as a second language. But the fact is that seven years is the number that is allotted, and it seems to be doing well because you will find when you look at longitudinal studies of our kids that enter the system as English as a second language learners, they tend to be doing very well compared to the rest of the cohort of students.

Mr. Hehr: Well, let's talk here. You mentioned that we would need 400 schools in the next 10 years. I believe that's what you said. What are the ministry's plans to do that? If you have a number, what's the estimated financial cost of those 400 schools?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Well, you know, I have to underscore that the number right now, looking at capital plans, looking at growth projections and all that, is somewhere around 400. Don't quote me

on that because I know the member from the Wildrose Party will now say that I have a secret list that has 400 schools on it. Not the case.

When you look at growth projections of kids, when you look at the state of infrastructure and the age of current buildings and growth patterns, the number hovers somewhere around 400 new schools over the next 10 years. So that is why we're working diligently with the Treasury Board right now on finding what funding mechanism we could put in place to actually allow for announcing all those schools. As you know, there's no ill will to building schools; frankly, everybody wants to build schools. You would like to cut a ribbon, I imagine, on a school in your riding if you needed one. The fact is that the current financial regime doesn't allow us to build as many schools as we need.

One of the differences between building schools in Alberta and most other provinces and then building other provincial infrastructure is that we don't amortize the cost of schools over a period of time, over the lifespan of the building, but we actually pay for them cash up front. If you were to build a provincial building or something else, you would be able to amortize. The reason is that the moment a school is built and ready for occupancy, we hand over the keys to a school board and no longer have the assets on our books.

So Treasury Board and I and others are working on finding a way that meets our Auditor General's requirements for recording financial expenditures on infrastructure and that would also liberate our ability to build that many schools over that short period of time. As you can anticipate, there will be those who will find objection with this, but the fact is that we need schools now for kids today and not falling further and further behind on infrastructure.

Mr. Hehr: Well, I would agree with much of what the minister says. It would be ridiculous not to build these schools where needed. I would suggest that it's fairly simple. There's nothing wrong with putting capital plans into a separate pool and allotment and borrow the money to do it, for crying out loud. Oftentimes we look at capital projects as being investments.

I think that part of the problem – and maybe we've done it over time – is that we've tried to amalgamate this into a paying-cash-for-everything thing. We recognize that the daily costs of running things, services, yeah, that's one thing, but actually investments in infrastructure, that you can pay over time by people who use them, would be a wise move for this government to do. Is that the plan? If it is, I commend you for it.

Mr. Lukaszuk: I'll tell you what. The plan actually goes even further because the other dilemma comes with: what do we do with existing schools that are perhaps no longer supported by student populations? So two things are being looked at right now.

When we build new schools, we have to make sure that schools are more than just schools because 30 years from now trustees and MLAs will be struggling with the same problem as migration shifts again. So I'm looking more towards a consultation with locally elected officials, municipal officials, with not-for-profit agencies to see whether we can create synergies and build more than just a school. Imagine building a school that has a medical clinic built into it and perhaps has a gymnasium built into it and some arts facility built into it. So we're looking at campuses. That is something that we're working on as well.

That still leaves us with the very unpleasant issue of empty schools. Often those buildings that are paid for by taxpayers still have a lot of life left in them. The problem is that they have no students. So we are looking as a crossministry initiative at the

possibility of bringing other government wraparound services into those buildings, inviting not-for-profit service providers into those buildings so the buildings can still maintain their value and continue to provide the community with valuable services but perhaps no longer be places of education.

At the end of the day in this ministry – and I think our responsibility as government is to make sure that we provide the best education possible for children – when numbers drop to such a low level where it is impossible to provide programming and meaningful options and field trips and all that to children, difficult decisions have to be made by school boards. To ease that decision-making process for school boards, we're looking at creating an environment where other service providers can enter those buildings and perhaps provide equally important services to that community.

5:00

Mr. Hehr: In my view, deficit financing on schools is perfectly cool, and I think most people in these neighbourhoods would essentially agree. There are differences between capital and expenditures. Nevertheless, I realize every school is different, but you guys have an average cost of a school in Alberta, what that number would be just for the average school. If you guys looked at the 14 schools being built right now, what is the average cost of one school to go up?

Mr. Lukaszuk: You're right; it varies. An average K to 6 will cost you about \$12 million. Those are probably the least expensive because of the specialized infrastructure that's not required. Gyms are smaller, and no science labs. When you're looking at high schools, for a capacity of about a thousand students you're hovering somewhere around \$30 million for a building. They range. That is why often you will find elementary and junior high schools combined. Not only do they serve a wider cohort of students, but you find efficiencies in building two in one.

The range changes. As we are going to look at building campuses, you will be looking at partnerships with others, and that cost will be offset by that.

Mr. Hehr: A recent announcement on charter schools said that you were looking at eliminating the cap on student enrolments there. No?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Grow into the size of the building that they're in.

Mr. Hehr: Explain to me your announcement, so I get it straight again. Sorry.

Mr. Lukaszuk: The announcement, Mr. Chairman, was as such: number one, charter schools, I firmly believe, have proven themselves to provide a good quality of education to our children. Obviously, parents are voting with their feet. They're signing up kids into charter schools. The problem charter schools had is that their lifespan was five years, so by the time their charter was renewed, they had to start working and accumulating paperwork and be assessed to get their charter renewed. Now their charter is renewed for 15 years, where they will be able to plan, particularly from the side of infrastructure, longer term, maybe buy a building, enter into a long-term lease, and maybe find some efficiencies there.

The second part of the announcement was, Mr. Chairman, that certain charters were capped at a given number – let's say 300 students – but they were by default in a building that had capacity for 350 students. We will now allow the number of students to grow to the maximum capacity that the building can accommodate

using our Alberta standards of how many children should be in a school building. So they can only grow to size.

