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The 31st Legislature
Second Session

Alberta Hansard

Tuesday evening, November 18, 2025

Day 11

The Honourable Ric McIver, Speaker

Legislative Assembly of Alberta
The 31st Legislature
Second Session

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Legislative Assembly of Alberta

7:30 p.m. Tuesday, November 18, 2025

[The Speaker in the chair]

Government Bills and Orders
Second Reading

Bill 6
Education (Prioritizing Literacy and Numeracy) Amendment Act, 2025 (No. 2)

[Debate adjourned November 18: Mr. Shepherd speaking]

The Speaker: Are there any speakers? The hon. Member for Calgary-North East.

Member Gurinder Brar: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In the early 1900s there was a cabinet minister in the U.K., and he got easily distracted. He chased distractions like a puppy chases butterflies. And one morning he came to a meeting at 10 Downing Street rushed, sweating, thinking others were judging him. His glasses were fogged, his tie was crooked, and it looked like he came running from his home. He took his seat, opened his notebook, ready to focus on matters of state, and that's when he saw it: a banana peel lying on the shiny wooden floor.

To everyone else in the room it was nothing. To the minister it was an imminent national emergency. He lost interest in the debate about taxes, about trades, about treaties, and got carried away with the banana peel. He nudged the minister beside him and whispered: "Someone is going to slip. Someone will slip. Why is no one slipping?" Again, after some time, he said: "Why isn't anyone picking it up? Is this a trap?" Meanwhile across the table the country's most important issues were being discussed, but the minister was conducting a silent surveillance operation on the banana peel.

Finally, he lost his patience. He stood up mid-meeting, interrupting the flow of the meeting, and walked across the room with the determination of a man saving the nation from a disaster. He bent and reached for the banana peel, and in that heroic moment, that grand attempt to save the government from catastrophe, he slipped. His papers flew, his glasses slid sideways, and he stumbled straight into the chair of Winston Churchill. And without even looking up, Churchill said: if you spent half the attention on policy that you spent on bananas, we would run this country twice as well.

This bill is the banana peel, a pure distraction: a distraction from the inability to build more schools, the inability to address classroom complexity, and the inability to fund our education system. Our education system was one of the best in the world not long ago. Our education has never been this bad before.

It didn't happen overnight. It is the result of the deliberate government policies from the past six years. Prior to 2020 Alberta had funding based on enrolment growth. In February of 2020 the UCP government changed the funding formula to a three-year weighted average formula. Our educators rang the alarms, but this government had earplugs in their ears back then. Now we have the lowest per-student funding in the entire country, 16 per cent below the national average. Sixteen per cent, Mr. Speaker. It's approximately $3,000 less per student compared to the national average. The UCP fired educational assistants during COVID-19, the time when kids needed them the most. Underfunded classrooms, undersupported teachers, and no predictability: that's what this government offered to kids during the pandemic.

The UCP continued to cut education funding and engineered a teachers' strike. Teachers didn't ask for stars from the sky. They wanted fair wages for shaping the minds of our future generations. They wanted more funding to address classroom complexity. They wanted more staff so our kids can get the best education in the world, which they are entitled to, and this government even denied that.

The UCP had 18 months to negotiate in good faith, but the UCP was focused on corrupt care, wasting millions on Turkish Tylenol, and picking fights with municipalities, the federal government, and anyone who disagreed with them. They made situations so bad that Alberta's teachers had to finally strike to make their voices heard, and it didn't end there. The government that's loud about freedom but governs with an iron fist rushed Bill 2 in a day, invoked the notwithstanding clause, and forced the kids and teachers to the same underfunded, overcrowded, and complex classrooms.

Since September 2022 9,000 students have been added in CBE alone. Twenty-eight per cent of students in CBE are with English as a second language. In 2024 CBE was expecting 160,000 students by 2028, a 14 per cent increase from the 2023-2024 year. CBE needs 21 more new schools and five major modernizations by the end of 2027, and if this does not happen, CBE will operate at 107 per cent capacity by 2029. Even if the government builds these schools, CBE will still be operating at 97 per cent capacity, and that's just CBE, Mr. Speaker. There are so many other school boards that are asking for more funding, asking for more teachers, asking for more schools, and they are not delivered by this government. That's how bad things have become under this UCP in our education system.

People in Calgary-North East are upset with this government. When they bought homes, builders put up the future school site signs and sold homes. People thought the schools were coming and kids will attend schools closer to their homes with their friends and with their neighbours. To their surprise, the UCP refused to build schools. They were heartbroken, aggravated, and frustrated. The only two schools in Skyview were built by the NDP under the Rachel Notley government. Zero schools followed that, Mr. Speaker. Zero. Under this UCP government sometimes the schools are in the preplanning phase, sometimes they are in the planning phase, and God knows how many more stages they must go through until they are actually built.

I held a town hall before the beginning of this session, and I also attended one organized by my colleague from Calgary-Bhullar-McCall. We heard the stories of parents who have to send their kids to schools one hour each way every day just to get to the overcrowded classrooms, underfunded classrooms, and complex classrooms. We heard the stories of parents quitting their jobs just to pick up and drop off their kids. We heard the stories of parents who could not send their kids to the schools right in front of their homes because those schools operate at 110 per cent capacity. Both schools in Skyview are currently operating at 100 per cent capacity, Mr. Speaker. North Trail high school was 110 per cent capacity the day it opened.

7:40

People told us they need more schools for their kids, not the citizenship mark on the licence. They need more teachers and EAs in classrooms, not the new licence plates on their cars. They need more funding to address classroom complexity, not distractions from this government. They know that education is the lamp that lightens the minds of our kids and fights the darkness of ignorance. Under this government the plug is hanging out and the light is flickering. They feel the UCP is siding with decline, darkness, and ignorance instead of hope, dignity, and opportunity. People ask us: when will new schools be built? When will the classroom complexity be addressed? And when will kids get the teachers and

EAs they desperately need? These are the real issues of people. They want this lamp repaired, plugged in properly, and shining bright.

We can and we must fix it. On this side of the House, Mr. Speaker, we have a plan to fix it. First and foremost we must build more schools. Under the NDP 244 schools were built and modernized in just four years. Oil prices had hit rock bottom, yet per-student funding was more in 2017 than what we have right now under this UCP government. If the NDP did it in 2017, what's holding back this government from doing it right now? It's their political will that's holding them back.

When we build schools, we don't just build a building; we build a brighter tomorrow. When we hire more teachers, we don't just add more staff; we light more lamps of knowledge in the lives of our children. When we hire more support staff, we don't just add employees; we steady the lamp so that it can shine bright.

This brings me to my second point, Mr. Speaker. We must hire more teachers. More than 50 per cent of teachers quit their profession within the first five years of service. This is shocking and alarming. Brilliant minds, hard-working individuals gone and completely ignored. They have not seen a pay raise in the past decade. Teachers are not immune to inflation. They are overworked, they are underfunded, they are understaffed, yet they continue to give their best. We must retain our teachers, provide every support they need, and give them a dignified life.

Teachers paired with educational assistants can do wonders, Mr. Speaker. This brings me to my third point, addressing classroom complexity. Our classrooms are packed. Our classrooms are complex. Our classrooms are crying for more support from this government. This government stopped reporting class sizes. This government voted against Bill 202 introduced by the Member for Calgary-Beddington. This government ignored the alarms from school boards, teachers, and parents. Class size reporting means better decisions: better decisions to address classroom complexity, better decisions to keep our classrooms safe, better decisions to strengthen our education system.

The UCP has got a bucket full of excuses to not fund our education system. The UCP tells our teachers that they don't have money for them, but they have $80 million for Turkish Tylenol, $1.4 billion for a pipeline to nowhere, $4.5 billion for their wealthy insiders' corporate handout.

This minister says that the standardized tests will improve the literacy of kids. Well, how about implementing the curriculum introduced by the NDP that your government shredded? It was prepared by community leaders, subject matter experts, and teachers. This UCP government shredded that curriculum, and this UCP government introduced a new curriculum, which was rejected by teachers, by subject matter experts. In fact, the Northwest Territories even refused to implement that curriculum in their schools. They adopted the B.C. curriculum.