Mr. Hehr: Do you have the numbers of how many more additional spaces, then, will be available in the upcoming year as a result of that change?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Hon. member, since it's not a budget number, I can give you that number later, but I have to tell you that it'll be negligible. Because of the popularity of charter schools most of them actually have grown to their maximum size. There are a few that haven't, so the number will be negligible, less than probably 5 per cent, by far, of the total enrolment of children.

Mr. Hehr: Okay. There's \$192.5 million budgeted to support accredited private schools and early childhood services. How much is that, and has that been an increase since last year?

Mr. Lukaszuk: It's the same increase as all the other schools per child; however, they are not getting many of the other envelopes that have been given to the public and Catholic schools, so overall the answer would be no.

As the member knows, we don't pay for any infrastructure for private schools, and we fund them at 70 per cent of the per-student funding, the basic funding, but they don't get the additional envelopes. These schools have proven themselves, again, to be an asset and an asset of choice of parents, parents voting with their feet. Also, they don't get any allotment for class size initiative, and they get no transportation dollars either, so quite a significant overall difference in funding per pupil.

Mr. Chairman, you will find that the desire for charter or private schools stems from the fact that parents desire certain programs that may not be offered in a public setting, and even though charter schools are public, the public school board run schools always get the first right of refusal on a program. I am not suggesting that there will be a new charter application in Calgary, but I will give you a scenario where there could be one. Recently the Calgary board of education made a decision not to provide Arabic studies as a program of choice in Calgary. Well, I'm not sure how desirable that program is, how many parents are interested, but in a case where those parents were turned down, those parents, since it is so important for them to have their children learn their native tongue, may form a charter as a not-for-profit society for a charter application.

The same happens with private schools. In my riding we have an Islamic academy, which now has pretty well full enrolment. When I meet with the parents, this is the kind of program that they want for their children. We fund 70 per cent and no transportation, no classroom size, no infrastructure. They have to build or buy their own school. They do teach Alberta curriculum, and children are required to meet the same standards as kids in any other public school.

Mr. Hehr: Yeah. I hear those arguments. Obviously, I come from a philosophical background that says: "Hey, you want a private school? Pay for it yourself." I don't think I'll ever be persuaded of that argument elsewhere, but sometimes if you grow up in a household long enough, you can't unlearn the stuff you've learned. We'll leave it at that.

I'd ask you, then. You know, you get up in question period, and you say: "We support choice. We love choice." Why is it you don't fund private schools to 100 per cent?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Well, because they have the option of being a charter school. That is the difference. I lived in a house long

enough, too – and perhaps I won't change either – but the fact is that if parents want a specialized program that will be run as a nonprofit, governed by a board of parents or community volunteers, and if it's a program of choice that is not offered by a public system, they can apply for a charter and have a charter school that would be 100 per cent funded by the taxpayers' purse. If they choose to have a certain degree of autonomy and not be affiliated with any school board and have the school run by a board of directors that they elect, then there is a price that comes with that autonomy. Maybe that's somewhat in line with where your belief system is. If you want autonomy, you pay for it.

The fact is that we still expect children to receive basic education. Those parents pay property taxes. They pay for public education through their homes, through their properties that they have. They're taxpayers as well. We simply provide basic funding for basic education, but all the bells and whistles that the private school wants to offer, including a building, parents pay for themselves. The system seems to be working quite well.

That's why we have that wide range of options, you know. You can go into a public school that more and more offers individual programming, individual programs of choice. If those are not sufficient, go into a charter school. If that's not sufficient, then you go into a private school.

Mr. Hehr: Well, I argue that because this is upcoming and it relates to the budget. You know, Wildrose is now going to a voucher system. They're going to 100 per cent fund this stuff to help every person. Money follows the child into a private school. Money follows a child to a charter school at 100 per cent. I wonder if you can point me to the evidence where you're looking at societies that have gone to this funding model, full well knowing that Alberta has the highest funding of private schools throughout Canada. I can find very little evidence out there that says that this has an overall benefit for the whole of society's learning activities, which you as the minister should be in charge of, not worried about some individual family's needs or whether a religious sect or whatever wants a school, okay? If you can point me to that, maybe that will help me. I'll go read the study.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Well, you know, what they would do in the Wildrose is their thing. I firmly believe that education should not be driven by ideology. It should be driven by pragmatism. What's best for the children, right? So I don't entertain many of the ideas coming from that particular corner.

The fact is, I guess, that the best study that really exists, and I think the most conclusive study that exists, is the analysis of how our system performs vis-à-vis all other systems not only in Canada and the United States but throughout the world and the fact that having the system that we have and having the funding formula that we have and giving the parents this wide plethora of options that we give puts us in the top four position in the world. So I would say that it's very difficult to argue with success.

We should strive to improve our results. There are pockets of students that need additional attention. As you know, my personal passion is our aboriginal population, where we have a lot of work to do over a period of time. But at the end of the day don't fix it if it ain't broken. It seems to be doing very well.

5:10

Mr. Hehr: I understand the minister full well, and it's a credit to much of what we've done in Alberta that we're performing so high. Although I can say that you guys have screwed up health care 37 ways from Sunday, I can't necessarily say that about education. I do applaud you on that; nevertheless, it's the future.

Do you have any numbers of students of American descent who are currently going to private schools? What I see happening, at least in Calgary, are many Americans coming to our cities who are working in the oil patch, who are used to more of a private schooling option. They are choosing this more from a fundamental belief that that is it. I'm just wondering if . . .

The Deputy Chair: Thank you.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona, followed by the hon. Member for Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo.

Ms Notley: Thank you. I've been on the website since our last discussion, trying to track down the information that the minister says is there. It's still just for clarification; we're not getting exactly the information I'm looking for.

On your website you talked about \$68 million being made available for the purpose of moving forward on your revised plan on inclusive education. In a time when conversations like this were accompanied with a great more clarity – let's just say that the previous minister was more inclined to that. He talked about the fact that the \$12 million – and now I'm assuming it's \$68 million, or maybe it's \$80 million because I still haven't got an answer to that question – was really geared toward the process of revising and rejigging the system to implement the recommendations, which are far reaching and wide ranging and represent a significant change in the way things are done within our school system.

The idea was that first there'd be \$12 million dedicated to that process, and now it appears from the website that \$68 million is being dedicated to that purpose. So I understand, then, that we're looking at a total of \$80 million although I've yet to get that answer given to me. But I'll try again. So you can tell me if that's what is being done.

My question is – because, again, in previous conversations with the Education minister last year I was told that we would be given much more clarity and description around the work that the government is doing with this \$68 million or maybe \$80 million and that we'd be told because, you know, it's \$80 million; it's not a small amount. I think we're all interested in wise use of our dollars. The idea was that this was around the retooling process.

So I'm asking again if I can get some clarity around what the \$12 million was used for last year and what the \$68 million is going to be used for this year. Just that money. If I could get that information, I would really appreciate it. Hopefully, you won't take 40 minutes.

The Deputy Chair: As the chair I hesitate to interrupt, but the Government House Leader has caught my eye. As we're all well aware, pursuant to Standing Order 19(1)(c) the question must now be put on the motion for consideration of his Honour the Lieutenant Governor's speech. Therefore, I will recognize the hon. Government House Leader for his motion.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I would move that the Committee of Supply now rise and report progress and beg leave to sit again.

[Motion carried]

[Mr. Zwozdesky in the chair]

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Strathcona.

Mr. Quest: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Committee of Supply has had under consideration certain resolutions for the Department of Education relating to the 2012-13 government estimates for the

general revenue fund and lottery fund for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2013, reports progress, and requests leave to sit again.

The Acting Speaker: Does the House concur in the progress report? Say aye.

Hon. Members: Aye.

The Acting Speaker: Those opposed, please say no. So ordered.

Hon. members, as you all know, under Standing Order 19(1)(c) the question must now be put for consideration of His Honour the Lieutenant Governor's speech. It's a procedural matter.

Consideration of His Honour the Lieutenant Governor's Speech

Mr. Fawcett moved that a humble address be presented to His Honour the Honourable the Lieutenant Governor as follows.

To His Honour the Honourable Colonel (Retired) Donald S. Ethell, OC, OMM, AOE, MSC, CD, LLD, the Lieutenant Governor of the Province of Alberta:

We, Her Majesty's most dutiful and loyal subjects, the Legislative Assembly, now assembled, beg leave to thank Your Honour for the gracious speech Your Honour has been pleased to address to us at the opening of the present session.

[Motion carried]

The Acting Speaker: Now, as indicated, we'll proceed with Motion 10.

Government Motions

Address in Reply to Speech from the Throne

10. Mr. Hancock moved on behalf of Ms Redford:
Be it resolved that the Address in Reply to the Speech from the Throne be engrossed and presented to His Honour the Honourable the Lieutenant Governor by such members of the Assembly as are members of Executive Council.

The Acting Speaker: Are there any other comments?

Seeing none, I would ask the hon. Government House Leader on behalf of the Premier to close debate.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Whitemud, the Government House Leader, has moved a motion to close debate, so we'll vote on the motion.

[Government Motion 10 carried]

Committee of Supply

[Mr. Zwozdesky in the chair]

The Deputy Chair: Hon. members, I'll call the Committee of Supply to order now.

Main Estimates 2012-13

Education (continued)

The Deputy Chair: As you may know, the Committee of Supply has under consideration the Department of Education, and we are in the middle of the exchange between the Member for Edmonton-Strathcona and the Minister of Education. The chair is pleased to recognize the Minister of Education.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Thank you. Mr. Chairman, I've been trying sincerely to answer that question, and I'm not sure where the

breakdown in communication is. Maybe I've been too long out of the classroom, and I'm not good at conveying information anymore.

Mr. Chairman, I want you to make note of the fact that today is actually quite an important day, with two breakthroughs. Number one, the hon. Member for Airdrie-Chestermere has acknowledged that there is no secret list and now tells us that actually there is a possibility to create a list if I ever wanted to, so that is very important. The second one is that the member who is just asking me questions right now acknowledges that there is a website, that there is information on the website that was previously available, so that is a good deal, too, Mr. Chairman.

Let me try to answer the question in more detail. The entire \$80 million will be going into classrooms. The money is allocated for provision of special-needs services. Tell me where I'm going off base. The money will be distributed in two ways. Historically it was on a per-file basis. Kids were diagnosed, they were coded, and certain codes allowed for certain additional funding. That's how money was directed to school boards. In cases where that form of funding is the higher of the two, that's how money will be distributed this year as well.

But we also have a new formula, which we are bringing into life starting this year, which will be the formula next year. You will be comparing funding vis-à-vis the old formula and the new formula. Whichever one is higher will be funding that child. Under the new formula the teacher will be making the call on whether the child requires additional services and what those services are. It's not the coding that will be determining, but the teacher will be making the decision what additional services the child needs.

5:20

The teacher will be making the determination of whether the child needs instructional support, assistive technology, learning coaches, literacy/numeracy services, community supports, counselling supports, speech/language support services, physical therapy supports, occupational therapy supports, mental or other health supports, vision/hearing support services.