That curriculum was antiracist, thoughtful, and inclusive, but does the UCP care about these words? Not at all, Mr. Speaker. To this government that points at Manitoba's support for a similar bill, I say that Manitoba's screening is for reading only with additional resources behind that. Manitoba has class size gaps, more respect for teachers, more funding per student than Alberta.

Our lamp of education needs a caring hand that will repair the lamp, that will replace the bulb with higher megawatts, and that will properly plug it in to make it shine brighter and forever.

The Speaker: Any other speakers? Calgary-Acadia.

Member Batten: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise today because Albertans have been very clear what they expect from this government. They want this government to properly fund public education. Even parents with children attending private schools tell me the same thing; they still want our public system properly funded. This message is part of every single conversation: the conversations I have with families, with teachers, with other school staff. Individual concerns, of course, vary, but at the end of the day it comes down to the same thing, that same core issue of funding public education so that every child has access to a high level of education.

We know that when public education is underfunded, every other challenge becomes harder or impossible to address. Bill 6, this Education (Prioritizing Literacy and Numeracy) Amendment Act, 2025 (No. 2), does not provide proper funding to public education. Albertans see this disconnect. They know Alberta has the fiscal capacity to invest in education. They also know that our province is prosperous; it's resilient; it's full of opportunity. Yet they also know that Alberta funds its students at the lowest level in the country.

They see that reality reflected in their classrooms, the wait-lists, and their daily experiences. They have concerns about class sizes, complexity, teacher burnout, specialist shortage, delays in early childhood assessments. Not because they are complaining, Mr. Speaker; because they genuinely cannot understand how a province with our resources has allowed the system to reach this point. They expect this government to prioritize children. They expect this government to strengthen public education and not sidestep it.

Bill 6 does not address these expectations. It avoids the fundamental question, which is: are we prepared to invest properly in the future of our kids? Albertan families want stability. They want a government focused on what Albertans need and what they want, and they want public education funded properly so professionals can do their jobs.

Parents describe the challenges they're seeing. They're becoming more and more common, not less. Their children are waiting months for essential assessments, speech-language, occupational therapy, developmental evaluations because specialists simply cannot keep up with the demand.

Teachers talk to me about classrooms where one teacher is responsible for – I don't know – 28, 30 kids, several of whom have complex needs and require significant support that they can't get. Educational assistants, of course, try just to do their job, but they are stretched across multiple students. A person cannot be in two places at once, Mr. Speaker. The system is set up so that they fail. They cannot do their job. That is from decisions this UCP government has made. Psychiatrists, therapists rotate through the schools, but they're there so infrequently, they cannot do their job. They cannot build meaningful relationships with these kids so that they're open to their resources.

These pressures aren't temporary. They're a direct outcome of chronic underfunding. They are the consequences of decisions where basically they have not matched the real needs of the children in the classrooms. And they are the reason that I continue to hear the same message over and over again, which is: fund public education properly. It benefits all of society.

7:50

Families are also really concerned about early childhood supports. Now that the ministry responsible for child care is included with education, what an opportunity this is, Mr. Speaker. We could actually invest in early childhood development. Families see how the delays in the assessment and intervention for their children – they see the impacts. When you think of it, those impacts not only compound year after year, but it's not just their child who's going through these same things.

Families understand that the earlier a child receives support, the better the long-term outcomes will be, yet they're watching FSCD wait-lists continue to grow. Or we assume it continues to grow. The government won't share with us what the numbers are, but I've heard: years. There is a critical time in a child's development where interventions are most effective. Because the wait-list is so long, we're missing that window. This government is choosing to ignore an amazing opportunity for these children.

There is also PUF funding, one that's near and dear to my heart. It's honestly one of the reasons back in 2019, when the UCP government decided to mess with PUF funding, that I started to take notice of what this government was doing. It's actually thanks to that and a few other decisions that has me here today. PUF funding is an incredible investment. It's incredibly needed but does not reflect today's needs. It just doesn't.

Further, families are experiencing delays accessing specialists even if they had the initial assessments that told them they could. Specialists' caseloads are so high, even if they could get there, they still may not get those resources.

Albertans understand the economics of this, Mr. Speaker. They know that early intervention is one of the smartest investments a government can make. When children receive the supports they need early, they require fewer supports later, they achieve stronger academic outcomes, and they are better prepared for the workforce. Early investment reduces long-term costs across education, health care, mental health services, and social programs, among many others. Investing early is not just compassion; it's fiscally responsible. For a government that claims to be that – it hasn't demonstrated that – maybe this is the opportunity to do so. It would be great to see amendments that actually took this Bill 6, that addresses none of these concerns, and pivot so that it actually invests where it should invest. It's an idea.

This, among many other reasons, Mr. Speaker, is why Albertans are so frustrated. They see the evidence, they understand the economics, and they watch the consequences unfold in their own homes, yet they do not see a government willing to take action on the most cost-saving investment available, which, again, is to properly fund public education.

When I speak with teachers and principals and psychiatrists, psychologists, speech-language pathologists, occupational therapists, educational assistants, they all make the same point over and over again. The government needs to let them do their jobs. These are trained, experienced, and knowledgeable professionals. They understand the complexity of childhood development more than, I would argue, anyone inside this space. That is their vocation, their calling. They understand classroom dynamics and they understand the learning needs. They know what works and they know what barriers exist, but they cannot navigate through the political interference that continues, and they cannot navigate inconsistent policy shifts, abrupt directives, or legislation that adds to their workload without addressing the core issues. They cannot navigate decisions that prioritize ideology over evidence, Mr. Speaker.

Albertans are very clear. They want this government to stay in their lane, provide the resources, respect that expertise, and start being helpful instead of harmful. Professionals are capable and they are committed. They need the conditions to succeed, not obstacles created by decisions made far from the classrooms.

Public education is foundational. It is the system that ensures that every child, regardless of its background, has the opportunity to build a strong future. And it stabilizes families, Mr. Speaker. It supports community well-being. It prepares young people to contribute meaningfully to our economy and to our society.

Underfunding public education undermines all of that, and when our public education is weakened, we see the impacts everywhere. Kids fall behind academically, behaviours escalate because their needs go unmet, and families are put in a situation where at times they are forced to seek out private services that they cannot afford just to save their child, well, from the mess that's been created by defunding public education. Teachers burn out, specialists leave the system, and pressures spill into health care, mental health, and other public services. These are long-term costs that Albertans do not want to be paying.

Albertans know that there is a much smarter way to approach the situation we're finding ourselves in with public education. Bill 6 is not it. Schools in Calgary-Acadia are facing rising enrolment, increasing complexity, and greater demands than ever before. Families are doing everything in their power to support their children, but they cannot replace the public system. They need a strong foundation behind them. Bill 6 doesn't provide that. It doesn't address wait-lists, it doesn't restore – oh, I don't know – funding that's appropriate for what the kids need, it doesn't reduce class sizes, it doesn't add specialty capacity, it does not fund public education properly, and it misses the moment that Albertans are living in right now.

Albertans have been very clear about what a smarter, better pathway looks like. They want a government to fund public education properly beginning with – oh, I don't know – real enrolment, real needs that meet the actual needs of the Albertans coming in and not act like it's a surprise when enrolment increases year after year or buildings need maintenance and they fall apart if you don't address that. They want to see funding that reflects the actual complexity in the classrooms. They want appropriate access to early intervention. And that's not for me to make the call, Mr. Speaker, what that looks like. I'm not the professional. I'm not the expert on that, but neither is this government.

Albertans want decisions grounded in evidence. They want professionals empowered to do their work without politics getting in the way. It's not that we're asking for perfection here, Mr. Speaker. We're just simply asking for a responsible government. We're asking for leadership and a government that understands intellectually if not morally, financially, whatever, the long-term value of public education and early investment in children. Albertans have been incredibly patient with this government, and they have been clear. They've been consistent. They've rallied outside this House a couple of times. They want strong public education.

Thank you.

8:00

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-South West.