The funding this year will be the higher of the two. The entire \$80 million will be in the pot. That's how the money will be distributed. From the end of this fiscal year on we will be moving to the new formula, which will be looking at the child's demographic and the child's neighbourhood and the family that the child comes from, knowing that children from certain demographics do require additional funding and do require additional services, giving teachers that latitude to provide those additional services to a child who is not necessarily coded.

Those demographics that we will be looking at for extra funding will be: if the child is above or below the norm for average income; for the percentage of homeowners in that geographic area; for the mother's average education, because it's known to be a determining factor; for percentage of lone-parent families; for percentage of parents with no degree or postsecondary certificates; for low-weight gestation for the child; whether the child is aboriginal or not; whether the child is a refugee is not; whether the child is in care, in provincial custody; and also distance, and that is 40 kilometres from a major urban centre.

The child will be judged by those criteria, and if the child falls outside of the norm, additional funding will be provided to the school board. The entire \$80 million will be going to school boards.

Ms Notley: I'm starting to see why I was perhaps a bit confused around this stuff. I'll be quite honest. In previous conversations with the previous minister, when we talked about setting the

direction and action on inclusion, I specifically stated my concern, which continues to be quite significant, about this program and the merits of this program and the advisability of this program. One of the points that I would make, which, quite frankly, I have extreme support for amongst the teaching profession, is that teachers are not currently qualified to assess kids in their class.

For instance, we have speech pathologists, who go to school for years and years and years and years, and we have psychologists, who go to school for years and years and years and years, and they learn how to assess. Teachers, the vast majority of teachers, are in our classrooms right now without ever having taken a course on special needs, let alone distinguishing between the nature of special needs and the best practices and the peer-reviewed literature and the expert literature around the best mechanism for teaching different children with different special needs. Our teachers just are not equipped with that.

Now, when I'd had this conversation before, I'd always understood that this money, the \$12 million last year and perhaps the \$68 million this year, which now I'm hearing is different, would be dedicated to dealing with that gap. It would be dedicated to dealing with the fact that we're asking teachers to do something which they are absolutely not trained to do.

Maybe that's not what you're doing. Maybe what you're doing is that you are just throwing the full \$80 million into the class, and you're just going to cross your fingers and close your eyes and hope that teachers who do not know how to engage in this process will simply learn it off the side of their desks by reading a couple of your online things. I have been on the website, and I have looked at some of the coaching literature and some of the lovely little online web courselets that are being offered for the teachers to read at home, you know, in their extra time and all that kind of stuff. Knowing what I do know about the expertise required to identify a learning program for children with special needs, I know that that's not enough. Maybe that's where the issue is.

You've got more money in there, but really what we've got is a profile that's been frozen for five years. Yes, we've now put \$68 million into it, which is great, although if you do sort of population and inflation over the last five years, essentially this money has just now brought us back to where we were five years ago in terms of the funding.

There was a survey that came out from the ATA in December 2011, and I'm just wondering if the minister can speak to this. Given that the teachers are the ones who you anticipate carrying the load of this whole new area of practice for which they've never been trained and given that we really only put enough money back into the special-needs pot to bring us back to where we were in about 2007, 2008 and given that we have this survey where the number of teachers identifying significant deterioration in special-needs resourcing and special-needs support in the classroom has doubled – you know, in 2006 or 2007 25 per cent of teachers thought that special-needs education was in trouble; now over 50 per cent of teachers believe that special-needs education is in big trouble – I'm wondering if the minister can comment. Since that came out, you know, two months ago, how do you see this unfolding in a way that doesn't continue to compromise the educational outcomes of our special-needs kids?

The last question I'll ask on that. Last year I asked the previous minister about why we have no performance measures around special-needs kids' performance and holding ourselves accountable for how well our special-needs kids do. I see that indeed that's not changed one bit in the measures that you're using to keep yourself accountable even though we're in this incredibly chaotic change in your system. So why is that not in there? Why hasn't there been some work done on the accountability

framework, that was specifically promised by the previous minister in the last estimates debate?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Well, I have to tell you that the world does not look so bleak from this angle and from what I'm hearing and seeing. First of all, this member underestimates teachers' capacity and their ability to make decisions relevant to what the child requires. [interjection] I see the Member for Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo would like to contribute. I'll sit down and let him talk.

Chair's Ruling Decorum

The Deputy Chair: Through the chair, please. We're having a very good, high-level debate here, and the chair will do his utmost to keep it there. Hon. members, if you could keep your comments until your turn, that would be appreciated. At the moment the Minister of Education has the floor, and I would invite him to proceed.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I appreciate that.

Debate Continued

Mr. Lukaszuk: Mr. Chairman, teachers do have the capacity to make decisions as to what is required for the child, but it goes further than that. Under the current system, frankly, you will have a situation where you may have a child who is legally blind. Do you really need the child coded and going through the expensive assessments to determine whether the child is blind or not and what the child needs? Teachers can make those decisions very often.

Also, Mr. Chairman, teachers do receive significant in-servicing, and implementation of this particular model will perhaps require school boards and principals to make decisions on in-servicing teachers, at least particular teachers in a school, to develop that capacity, to be able to provide welcoming, inclusive schools for all children. At the end of the day the goal is that every school will have the capacity to be inclusive and to be welcoming to all students. That will be a skill that will be required of teachers as time goes on, and teachers can do this.

Also, that aligns itself very nicely with Bill 2, that is on the floor of our Legislature. As you know, one of the propositions of the bill, if passed, is the fact that parents' rights are being significantly elevated. Parents are now considered partners in education, where they will be making decisions relevant to the education of their child and will be provided access to information that will allow them to make well-informed decisions. The very parent of a child with a disability, who knows the child best, who has been involved in the medical treatment of that child supposedly for years, up to the time the child enters the school system, will also contribute expertise on what the child requires.