Mr. Ip: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I appreciate the opportunity to weigh in on debate with respect to Bill 6, Education (Prioritizing Literacy and Numeracy) Amendment Act, 2025 (No. 2). This bill so clearly demonstrates how disconnected this government is from the realities that teachers face every day.

While literacy and numeracy without question is foundational to learning – that is true – what the government has presented is not a serious plan. It's not a serious plan because it doesn't come with all the things that make any plan possible, and that is funding and appropriate, adequate resources. There is no literacy or numeracy strategy here. It's quite simple. It's just a bill that mandates testing, but it doesn't require any of the needed supports in an already stressed system, frankly, that this government has allowed to become. Under this government the education system has become underfunded, overcrowded, and overwhelmed.

Let's not forget that this government has been in power for six years. All of the issues that teachers have been talking about, school leaders have been talking about, school board trustees and community advocates and parents have been talking about for years and years land squarely on the shoulders of this government. If this government took the time to talk to teachers and principals, they will learn that what school leaders need are more teaching resources in the classroom, more educational assistants, more learning specialists to support the most vulnerable learners.

I visited a school recently, and one principal in my constituency told me that he can list the number of positions he's had to cut as a principal over the years because of the weighted moving average. He told me that what he really needed was a reading recovery teacher or a teacher librarian or, frankly, just more classroom teachers in general and educational assistants who can help students who require specialized supports and give them that individualized attention. He also wished that he had an additional classroom so that he doesn't have to use the staff room as an overflow room. Mr. Speaker, these are pretty basic asks, and I think throughout the last several months through the bargaining process – I must say that this government has engaged in bad-faith bargaining over the last few months – that they would have heard very directly from teachers and those at the bargaining table that this is what they need.

We know how foundational reading is to the future development of a child. In fact, it is the key indicator of not just academic success but success in life. The broadly accepted premise based on evidence is that if a child is able to read at grade level by grade 3, they are much more likely to finish high school and lead a successful life as an adult. That is one of the best social investments you can make as a society, and that is in education and, frankly, in reading.

Ironically, it was this government that decimated program unit funding. I talk a lot about program unit funding because I was a former trustee, and it was truly one of the best if not the best early intervention programs in the country before the UCP came and decimated it. I should also mention that it was this government that cancelled the collecting of class size data, and it was this government that introduced the weighted moving average formula that underfunds, perhaps by design, growing school divisions.

I know this government seems to feign ignorance when it comes to what's needed in the classroom or feigns ignorance when it comes to an already overstretched and underresourced educational system. I know they pretend to not really know what needs to be done when the solutions are quite simple, but this seems to be their modus operandi.

This government likes to change the channel and say to Albertans: why don't we just create another committee to study the problem? They seem to be doing a lot of those, a lot of special blue-ribbon panels that study the problem away. For a government that prides itself on cutting red tape, I have to say, Mr. Speaker, they sure like to create a lot of it, because what they do instead with all of these complexity committees and these special panels – and this is not the first panel. I think that the, you know, former Premier Kenney created another blue-ribbon panel on education as well, but with all of these panels it downloads more administrative work on classroom teachers.

It does things like make teachers fill out another survey. This government likes to write another report, all the while without committing any of the resources to any of these problems. Instead what we've seen is that they've deliberately fragmented the system by diluting resources away from public education.

Let's talk about what Bill 6 actually does. Bill 6 amends the Education Act to require literacy and numeracy screening assessments for children from kindergarten to grade 3. Under the new division it creates, boards must administer literacy and numeracy screening assessments for K to 3 students, report the results to parents, and report individualized student results to the minister in the form and manner the minister requires. The bill then requires the minister to publish an annual report of these results on a government website, and it gives the minister broad regulation-making power over the establishment, conduct, frequency, timing, exemptions, and reporting of these assessments.

Mr. Speaker, this sounds like a lot of nothing. The truth is that if any members on the other side of the House have spent any time in a classroom, they'll know that teachers and school leaders already do their own kinds of assessments when it comes to reading and literacy and numeracy. If you talk to a teacher, they can tell you and identify which one of their students is the one who's struggling with reading or numeracy. They already have that information. What they need are the reading recovery specialists. What they need are the educational assistants in the classroom. What they need is, frankly, respect for their profession, but Bill 6 doesn't do any of that. What it does is that it explicitly authorizes the minister to "request information, including personal information . . . [about individual children, from school] boards for the purpose of overseeing the administration and operation of [these] assessments." That sounds a little bit like *1984* and Big Brother.

8:10

What this bill does is that it essentially establishes, with formal channels, the collection of data. That's all it really does. What the government isn't considering is that what this means is that it will download more hours, in fact hundreds, of administrative work to teachers, taking them away from actually teaching students. Isn't that ironic, Mr. Speaker? This so-called numeracy and literacy bill that is supposed to address classroom complexity perhaps or at least address numeracy and literacy challenges within our schools is actually taking time away from teachers in doing their jobs. That's what it does. None of this is free. This all comes at an opportunity cost.

When I was on the school board, I sat through discussions. I could see the impact of what another audit, frankly, does to the work of a principal or a teacher. It downloads hundreds and hundreds of hours of time that they simply don't have, and it takes away from their ability and from their time to support students. I think what it demonstrates as well, Mr. Speaker, is that this is a pattern of eroding local autonomy of school boards. It's disrespectful and paternalistic.

Basically, this government is asking teachers to do more work on top of the work that they're already doing. Don't forget that there are already lots of screening tools, from the PATs that teachers have to prepare for to standardized diagnostic assessment tools that were reintroduced from grade 1 to 3 in 2022 and expanded to kindergarten starting in January of 2025. So there are already these diagnostic screening tools. The government is introducing more.

But let's hear directly from teachers in terms of what they're saying. The ATA not too long ago issued a report on standardized diagnostic assessment tools specifically with insights from Alberta schools. What this government is saying about these tools is that these screeners are supposed to be quick, research-based tools that will help teachers identify struggling learners early. They quote statistics about accuracy and invoke the language of scientific research. In the ATA report, which directly heard from people who have to administer these tools to five- and six- and seven-year-olds and from the researcher who studied their implementation across Canada, they're basically sharply contrasting with what the government is saying.

The Alberta Teachers' Association, for example, working with Dr. Richelle Marynowski from the University of Lethbridge,

examined SDATs, or standardized diagnostic assessment tools, implementation in real classrooms. They concluded that "the classroom realities sharply contrast with the government's goals" for these assessments. In that report their findings include that, in fact, overtesting, in this case the SDATs, had a negative impact on students, that it was causing stress and anxiety especially for younger students, that English language learners and students with exceptionalities – you know, in situations where there are timed tasks and unfamiliar test formats, it left many children but particularly children with exceptionalities and English language learners feeling like they were failures rather than learners.

Teachers also said that the data arrives late, doesn't tell them anything they didn't already know from their day-to-day assessments. One teacher noted that they would not get usable results until the end of April, long after they had already identified and responded to students' needs. The research also found, Mr. Speaker, that tests often assume knowledge that had not yet been taught and ignore the huge variation in children's experiences entering kindergarten and grade 1.

Finally, Mr. Speaker, the ATA estimates that SDATs are consuming the equivalent of about four full days of instructional time for teachers who are already grappling with a new curriculum and complex classrooms. Imagine that: four full days away from the classroom, time that can be invested in actually supporting kids, especially the most vulnerable students.

In that same research, 82 per cent of teachers reported receiving no training.

Thank you.

The Speaker: Any other speakers? The hon. Member for Calgary-Foothills.

Mr. Ellingson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am pleased to rise and speak to Bill 6, the Education (Prioritizing Literacy and Numeracy) Amendment Act, 2025 (No. 2). I'll start out saying that the minister of education may recall that I have risen in this Chamber on multiple occasions to ask questions and comment on this government's decisions with respect to public education. We have discussed many times the desperate need for schools in Calgary-Foothills. Indeed, the Calgary board of education has four schools on their priority list for Calgary-Foothills, schools that they desperately need today, schools that are currently budgeted for planning that might open and accept students in 2031, if we're lucky.

This bill is about mandatory requirements for literacy and numeracy tests for children in kindergarten and primary school. It is unfortunate that the bill and this government continue to do nothing to address the challenges faced by public school boards, educators, and children. The residents, the voters in Calgary-Foothills place public education as their top priority, probably because there are 7,000 children every day bused up to 45 minutes to a crowded school that likely isn't meeting their needs. This is what motivated me to spend last summer collecting over 1,200 signatures on a petition asking the minister to accelerate construction of just one of the four priority schools for Calgary-Foothills.

Just as the minister has ignored teachers, he ignored that petition. The so-called school accelerator program has not accelerated a single school in Calgary, the largest and fastest growing school division in the province. We learned yesterday that this government doesn't care about minimum wage earners or workers collecting tips for their owners and managers. We learned today that this government doesn't care about gender-diverse kids and the queer community. And as this bill does nothing to address the actual learning environment so that kids can excel, the message that this government sends is clear. They simply don't care. If they did, they would be addressing the very real challenges of classroom sizes, classroom complexity, and the sheer number of new teachers that are leaving the profession.

The Premier has alluded that we aren't talking to teachers, us over here on the other side, but I'd like to take a moment to read some of the notes sent to the minister's office and the Premier's office from which they have received no response. Conveniently, teachers copy us on their correspondence because they know that they will receive no response from the minister. I'll quote.

> There are 8 students with special needs from moderate to severe in my grade 2 class. They are getting no educational assistant support as there are other students in the schools with more severe needs. They need help. I can't do it all. There are 27 [children] in my [kindergarten] class.

8:20

Another teacher, Mr. Speaker, wrote:

> [As a grade 4 teacher I] have 27 students including 2 with no English. I have no EA support. In all I have 11 english language learners and 3 on learning support plans. So much paperwork [and] no support.

Mr. Speaker, I'll throw in another one.

> I have 31 students. Some cannot read or write. 1/3 have behavioural concerns. There is little EA or admin support. I am burnt out and [I am] thinking of quitting.

I think we should be listening to these teachers. If we were listening to these teachers, Bill 6 is not what we would be talking about right now. We would be talking about prioritizing building schools. We'd be talking about prioritizing keeping teachers in the profession and bringing more new teachers into the profession. We have heard that as many as 40 per cent of new teachers are leaving the profession in their first five years. If that, Mr. Speaker, is not a sobering number for all of us to be paying attention to, I don't even know what to say.

Mr. Speaker, I will certainly take some time now directly addressing the content of this bill. Now, I'll admit that I am not an expert in this area. Even though I have a lot of expertise in economic development, I don't think I'm qualified to be teaching in a junior high or high school on that topic. I'm going to draw on the expertise of teachers, residents, voters in Calgary-Foothills again who have written to the minister and the Premier on the subject of literacy and numeracy testing for children in K to 3.

> I am writing to provide feedback on the Early Years assessment after administering it this September in my first grade classroom.
>
> At the beginning of the school year, the most important things are building relationships, getting students excited about school [and learning] and the year ahead, and building [those] students' self-esteem. These tests went against every one of these integral parts of [a child entering] first grade . . .
>
> Testing students for hours and hours does not make them excited to learn. It in fact does the opposite. Students were stressed out, frustrated, and even crying because they didn't know how to do the activities. Grade ones at the beginning of the year are learning how to put glue stick lids on, [how to] use their scissors, write their name [at the top of] a sheet of paper and the expectations from these assessments (the math specifically) were absolutely not appropriate. Building community, spending time together, practicing the concepts that they . . . learned in Kindergarten and enjoying each other are the way to [create] a successful . . . school experience . . .

That's what we should be thinking about as children enter grade 1.

> . . . and this testing should have no part in our back to school plans.

> I cannot get over the amount of time this took to administer. It was over 8 hours of individual pulling of students [aside].

Eight hours.

> How is that ok?!?!?! At the beginning of the school year I spend all of my time with students supporting them in activities, showing them how routines work, teaching them at the level they are at and I cannot do this when I am sitting off to the side [of the class] pulling [children aside] to assess them. This was just the literacy. The whole class math testing took . . . 2 hours to complete. This means that instead of students learning actual curriculum, which by the way has increased by three new units with the new math curriculum, they were instead doing useless testing that does not help the teacher to learn where they are . . . they are not expected to know any of those concepts yet!!!!!!!!!!
>
> Not only does the testing take incredible amounts of student learning time, it also drains teachers with marking everything and then having to enter all of the data. The beginning of the school year is absolutely the most exhausting time of the year and this additional work took away from teacher wellness and planning time.
>
> The content of these assessments . . . needs to be addressed. True screeners that are diagnostic do not happen until grade 3. These Early literacy assessments are being presented to the community as screeners that will find students who are behind. What these assessments are testing is not screening students because it is assessing students on what they need to know by the end of the year and even some of [the content] is not [included] in the curriculum. It actually says in the documents from Alberta Education that these tests are not correlated to curriculum. If testing must be part of the process then it must be relevant.

She goes on to say, Mr. Speaker:

> I invite you to come visit a grade one classroom and spend [some] time to find out what it . . . is [really] like at [the beginning] of the year and then consult [and talk] with teachers who are in front of these students on what is truly best for them.

Mr. Speaker, on this side of the House we are listening to teachers, and teachers are telling us that Bill 6 is ludicrous. Let me assure you, this was not the only letter that I received from teachers who live in Calgary-Foothills regarding this bill, but the ATA has also weighed in on this topic. In their report on literacy and numeracy screeners, classroom conditions, cellphone bans, and AI in Alberta's K to 12 schools, the ATA pulse research study from January earlier this year, they made it clear that these tests are regressional. They make the learning environment and performance of children in these key skills worse, not better. The report highlights that 75 per cent of teachers say that these tests contribute significantly to student anxiety and stress. Timed assessments in particular lead to emotional distress, causing students to cry, shut down, or refuse to participate.

Mr. Speaker, is that the goal of this government? To shut down children so they don't participate? I thought what we wanted to do was create a learning environment for all children to succeed. Bill 6 does not do that; it does the opposite.

Further, 71 per cent of teachers report that the screeners are misaligned with the students' developmental readiness. Literacy screeners test phonics and vocabulary not yet introduced. Numeracy screeners present concepts that are beyond grade level. The majority of teachers say that there is a lack of actionable insights, unclear benchmarks, and no training offered in interpreting the results of these assessments. But this government has made it clear that they don't care what teachers think. They made it clear when they stripped them of their Charter rights in Bill 2.

Not only does Bill 6 do nothing to address the very real challenges in public education; the requirements set out in the bill make things worse. It burdens already overwhelmed teachers with meaningless time spent administering screeners with no planned actionable outcomes. It forces children through a process that is inappropriate for their learning level, resulting in increased anxiety. We are supposed to be encouraging children to learn; instead, this government seems intent on shutting them down. Since this government is already so focused on punching down on the vulnerable, the negative effects of this bill are even worse for kids with specialized needs and English language learners.

8:30

The minister might recall that 90 per cent of teachers voted against the settlement that was forced upon them. They rejected that proposal because it did not address class sizes, class complexities, or the needs of teachers and students.

Mr. Speaker, if this government won't listen to teachers and build a public education system that supports the needs of all students, Alberta's New Democrats will. The final say on this topic is not from the government members. The final say is with the people. The people will be the judge, and they are judging already that Bill 6 should be shot down.

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

Mr. Dach: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. A pleasure to rise this evening to speak to Bill 6 and carry on the debate, which has been rather one-sided this evening, I must say. We heard a number of my colleagues from this side of the House, the opposition NDP, speaking very, very vociferously against the legislation, yet we haven't heard a peep from the government side in support. Perhaps there's good reason for that. The bill is a pretty difficult piece of legislation to defend, in my opinion.

I was trying to garner some understanding, in reading the legislation and reports about it, as to the motivation for this piece of legislation from the government. Generally speaking, there usually is a reason that a government comes forward with a piece of legislation, something to benefit the population it's supposedly serving although it seems as though time and time again this government is intent on serving its own interests rather than the interests of Alberta when they bring forward pieces of legislation.