You will have collaborative decision-making between parents and educators, and I have full faith in the system that they can make those decisions. Some school boards may have consultants that they will be utilizing and using within the school board to make additional input on what devices and accommodations are the best for what child. But at the end of the day I have no concern that children will receive the help that they require.

5:30

Ms Notley: I wonder, Mr. Chair: could you tell me how much time I have left?

The Deputy Chair: You have five minutes and 45 seconds in this exchange.

Ms Notley: Thank you.

First of all, I don't want to suggest that I don't have confidence in teachers. I have all confidence in teachers, and I have confidence in teachers to teach the children that they themselves have been taught to teach. But I think that you are doing a disservice to the special-needs children of this province if you ignore the fact, the same fact that most teachers themselves understand, that the vast majority of them haven't been trained in special-needs education. Even for those who have been trained in special-needs education, most of them have not been trained in assessment.

You know, saying that I'm concerned about whether a bus driver can rebuild a carburetor but that somehow I don't trust whether they can drive or not is silly. They've been trained to do one thing, and that's what teachers tell me. They are worried about it because they have not been given the support and the training that is necessary to manage complex classrooms with a variety of children with special needs, a variety of behavioural needs, a variety of individual educational planning program requirements, a variety of different standards applied to their educational expectations. They haven't been given that training.

We've already heard about this ministry suggesting that class size is only relevant for the K to 3 population. I appreciate that the class size is not too bad right now for any population. That's fine although, again, we're looking at averages, so that's a bit concerning in those areas where the averages are not being met. But the fact of the matter is that, again, you know, special-needs kids have a different need for a proper class size, and teachers with three or four children who may have previously been coded as severely disabled in that class – it makes a difference. If they've got 20 kids and five who were previously coded severe and now no longer are coded severe, then the relevance of that class size is very different, depending on the composition.

The ministry's decision to focus on K to 3 for class size and to make that decision that 4 to 12 is irrelevant in terms of class size, according to the research and according to what the minister said to us last year in estimates, is an implicit systemic failure to understand the needs of special-needs children.

I'm not in any way critiquing teachers. Quite the opposite. I am here on behalf of teachers to give you the message that you are expecting them to create all the solutions with no resources and no support. They are frustrated and they are stressed and they are anxious because they know that the expectations of this current plan are such that ultimately it's Alberta's children who are going to suffer. That's my concern.

I'd like to switch quickly to the issue of predictable funding and the grant. I know the Member for Calgary-Buffalo has already raised this. You know, we've got the 1 per cent grant, and you guys are proposing 1 per cent, 2 per cent, 2 per cent. You're talking about three years of predictable funding, and there's a lot of self-congratulatory joy over there for having done that. But, of course, everybody has always said that it needed to be predictable, adequate funding.

My concern is that most estimates, conservative estimates, suggest that wage increases for 2012-2013, generally speaking, will be between 2 and 3 per cent, and for every 1 per cent miscalculation on your part I think we're looking at about a \$50 million shortfall. If we want to have stability and we don't want the teacher salary and the funding of the teacher salary, not to mention the support staff salary, to continue to be a political football, the way it has been for the last three years, and to create the kind of chaos that it's created every summer over the last three years, how are we going to deal with that when you're currently planning for an increase that is much lower than what most – you

know, the Conference Board of Canada is projecting a higher percentage wage increase this year for public-sector employees. How are you going to deal with that?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Well, let me deal with the first long comment. The fact is, Mr. Chairman, that just because the funding formula will change for children, the provision of services doesn't necessarily have to be on a per-child basis. If a child comes to a school coded because the child is blind and now the child comes to school not coded but the child is blind, teachers still are making the decisions on what is best for the child and what adaptive devices and what assistance the child needs. When a child comes coded, it doesn't come with a list of devices that the child will need. Plus, there's funding for learning coaches that are being implemented throughout school boards. One of their jobs will be and is to work with teachers and to create that capacity so that proper decisions can be made for all children in all schools.

I still continue to believe that the system is in place to make decisions. At the end of the day there are consulting services that are available throughout school boards that can supplement that body of knowledge.

Relevant to salaries . . .

The Deputy Chair: Thank you. I'm sorry to interrupt the hon. minister, but that concludes this exchange.

We now go to the hon. Member for Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo or the hon. Member for Airdrie-Chestermere, whichever one is ready. Please proceed.

Mr. Anderson: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I just want to continue and pick up where we'd left off last time. Just to refresh everybody's memory, we were talking about the fact that you had 62 school boards from across the province all submit their priority lists to the provincial government. We agree that that is occurring. The minister said that he would put those lists up online, which is great.

Then I was asking the minister about – every year he has to determine which of those priorities he's actually going to fund, in the order of the way the boards have laid them out, but of course you can't give the boards everything they want. You can only give them some, if any, of what they want, and therefore you've got to prioritize and say who gets what, which board gets how much money for what projects. He said: "Yeah, every year de novo we come and we make a new list from scratch every single year on the priorities for that year. Then we build those priorities with the money that we have in the budget."

My request was that not only would this minister on a go-forward basis put those priorities there, the one through 40, whatever, that he's going to fund that year, but also, based on criteria and so forth, that he publish the full list, well past what he is funding that year, on down the line from highest priority to lowest priority of what's next. What's the next priority for next year should all things remain the same? Of course, that would have to be updated every year and so forth; I understand that. But in that way it would be transparent. People could know why it's important to have a priority list, and it could be transparent that the education bureaucracy is not being used for political purposes. That's why I'm asking this very serious question. I hope I get an answer to it.