This piece of legislation is devoid of any benefit to the students it purports to serve, the educators it will force the screening tests upon. The only thing that I can glean from my interpretation of the bill, Mr. Speaker, as to the intent is to allow the government to once again create a platform to blame somebody else for problems that they are responsible for.

The problem that they're looking at trying to deflect responsibility for, Mr. Speaker, is the underfunding of education and the resulting difficulties that that's caused for educators in this province to the extent that in the recent negotiations that took place and which ended up failing to reach a negotiated fair deal between teachers and the government, underfunding was at its basis. The teachers were never ever claiming that there was a contract looking for solely increases in benefits for themselves. At the root of it was always the classroom sizes, the classroom complexity, which needed to be properly funded for.

That is what the government failed to recognize and to account for in the negotiations that took place with the Alberta Teachers' Association. Twice the contract that was offered to the teachers was rejected. Ultimately, that's basically, I think, the root of the issue that we're talking about here, Mr. Speaker, with this Bill 6. It's another chapter in the UCP blame game.

Now, who evaluated students before this piece of legislation came along purporting to codify what has been in place for a little while, that is the K to 3 testing for literacy and numeracy? It's a

fairly draconian move to come in and say – I mean, this testing is in place and it's happening already. The teachers are accepting the burden of testing, apparently taking up to a week of classroom time to administer these exams, these tests on K to 3 students. And I might say, Mr. Speaker, that if you think about it, K to 3, these are children under 10 years of age undergoing rather stressful exams. I mean, if you want to compare them to provincial achievement tests at such a young age, I think that would be a fair comparison. Students are aware that they're going under some scrutiny when they're taking these exams. There's a stress level that I think is unnecessarily being imposed upon these children to serve a government purpose but certainly not the benefit of the children.

I've got a very interesting situation in my constituency, Mr. Speaker, where the Edmonton public school board listened to their constituents and actually implemented a school which is exactly these grade levels, from K to 3. Aleda Patterson school in my constituency is a school which comprises of students only in grades K to 3. It's a magical place to visit. Those grade levels are students who have yet to find a competitive necessity, I might describe it as. It's a joy to go into that school because none of them are looking to batter the other student. The whole goal is learning and helping each other out. The staff and students are to be credited because they, basically, find ways to find joy in that learning environment with students who have yet to do anything but feel they need to be there to learn and be creative in an environment that is noncompetitive.

Yet we're looking to implement and codify and legislate and make it legally required to have these students, these K to 3 students who are in a rather blissful environment in Aleda Patterson, subjected to an unnecessary stress that will, I think, taint the experience that they've had created for them in this K to 3 school in my riding of Edmonton-McClung. I'm going to make a point, Mr. Speaker, of trying to find out from these educators at that school exactly how they feel it is going to affect the environment in that school. I've got some calls out to teachers there and the administrators to see exactly what their thoughts are. I hope to hear back in time to add that commentary to the debate here in the House.

Now, this decision to implement and legislate this new testing imperative is one that we should ponder because, in fact, it's not something that has suddenly been imposed. The requirement to test for numeracy and literacy for younger grades has been in place as a policy matter for two to three years now, but all of a sudden the government, for whatever reason, has decided to mandate this and make it a legislative imperative. One asks oneself what indeed the motivation was for that because that, Mr. Speaker, is really the only significant change that's taking place as a result of this legislation, making it legally mandatory.

Adding teeth to the bill, you know, is like a warning sign. It's a shot across the bow. It's a heavy-handed notification to somebody. Once again, I think what it does is imply that if you fail to comply – it might imply it. It will say in the legislation that if you fail to comply, there are going to be consequences because it's a legislated, mandated testing requirement for teachers. The reason I think that the government is coming up with this is to, once again, provide a platform to blame somebody else for their own shortcomings. Of course, in the past who have we seen them blame in previous public servant negotiations? It was the health care workers. In a previous time frame it was the educational assistants. In this particular instance, Mr. Speaker, I posit that it will be the teachers and educators once again who'll be the target of this UCP government as a result of implementing and prioritizing literacy and numeracy as a mandated requirement enforced by legislation.

8:40

Once again, the heavy hand of this government is poised to turn into a fist in very short order as a result of this piece of legislation. All it does, in my view, Mr. Speaker, is enable a rather draconian measure to ensure that the will of the government is done, you know, even in the classroom. That's how far the tentacles of this government are stretching, into K to 3 classrooms. The government wishes to wrap its tentacles around the operational environment in a K to 3 classroom. What my constituents in Edmonton-McClung are telling me about this is that they are not only dismayed and surprised and shocked; they're angry about the lack of respect that this government is showing multitudes of professional public servants. In this case, of course, it's teachers and administrators.

Instead of providing them with the resources they require to provide a learning environment necessary for students to achieve the results that teachers are already evaluating on their own in the classrooms, they've been starved of those resources over the last number of years. No matter how many times the government tries to skew the numbers to suggest that they are spending more than ever before on education, the per capita numbers, Mr. Speaker, are really what matter, and in fact the per capita numbers of spending on students over the last while has dropped. The fact is that the budgets have been squeezed, and as a result you don't have the supports in the classrooms, where you have increasingly complex classrooms, where you have much larger classrooms. As a result, the teachers are overtaxed, overstressed, and many of them will quit.

The number I've read, Mr. Speaker, is that 50 per cent of those teachers who graduate with a teaching degree are no longer teachers. They quit the profession within five years. That's a startling result, and it's very, very wasteful, in my view, of the time and talent of those individuals who have invested four or five years or more of their young adult lives to become educators. Yet they're so disgusted with the treatment that they've received from this government after joining the profession, so disappointed with the lack of respect and the lack of resources that they receive while teaching that they leave the profession. Now, that's a pretty damning condemnation of the world of teaching and education in this province right now.

Funding schools properly is something that has been called for time and time and time again, not looking to test K to 3 students and making it a mandatory requirement to do so, Mr. Speaker. That's not anything that's been called for by teachers, by parents, and certainly, of course, the students haven't been asking for it. They're too young to know what's happening, but K to 3 students in my riding will suffer the consequences of this decision. Unfortunately, it seems to be motivated by the government's need to control, once again, anybody that might dare to oppose them. In this case it may be another way to control teachers.

The data that will be collected as a result of the K to 3 screening tests: I'm not sure what the actual motivation for collecting the data will be. Is the government intent to once again take a look at the data and point to teachers as those who are responsible for failings? I probably would venture to say yes. The failings are evident in the funding model, Mr. Speaker, and that's why 50 per cent of teachers are leaving within five years of entering the profession.

I mean, forcing striking Alberta teachers back to work is something that will haunt this government forever, Mr. Speaker. It'll be a hallmark of their failure in the next election as well as other things that they are contemplating right now.

The only thing that individuals who are involved in the education system right now are asking for is to ensure that the students are receiving the funding resources that are required to make sure that

the classrooms are good learning environments and that the large numbers of students that we've seen come to the province have the funding they require to meet their needs, specifically and especially when you have so many students with English as a second language as well as students with special needs. The whole concept of inclusion is something that we've been . . .

The Speaker: Hon. members, the Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

Mr. Gurtej Brar: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We all agree that literacy and numeracy are essential. Every child deserves the confidence to read, understand numbers, and flourish in classrooms, but Bill 6 is not the path to achieving that goal. It is the wrong approach, built on wrong assumptions, justified by wrong arguments. To understand how we reached here, let me begin with a story, not a fictional story, not an inflated one but the story of our province. Alberta is the land of opportunities, a beautiful province blessed with natural wealth, built by hard-working people. For decades our public education system was admired globally. People chose to settle here because they believed that Alberta was a place where their children could thrive. Teachers were respected. Classrooms were supported. Communities trusted the government.

But in recent years the people who stand at the front of those classrooms, the teachers, began to see something deeply concerning. They saw that resources are shrinking, they saw supports disappearing, they saw classrooms growing more overcrowded than ever before, and they discovered that Alberta, one of the richest jurisdictions in the world, was spending the least per student in the entire country. Teachers were being stretched thin because they lacked the tools and support required to do their work safely, sustainably, and effectively, not because they lack skills or qualifications. How long could they continue like that?

They spoke up. They made it clear that Alberta needs 5,000 additional teachers and 3,000 educational assistants to ensure every child received proper attention. Alberta teachers were working 47 hours per week, among the highest workload anywhere. They asked not for bonuses or special treatment but for dignity, fairness, and the resources necessary to help students succeed.

Instead of listening, this government saw a political opportunity. For 18 months they pretended to negotiate in good faith. They told teachers they were working on it, they told parents they were collaborating, but behind the scenes they were preparing legislation, legislation designed not to solve a problem but to silence the people raising the alarm.

8:50

When teachers had exhausted every avenue, when their concerns had been dismissed again and again, they exercised their Charter-protected right: strike, a right every worker in a democracy possesses, a right to get fair wages, fair treatment, and fair employment. But what did this government do? They launched an attack against teachers, not with evidence, not with solutions, not with moral ground but with taxpayer-funded advertisements designed to undermine and discredit them. They attempted to turn Albertans against the very people who educate our children, but parents, guardians, and students rallied in support of teachers because they understood the true value of education. Alberta's education crisis is not a crisis of teacher performance; it is crisis of government neglect.

Thousands of people stood outside this Legislature in the cold, in the rain demanding fairness. Communities organized rallies, town halls, petitions, and peaceful demonstrations, yet this government did not listen, not for a moment. Instead, they introduced Bill 2, that so-called Back to School Act. The legislation crushed a lawful strike. It imposed the contract rejected by 90 per cent of teachers. For the first time in Alberta's history this government invoked the notwithstanding clause against its own teachers, signalling to the entire province that the voice of 51,000 educators, parents, and students did not matter. The world noticed, and people asked: how can a government in one of the most democratic countries in the world undermine democratic rights so casually? That is exactly what happened right here in this Legislature.

Now, Mr. Speaker, the same government that silenced teachers claims it's suddenly acting in the best interest of students. Today they bring Bill 6, a bill that pretends to support literacy and numeracy, but in reality what this government does is very different. It targets the professionals who know our children best. It downloads responsibility without providing resources, and it introduces mandatory testing that research shows is harmful, unnecessary, and counterproductive.

Let us be clear about what Bill 6 actually does. It forces every child from kindergarten to grade 3 to take a standardized literacy and numeracy screening test chosen by the minister. School boards must administer these tests, collect the data, send the individual result to the parents, and then hand over the entire database to the minister's office. Then the minister gets to publish an annual public ranking of schools' report cards, as they call them, based on entirely how many young children hit a government target.

Mr. Speaker, I want to repeat this because it's nearly unbelievable. This government wants to rank kindergarten classes. Teachers know this makes no sense. The ATA has rejected this idea. Teachers already identify which children need support, often within days, sometime within hours. These mandatory tests will reveal nothing new, but they will consume precious instructional time in the classrooms already overwhelmed.

Let us turn to what the evidence says. First, early standardized testing harms young children. A 2023 meta-analysis of 113 studies found that high-stakes testing in early grades increases anxiety, reduces motivation, and damages the natural joy of learning. Stress hormones spike when five-year-olds are asked to complete tests they cannot yet read.

Second, vulnerable children suffer most. English language learners, First Nations, Métis, and Inuit students, and children with disabilities are unfairly flagged as failing not because they lack potential but because they lack support. More testing will not close the gap, but more support would.

Testing narrows the curriculum. When schools are judged on test scores, instruction becomes test preparation. Play-based learning, which research consistently shows is essential for early development, disappears. Music, art, drama, and physical education remain squeezed to the margin. Creativity is sacrificed for compliance.

Fourth, the bill adds paperwork, not teachers. Alberta has the most overcrowded classrooms in Canada. Kindergarten classes with 30 to 35 students are no longer unusual. Teachers buy their own supplies. Assistants are stretched so thin, they are often supporting multiple classrooms at once. And instead of funding more staff, this government adds new mandatory reporting requirements without providing more funding. Bill 6 promises no details, no commitments, no additional teachers.

Fifth, Bill 6 threatens privacy. Sensitive student data, including behavioural notes, medical exemptions, and learning accommodations, will be sent directly to the minister's office with no clear limitation on storage, access, or future use. Parents deserve transparency and safeguards, yet Bill 6 provides neither.

Mr. Speaker, Alberta students are not falling behind because teachers forgot how to teach reading. They are struggling because this government has cut per-student funding by over 12 per cent in

real time since 2019 once inflation and enrolment growth are considered.

Let me offer a different example from my constituency, one that shows what is truly happening in our schools. I recently visited three elementary schools. Each of them serves different communities, different backgrounds, and different needs, yet all of them face the same challenges: classrooms with nearly 30 children, teachers stretched beyond capacity, and support staff pulled in six directions at once. In one school I hear their stories of new students who have English as a second language impacted by the funding cuts, and in another the principal told me that they don't have enough teachers to pay one-on-one attention to kids. In a third teachers told me that they were forced to teach kids in the hallways, gym, and library. Is this what our kids deserve, Mr. Speaker? I'm sure we can all agree that kids deserve better.

Those classrooms do not need more tests; they need more hands, more supports, more adults who can sit with the child, listen deeply, and teach with care and patience. A test cannot do that. Spreadsheets cannot do that. But teachers can when they are given the resources to succeed, Mr. Speaker.

If this government truly cared about literacy, they would invest in the proven solutions used around the world: smaller class sizes, more support for kids with special needs, support staff. Instead, we get Bill 6, a bill built on the idea that pressuring children will somehow help them learn faster. It will not. It cannot, Mr. Speaker. The UCP broke trust with teachers when they invoked the notwithstanding clause to silence them. Now with Bill 6 they threaten to break trust with parents and children by turning early education into a factory evaluation.

9:00

This bill will not improve the literacy rate. It will increase stress, narrow learning, and drive more dedicated educators out of this profession. On behalf of Alberta NDP, on behalf of 51,000 teachers who were told their voices do not matter, on behalf of every child in this province who deserves joy, courtesy, and safety in their learning, I urge all members of this Assembly to vote against Bill 6.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

Mr. Ceci: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I won't take too long. I want to get my objections to Bill 6 on the record as well, and I want to start by saying that Alberta used to have the best public education system in the world. But as a result of the UCP's mismanagement since 2019, we have slipped dramatically. The three-and-a-half-week strike is an indication of how badly handled the education system has been in this province by the government.

The proof point for those two comments, Mr. Speaker, is, of course, in the – let me just get the wording – standardized diagnostic assessment tool. I think that's the wording. Yup. In 2015 – no. I'm sorry; I'm talking about PISA, not the standardized assessment tool. In 2015 the program for international student assessment, or PISA, ranked Alberta students number one in Canada; 2015 happens to correlate with the end of the PC government and the start of the NDP government. In 2015 PISA ranked Alberta students number one in Canada and second in the world for science, reading, and math. At that time the PCs, followed by the NDP, funded Alberta education, the public education system, and the results followed that.

In 2022 PISA ranking for Alberta – and that would be about three years into the first UCP government – said that Alberta students had fallen to seventh place for mathematics. We know that Alberta has the lowest per-student or per capita funding in the country and the test scores are showing that, that the lack of funding has an impact on the ability of students to perform. That's what the three-and-a-half-week teachers' strike was all about as well. It was about teachers not trying to fill their pockets; they were trying to say they need support and resources.

Bill 6 does none of that. Bill 6 is legislating screening tools, legislating making law that screening tools have to be in place. They're already in place, Mr. Speaker. I was looking at some of the comments that many of my colleagues on this side who are opposing Bill 6 have made. The colleague from Calgary-Beddington put forward the idea that the minister is putting forward Bill 6 to show that he's doing something for Alberta students. On this side we kind of stand with teachers who say: if you want to do something, address the size of the classrooms. And my colleague just on my other side here, Edmonton-Ellerslie, talked about 5,000 additional teachers needed – 5,000 – and I know that the other side is talking about 3,000, that over several years there will be 3,000 more. Well, that doesn't get the classroom size reduced to the extent that it needs to be immediately.