The minister was responding, saying: "You know what? People who don't get a school that year know they don't get a school that year. There's a vacant lot. You don't need to tell them." But maybe he misunderstood the point of having those other projects published. The point is transparency. It's to make sure that the

next year when he de novo comes up with his new list, if the priority has changed from those schools that didn't make the cut the year before, if the priority in there has changed again, there has to be a reason for it. That will make sure that people can question the reasoning for it and say: "Look, this school was number two; it was the top school that didn't get funded last time. Why is it not being funded this year?" There would be transparency.

Would that not be a useful tool for parents and school boards and just Albertans in general? Would that be something that you'd be willing to put up, Minister, so that we could have that transparency?

Mr. Lukaszuk: Mr. Chairman, if the list was less static, I would agree with this member that it would make a lot of sense because if only 10 schools are being built and yours happens to be the 11th one, that in a sense would be a bit of good news because wait till the next batch of schools, and odds are yours will be funded.

If you were to print a list of schools you didn't build, what you would be de facto doing is actually setting up false and unfair expectations because there would be a fair degree of expectation, if you were that 11th school and only 10 got built, that in the next batch of schools you would actually be captured in the next 10 schools.

5:40

The fact is, Mr. Chairman, that Albertans actually make very important life decisions, unfortunately in some cases erroneous, based on their anticipation of where a school will be built. I often speak with my constituents, and they tell me that a real estate agent promised them that where they're buying a house, there will be a school built one day. So they build their house because they're planning to have children, and they figure that by the time the kids reach school age, there will be a school. Well, 20 years later there is still a grassy field with maybe a soccer field on it. Now it gets to a point where those very same families don't want the school over there anymore because they're saying: "Frankly, I don't mind this green field. I don't need the noise of a school."

Setting up expectations that you will be receiving a school shortly, with the current funding model, would frankly be very unfair to families because families would be relocating to where they think schools will be built just to find out that their 11th school, which just didn't make the mark, all of a sudden is the 25th or 30th priority come the next capital plan because several school boards decided significantly to reject their own priorities.

Mr. Chairman, I don't think it would be transparent because transparency means providing Albertans with meaningful and truthful information. In this case it may be truthful, but it definitely would not be meaningful in any way because priorities change that significantly. If this member ever wants to sit down, I'll gladly do that with him and show him how priorities in school boards – I know he probably knows his own school board – throughout the province can change significantly and change the entire landscape of what's going on.

You know, if we decide to build a new school for Grimshaw, that will bump off another school somewhere. That's how fluid it really, really is. There's a better way of solving that problem, and I will ask this member and actually his entire party to be a little bit more open minded and co-operative on the issue of how we fund schools because there's a great deal of opposition coming from that corner of the Chamber on anything that resembles debt or debt financing.

The fact, Mr. Chairman, is that we need to look collaboratively at new ways of funding schools. If we continue funding schools

cash up front, we will never ever build all the schools that we require, and we will be falling further and further behind in our infrastructure needs, assessing roughly that we will need some 400 schools over the next 10 years. We need to find innovative ways of building infrastructure so that his kids in Airdrie don't wait 15, 20 years for a school that they actually need today. Then what happens in 20 years when I finally have the money to build them a school? They may no longer need that school. Now instead of an elementary school they need a high school. That's what causes the fluidity.

We would actually need co-operation from the other side of the House to finally acknowledge the fact that some capital needs to be built faster than upfront cash payments would allow and that we need to be much more innovative. That is what the Premier has been talking about, looking at our fiscal plan. It's not about raising taxes but finding innovative ways of funding capital so that we can build schools today for children that need schools today. At the current rate it simply will not happen. Printing lists of schools that simply didn't make the cut is, frankly, meaningless because that list will be so different the year after that, for you, Mr. Chairman, to know that you are number 11 will mean nothing. That doesn't mean that your school will be built in the next batch or the batch after that.

Another reason for the fluidity was that we have introduced special projects where we have bundled schools, as you know, and we have used P3s, and those could be done in certain areas and not in others. So that also changes the priority plan when you introduce funding relevance and bundling and P3 projects. I'm hoping to be able to actually have schools financed directly through government and not through third parties and actually build adequate numbers of schools so that our kids have the spaces that they need and deserve.

Mr. Anderson: Well, I'm always looking for innovative ways to build new schools, but I'll tell you that I do not feel that debt is innovative. There are lots of ways to do things without mortgaging people's futures, and it's called reprioritizing. How many schools would that new MLA office across the way build, for example?

Mr. Boutilier: Three hundred million.

Mr. Anderson: Three hundred million dollars. I'd rather see that turned into schools.

Anyway, I'm glad that he's passionate about building new schools. That's good. But we should never sacrifice the needs of the here and now on the backs of future taxpayers. I just disagree fundamentally with that. I think you prioritize.

Mr. Denis: Do you have a mortgage?

Mr. Anderson: I have to explain this all the time to the House leader. He never understands. He says: do I have a mortgage? The difference is that after I pay the mortgage, I have a house that's worth something, that I can sell on the market if I need to. You can't sell a bridge, can you? Can you sell a bridge? No, you can't. So it's a big difference, a huge difference from a mortgage. It's just debt. In fact, the bridge actually costs more money to maintain as we go forward. Anyway, we're getting off track. I have this discussion with the House leader all the time. It's totally different.

With regard to transparency that was an interesting comment. I don't think transparency is telling Albertans what you think they need to know. I think transparency is telling Albertans what the truth is. So I think you've got it half right. When I say that, that means that they should see exactly why the schools that they requested got left off the list. There's criteria.

People in Alberta are smart, capable human beings that can analyze. They're rational about stuff. They know that the government can't build every school and every project that every Albertan wants. They get that. They really do understand that. But they will only understand it if the criteria is made public, the weighting system is made public, and they can therefore see why their school is not on the list that year, what moved it up, what moved it down. They'll be fine with that. Albertans just want to know what's going on.