My colleague also talked about education assistants, 3,000 of them. I remember back in 2019-2020, just at the onset of COVID, that the other side, Mr. Speaker, as government wanted to reduce the budget at the time. They looked to the public education system, and they talked about – no, they didn't talk. They made a reduction of 20,000 employees, teachers, education assistants, administrators. All those people were let go unceremoniously.

One of the talking points that I hear often from the other side is: well, you didn't raise teachers' salaries; for 10 years they didn't get a raise. You know, Mr. Speaker, we did not fire one of them. We did not fire or let go one of them. We built or invested in 224 schools or modernizations. The other side can claim that they put so much time and energy into investing in schools, but we know it's in the dozens, like, maybe 60.

Mr. Speaker, the other side has let teachers down, they've let students down, and now this is what they bring forward to say that things are going to be better as a result of this. Well, teachers don't buy it. Administrators don't buy it. We don't buy it. I'll tell you what one teacher – I think it may be the same as the letter my colleague from Calgary-Foothills got. This teacher called Elisha said: "These assessments are due by the end of September at a time that should be spent on building relationships, establishing classroom routines, reviewing prior learning, setting students up for success. Instead, students are often left doing busywork, watching a movie, or playing games while their teacher is tied up testing. There are no supports provided by this government to deliver these assessments. There is no funding attached to delivering these assessments."

Speaking of funding, I think I saw written somewhere that the minister says that there's $13 million, $14 million the next year, and $15 million the year after that. Well, Mr. Speaker, that's wholly inadequate to address complexity in the classroom. That's wholly inadequate to address class sizes. One of the larger school boards says that to address complexity in their classrooms, it would take 10 times that: $148 million. The minister is talking about a paltry $45 million for the whole province's public education system.

I don't think this minister, this government wants to fix the public education system and the achievements of our students. I don't think they do. I think they're content with an underfunded and least per capita in the entire country funded education system per student. That's no legacy, Mr. Speaker. It's not one an NDP government would leave. It certainly is one that the UCP government is confident that they want to leave Albertans.

Teachers, others: they're not going to take it anymore. Mr. Speaker, that side took away the right for teachers to organize as a labour union for five years. It's shameful that we're seeing the notwithstanding clause come forward four times today as well as Bill 2's one time.

Mr. Speaker, I'll sit down and let my colleague from Calgary-Mountain View speak. Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Mountain View.

9:10

Ms Ganley: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to rise to speak today to Bill 6. I care very deeply about education, I would say in part because I have a child in the school system but also in part because of my background. At the time Justice and Solicitor General was all one, so sort of police and courts and corrections and jails and everything were all in one ministry, and I dealt with it heavily. What I would say was clear then and, honestly, even back when I was in school and working with Student Legal Assistance is that there's a real, clear correlation, for anyone that has ever worked in the justice system, between public education and investment in public education and not having people wind up in the court system and in jail.

[Mr. van Dijken in the chair]

There are various estimates about how much is saved by $1 invested in education, Mr. Speaker, but the lowest one I have ever seen is that it ultimately saves $4. Now, this isn't politically expedient, so this government probably won't be that concerned with it. The savings ultimately vest down the road. They vest to a subsequent government, so they can't make hay with it. That sort of long-term planning and long-term thinking is not something that this government is particularly interested in, which is very, very sad. It would be to the benefit of us all to spend the money on a child's education rather than spending the money incarcerating the adult. It's a real shame.

I don't like this bill, Mr. Speaker. I don't think it's a good bill. The reason I don't like it is because, well, I mean, one, it's just a huge waste of time. Like, teachers already know these things. But this is a government who's unwilling to believe teachers, in part because they devalue professionalism across professions. I mean, whether it's teachers, doctors, lawyers, whatever, they don't have an interest in sort of professional judgment or allowing professionals to act in that way. That is a big problem.

Teachers already know this about their students. They know where the students are struggling. The government is unwilling to believe the teachers, so instead they want to do these assessments, assessments that will take the teacher out of the classroom for days. Like, you want to talk about money that gets wasted in the education system: pulling a teacher out of a classroom for days in order to deal with this when they already probably knew the outcome is very, very problematic.

The real reason, Mr. Speaker, that this bill is problematic is because it is a distraction in, like, the most intense way. This is the ugliest side of politics, where the government brings forward a bill that is totally unnecessary. Unnecessary at absolute best; detrimental at worst. But because they want to have something to talk about on education other than the fact that our once best in the country education system is crumbling under this government – and it's crumbling due to lack of investment. We have the lowest per-student funding in the country in a province that has historically had the best GDP, the best economy. We are totally shortchanging our children. An investment at this time, investment when a child is small, changes the entire trajectory. You have to invest so much less to get the same result than you would at an older age.

Do you know that there are studies, Mr. Speaker, in the United States that have extensively studied the fact that grade 3 literacy rates reverse correlate to prison populations? You can predict how many jails you have to build based on how well you're teaching your children in the public education system. It's all very well and good to say, "Oh, well, for the rich kids they can go to private school," but your prison population literacy rate correlations aren't just the rich kids; they're all the kids.

It's about ensuring that those who came from different backgrounds have an equal opportunity. Mr. Speaker, that's what public education is. It's about ensuring that, no matter what your background, no matter what your parents do, no matter where you came from, you have the same opportunities, and the fact that we are allowing that to erode, that this government has taken us to the lowest per-student funding in the country and is allowing that advantage to erode, is incredibly problematic. These assessments will not do anything positive, and they will probably have a detrimental effect.

Meanwhile our children are crammed into classrooms. You know, people talk about these, like, 100 per cent utilization rates, Mr. Speaker. That is 100 per cent of the floor space, so when you talk about a 100 per cent utilization rate, that means there's no library, there's no gym. All of those things are being used as classrooms. I mean, I actually think it's a bad way to measure the numbers because it doesn't communicate properly to the public, who are ultimately the people who should be upset about this, but the fact of the matter is that these schools are overutilized. A hundred per cent is over capacity. It means that there are kids learning in the gym and on the stage and in the library, in spaces that we need to enrich our student experience.

This government hasn't been building schools. This was absolutely predictable. It was the most predictable thing ever. No one should have been surprised, no one that was paying attention, anyway. Really, you know, this government can say: "Oh, we were so surprised. We just weren't watching. We weren't paying attention, and then, whoops, all these people showed up, and we didn't build schools for them." I don't know. I think that's a terrible argument, but maybe we'll allow it.

Then what's the excuse for the per-pupil underfunding? What's the excuse for that? We know the students are here now. The government could simply fund them. I don't know. Even up to the average in the country might be helpful, but no. Instead, they bring in this bill to distract. This is a government that so deeply doesn't want to talk about our children's learning conditions that they stopped measuring. They stopped measuring. Like, they're going to tell you, "Oh, this is about data," but they stopped measuring classroom complexity and class sizes in 2019, and now they think they need a committee about it. They don't need a committee about it; they need to read their inboxes about it.

Teachers are writing to us. They are telling us what is going on, but this is a government that isn't willing to believe teachers because they don't like them? I don't know. I mean, they certainly trampled over their rights with casual disregard that's incredibly troubling, and now they're suggesting that teachers knowing what their students need isn't enough. Instead, they need to know. This is all part of their: "We know better. We know better than professionals. We know better than doctors. We know better than everyone." And that's – yeah.

Everything – everything, Mr. Speaker – about this bill is extremely troubling, and I really think the government ought to do

better. With that, I am going to move an amendment. I will wait for it to reach you.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you, Member.

The amendment will be referred to as amendment RA1.

If you could read it into the record, please.

Ms Ganley: Absolutely, Mr. Speaker. I move that the motion for second reading of Bill 6, Education (Prioritizing Literacy and Numeracy) – oh, boy, the title – Amendment Act, 2025 (No. 2), be amended by deleting the words after "that" and substituting the following:

> Bill 6, Education (Prioritizing Literacy and Numeracy) Amendment Act, 2025 (No. 2), be not now read a second time because the Assembly is of the view that the proposed screening assessment and reporting requirements are deeply ableist and will leave behind in their education thousands of children in Alberta, who are already struggling in overcrowded and undersupported classrooms in the public education system.