That would be a lot more transparent than, you know, someone sitting in Beaumont or Castle Downs or anywhere else saying: "Why are we not getting schools right now? Our population is growing. We have new students that need schools, yet we're not getting our schools." At least then they would know why. The reason is because there are 12 schools in front of you that have a higher need based on these criteria and this weighting system.

I think that will only tell you what you need to know. I mean, that's typical of government, not just this government. All governments when they're in power don't want to tell people more than they need to know. Well, who's to determine what the people of Alberta need to know? They need to know all the information that you have in making your decision. Why shouldn't they know that? Why shouldn't they know why their school was left off the list? They should know that. Guess what? If you were that transparent, they wouldn't be mad at you for it; they would understand it. Well, I guess a few would be mad about it still, but I think at the end of the day the vast majority of people would be rational about it and say: well, obviously, these schools were needed more.

I just don't see the value in holding that information back. It's kind of like the Fraser Institute school rankings. The Fraser Institute rankings, we agree, are not a good indicator in and of themselves of a school's performance. They're not. They don't take all of the relevant information into account. However, that doesn't mean you hold back the test scores from the PATs from the Fraser Institute so that they can't make the rankings. And you haven't. Absolutely. You're not going to hold that information back as far as I know.

For that same reason don't hold this information back. Let Alberta parents know, and then let them decide whether your weighting system is correct. I bet you they will. I bet you that transparency will take the politics right out of schools. I won't need to organize or help organize folks coming up from Airdrie to protest for schools. I won't need to do that anymore because there'll be a transparent list with a weighting system. It'll all be completely transparent. [interjection] Well, then, publish it, though, hon. member. If you were doing it before, publish it. That's the point. More transparency. That's all I'm asking.

5:50

Mr. Lukaszuk: Mr. Chairman, you know, this is quite interesting. I'm glad that this member had ample time to explain himself. Really, when you hear him say that, he's actually more concerned about me printing lists of schools that I didn't build, schools where children are crammed into portables or into Legion basements or into church basements because there are no schools, schools where kids are studying in hallways. He's more concerned about me printing lists of schools that we didn't build than actually engaging in meaningful dialogue on how we can build schools and provide children with schools right now, including in his own riding.

Because of his ideological narrow flaps he will not even consider the ability for creative financing of schools so that the kids in Airdrie can actually have a school maybe in two years, to

satisfy all kids in Airdrie, that they actually need right now. I don't have to tell that member how crammed they are and how the space is inadequate. No. Ideology prevails. He will not look at alternative financing because he will not mortgage today's schools, that kids actually need today, on future finances.

The fact of the matter is that if you don't provide children with schools today, what kind of a future are you building? Yeah, maybe you will have a mortgage-free future, but you're going to have children with no schools in the meantime. I hope that this is not the kind of province and not the kind of vision that this government has in mind. The fact, Mr. Chairman, is that our kids throughout the province need schools today, and there are many ways of financing schools that are creative, that will benefit children today and their children into the future because these buildings will be standing around providing children with adequate education and adequate education spaces.

The ideological argument that you simply cannot either borrow money or use funding vehicles to build schools right now is, frankly, Mr. Chairman, ridiculous. The fact is that businesses don't buy factories and shops and stores with cash up front. Even if they had the money, they wouldn't do it because any financial adviser will tell you that often it is better to borrow money at an advantageous borrowing rate than to keep the money at a lower rate in your bank account, especially having the ability to borrow like the province of Alberta. Then you provide the service right now for children who need it right now.

On a consolidated statement, Mr. Chairman, the school is still an asset. Whether we're selling the school or not, the school is still an asset on the books, and your liability of \$20 million to build that school shows as an asset that is depreciated every year on a consolidated budget like you would with any business.

You know, even the ideology that this member is so confined by, that will deprive our children of schools, doesn't make sense from a capitalist point of view because the fact is that you will find very few businesses anywhere in the world that are paying for their capital acquisitions with cash up front. Everybody amortizes the cost of their capital over the life of the capital. You write off the capital depreciation, and that's how you balance your books.

But, no, there is this ideological digging in your heels that: "We will not provide kids with schools. We will pay cash up front, and by doing so will not build enough schools, will continuously have a shortage of schools, will have children attending schools in church basements and Legion halls and have parents from Airdrie come over here to protest on the front stairs of the Legislature." But of paramount importance to this member and the Wildrose party is that they will only allow for paying cash up front, which allows me to build maybe 10 per cent of the schools that I need every year and to keep on falling further and further and further behind.

Mr. Chairman, what is even more mind boggling is that it doesn't allow us to maintain the schools that we have because every single penny that we have, we put towards building new schools. So we have schools that taxpayers actually spend money on that we don't maintain adequately because there aren't sufficient finances for that. It's a theory that makes no sense. It's a theory that's harmful to our kids. Our kids deserve spaces, and we will be looking into forms of financing that will allow us to build schools right now.

I really want that member to go to his Airdrie families – I met, actually, hundreds of them just a few weeks ago in Airdrie who desperately want schools – and tell them: "You know what? You may need schools, but my ideological limitations are more important than your desire for schools, than your need for schools, because I will simply not allow the government of today to enter

into financial arrangements, that could be internal or external, to build the schools that they require.”

Well, if this member wants to be on the forefront of printing lists of schools that we didn't build and have the parents have the satisfaction that this government is transparent and now they know why they don't have a school, well, he may play and enter into that exercise. Mr. Chairman, I am more focused, with the Treasury Board and the Minister of Infrastructure, on spending our energy on actually printing lists of schools that we will be building where the schools are required, using whatever methodology we have to make sure that the children, the little guys, today have the proper spaces that they need today and into the future. That is what building the future of this province is.

We may find ourselves in a position one day, Mr. Chairman, of saying: “You know, I'm so proud of myself. I stuck to my ideologies so hard that I never borrowed a penny.” But you will be in a position where your schools will not be retrofitted, and you will be in a position where you will not have buildings and more and more kids will be in church basements and inadequate spaces.

Mr. Chairman, I think it's obvious. With a population growing like ours, where 120,000 people came to Alberta last year, mostly young families with children, with the population shifting, we need to find more creative and more adequate ways of financing infrastructure, particularly school infrastructure, which is the foundation of our future. You know, passing a progressive piece of legislation like the school act right now and then not having the facilities that are required would be mind boggling.

I'm looking forward to my next meeting on this particular topic with the residents of Airdrie. I'll tell them: “You know what? There are possibilities to build you a school, but for ideological reasons we simply won't.”

The Deputy Chair: Thank you.

The hon. Member for Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo.

Mr. Boutilier: Thank you very much. I've been listening to the comments of the tax-and-spend liberal, and my first observation is that I know the Member for Airdrie-Chestermere wants schools. What I find interesting, Mr. Chair, is the logic of this member and Minister of Education. I say that with a great deal of confidence as a teacher. My wife is also a teacher.

What I find interesting is that this minister thinks that it's more important to take \$350 million that could be used, Mr. Chairman, to build schools for little Johnny and Suzie, \$350 million that is going to his government's MLA offices and that could have been used to build schools. So the question I'm asking on this is about the fact that \$350 million, which is very simply a priority: that could have been deflected to the minister.

Now, the minister did say, Mr. Chair, that he, of course, goes to the Treasury Board. So I would encourage this minister to go back to the Treasury Board before this budget is approved and as the Minister of Education fight for \$350 million. It will not be debt. I am sure every Member of this Legislative Assembly would be willing to give up the \$350 million of tax dollars that is being used for MLA offices when it could be used for schools, schools to help the folks in Airdrie-Chestermere and to help schools to be built in Fort McMurray.

I am pleased to see that the minister recognized earlier that here we have a school in Fort McMurray with 54 portables, yet they are spending \$350 million for MLA offices. It's very simple. We don't have to go into debt. We can actually use the budget to be able to spend the money on schools. My constituency of Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo, the member's constituency of Airdrie-Chestermere, members of the Wildrose caucus, the Member for

Edmonton-Strathcona: we are saying that your priorities are wrong. We believe the priorities should go towards children and building schools.

I'm pleased that the minister thinks that it's important to build schools, but the point is that it's not ideological. It is quite simply that \$350 million of this government's budget is being wasted on MLA offices when it could have gone towards building schools. The reason I bring this up, Mr. Chair, is the fact that this member said that he goes back to the Treasury Board president. I see the Treasury Board president is here. So now it is the responsibility of the Minister of Education to go and fight and say: we want the \$350 million directed towards schools.

Do you know, Mr. Chair, how many schools that \$350 million could build? I will speak very slowly for the Minister of Finance because I know he's not that good with numbers because he didn't want to be the Minister of Finance. He wanted to continue to be the Minister of Energy. At an average of \$40 million a school, we could have had almost – guess how many more – 10 more schools. That would have taken care of a school in Grimshaw, where children after 10 years still have cold hands when they try to go ahead and actually do assignments in that school. I heard the chairman of the school district yesterday talking about the fact. Ten years. The hon. Member for Dunvegan-Central Peace has been fighting for this, but obviously it's fallen on some deaf ears of many ministers. I find it interesting, the fact that there was money.

6:00

To the Minister of Finance: did you hear this? Do you believe that 10 more schools could have been built? Not only that, but the member should have been aware of the fact there could have even been money used to build a long-term care centre. Or he might have forgotten about that when he was the wrecking ball in the ministry of health.

But that being the case, I want to not lose the focus of this minister. I'm sure that this minister wants to build schools. Ideologically, we do not have to go into debt. We can do this by taking \$350 million. To the President of the Treasury Board, to the Minister of Finance, and to the Education minister: why don't you have a meeting right afterwards, a Treasury Board special meeting, and say that with \$350 million, we can build 10 more schools in this fiscal year. I think it would put a smile on the Minister of Education's face because I know he was a dedicated teacher in his previous life. Deeply I do believe that this minister does want more schools. So to the Treasury Board president and to the Minister of Finance: I'm helping out the Minister of Education; we want 10 more schools rather than MLA offices for \$350 million.

I think if the Minister of Education could get some help, if you want me to come over since I sat in Treasury Board, maybe – maybe – the Treasury Board president would readjust his priorities. To the Minister of Education: is he saying that it's more important to have MLAs' offices, wasting \$350 million that could have been used to build 10 more schools? Ten more schools. To the Minister of Education: would the minister . . .

The Deputy Chair: I hesitate to interrupt the hon. member who is speaking, but pursuant to Government Motion 6, agreed to on February 8, 2012, the Committee of Supply shall now rise and report progress.

[Mr. Zwozdesky in the chair]

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Strathcona.

Mr. Quest: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Committee of Supply has had under consideration resolutions for the Department of Education relating to the 2012-13 government estimates for the general revenue fund and lottery fund for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2013, reports progress, and requests leave to sit again.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you.

Does the Assembly concur in the report? Please say aye.

Hon. Members: Aye.

The Acting Speaker: Those who don't, please say no. So ordered.

Hon. Government House Leader, you caught my eye.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm being pressured to ask for unanimous consent to extend the day, but I think it more prudent to move that we adjourn till 1:30 p.m. tomorrow.

[Motion carried; the Assembly adjourned at 6:04 p.m. to Wednesday at 1:30 p.m.]

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