9:20

Mr. Speaker, just to describe briefly the amendment, the concern is, essentially, that the government is disregarding teachers' assessment of what's going on with their kids. They're requiring them to take these tests, but these tests, I mean, are ableist. Essentially, the discrimination is that a neutral rule – i.e. everybody shall take the test – has a disproportionate effect on certain people, in this case children with certain disorders, whether they're ADHD, whether they're anxiety, whether they're just learning differences of various varieties. This has a real impact on these students, and it is highly problematic.

They are students that are already in a position of – I mean, you know, the government wants to enumerate them somewhere as the kids that are the problem, the kids that can't read or don't have math, without ever, Mr. Speaker, turning to look inwards and wondering whether the fact that they have denied these children access to an educational assistant really results in them being denied the right to an education at all. We wonder why kids who have learning differences act up in classes. Well, it's because they're not being educated. They don't have access to the material, and the government for very little input could give them access to the material but instead chooses to violate their right to an education in a way that is incredibly problematic.

Mr. Speaker, I move this amendment because I think that it is true that we should not proceed forward with this bill. With that, I will move that we adjourn debate.

[Motion to adjourn debate carried]

Bill 7
Water Amendment Act, 2025

[Adjourned debate November 17: Mr. Shepherd]

The Acting Speaker: Are there any others wishing to speak to Bill 7, Water Amendment Act, 2025? I will recognize the Member for Calgary-Glenmore.

Ms Al-Guneid: All right. Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to speak on Bill 7, the Water Amendment Act, 2025. I would like to start by saying that I am delighted to speak about water. I visited many places last year and this year that featured Alberta's headwaters, rivers, wetlands, and lakes, from Nordegg to the eastern slopes, Lethbridge, and, of course, all over the beautiful Rocky Mountains. Water is essential for the health of our communities, environment, and economy. Industry uses water, whether it's oil and gas, fracking, or oil sands, irrigators, farmers, municipalities: everyone, really. So water is essential.

The first thing that caught my attention when I first read Bill 7 was actually section 47(3), that says, "The Minister may, by order, authorize the Director to issue a licence authorizing a lower-risk transfer." Mr. Speaker, this section is very problematic because no minister – no minister – should ever have this power to direct any type of interbasin transfer from their political office without public notice, without proper public consultations. This is a ridiculous amount of unchecked authority and power centralization at the minister's office. I repeat: from the minister's political office and through a ministerial order, as per this section, the minister directs what we have here, a whole new category of low-risk interbasin transfers.

Back in June we saw Ministerial Order 15 from the environment ministry, which ended the limit on flaring in oil and gas operations. This ministerial order was quietly released through the Alberta Energy Regulator and quietly published in a bulletin on the AER website. Gas flaring in Alberta blew all the limits in 2023 and 2024, and what was the response of the environment minister, Mr. Speaker? The minister responded unilaterally through a ministerial order by removing the flaring limit in Alberta. That was the response from the minister's office. So it's hard to take these ministerial orders seriously and with any credibility, frankly, when it's about removing environmental protections. Frankly, it is giving up on industry innovation and the industry's emission reduction efforts.

Mr. Speaker, to protect the environment and reduce gas flaring, the energy company I worked for in the past built a small power plant next to the oil and gas operation, and the excess gas that was supposed to be flared was captured and used to provide electricity to the surrounding communities. This was one of the most successful local community projects in rural communities. If there is a will, there are many ways to innovate and reduce flaring and be a responsible producer, and the environment minister should take note instead of issuing ministerial orders that weaken environmental protections.

This is an example of these power centralization moves that we're seeing. Removing the flaring limits wasn't just the only unilateral decision made against evidence from the minister's office. There was also the decision of approving a motor race track in the badlands, a very sensitive ecosystem and a fragile environment, near Rosebud, Alberta. That was also against the evidence given.

There's also the ongoing clear absence of the environment ministry from protecting our water from coal mining in the eastern slopes. We know that coal mining overruns, whether it's mountaintop mining, underground, whichever fruit salad we hear from the UCP, will reach the headwaters and rivers, and selenium will make its way to our waters. This is another example of the weakening of our environmental protections under the UCP. [interjection] I mean, the minister can continue heckling. It's fine.

There's also the extremely disappointing effort of the environment ministry to weaken TIER and not fix its stringency, Mr. Speaker. This is Alberta's industrial carbon pricing system, that will help reduce emissions and protect the environment. After all these decisions that have weakened environmental protections, how can we trust another ministerial order from this environment ministry on interbasin transfers?

Mr. Speaker, I've gotten up a few times here in this House and spoken against this government's nonsense of power concentration in ministers' offices. Section 47(3) is a clear example of this power concentration, and it's an increasing pattern with the UCP government. We've seen the circus before, both in Government

Motion 16 and Government Motion 53, the Premier's sovereignty act. We've seen the UCP's musings of controlling private emissions data in Bill 45, which bars federal employees from entering oil and gas facilities, and it controls oil and gas data. We've seen this power concentration in Bill 52, where the utilities minister also bypassed the oversight of the Alberta Utilities Commission in order to pass the initial rules to implement the restructured energy market. Here again, in Bill 7, the government is removing checks and balances, public notifications, and consultations, and the environment minister gets to decide what is a low-risk interbasin water transfer. This is extremely problematic.

9:30

Mr. Speaker, I do speak regularly with the industry – oil and gas, oil sands, and electricity – and what every sector tells me is that we need regulatory certainty, clarity, transparency, and integrity. What the industry tells me all the time is that we need policy certainty; they want clear and effective regulations. What I see here is the government asking that we should trust leaving interbasin water transfer decisions at the fingertips of a political office; that is, the minister's office.

This is not policy certainty, Mr. Speaker. The industry is already wary of the political interference in the AER, the AESO, the overall politicization of the public service. The industry is also wary of the sovereignty act, the notwithstanding clause, and even the musings of creating Crown corporations in the electricity sector and potentially two more in the oil and gas sector to pay off their liabilities disaster. Bill 7 demonstrates this continued pattern of weakening our regulatory process in Alberta. I believe leaving such a critical decision at a political office is not policy certainty for the industry. Who needs enemies when the industry has friends like the UCP?

I would add that besides this unacceptable power concentration in Bill 7, it's important to say that interbasin transfers are risky and a very controversial thing. The government is coming up with this whole new category, the so-called low-risk interbasin water transfer, and Mr. Speaker, experts are telling us that any type of interbasin transfers should remain rare due to the risks associated with them and the potential to impact the long-term integrity of river basins. Has the minister requested and received a comprehensive analysis of the potential benefits and risks associated with low-risk interbasin water transfer? That could be in regional and community economic opportunities, environmental sustainability, First Nations' treaty rights, and even cumulative impacts.

Again, we see some numbers on the bill, and this is in 47(c)(i), (ii), and (iii). Where are the studies to prove this data? Why wouldn't the minister release all that information and studies on how the ministry came up with these thresholds? The merging of river basins must be done with expert-driven data, and this is something Bill 7 fails to outline.

And it's not just experts who are concerned about this irresponsible merging, but the Rural Municipalities of Alberta, or RMA, has shared a lot of concerns, Mr. Speaker. The RMA said that Bill 7

> weakens safeguards against inter-basin transfers of invasive species and contaminants by introducing a "lower-risk transfer" provision. This allows the Minister to approve water transfers where flow is below a set threshold. Although this may reduce regulatory costs, it heightens the risk of spreading invasive species and pathogens – such as whirling disease – across Alberta's watersheds.

The RMA continues to say that

> Bill 7 also loosens the requirements around approving inter-basin transfers to allow for approval by ministerial order in "low risk" scenarios. RMA expressed significant concerns with this change during the engagement process and continues to seek clarity on how this process will be used and for what purpose.

Wow. It sounds like the environment minister did not listen enough; maybe time to go back to the consultation process, Mr. Speaker.

With all these concerned stakeholders, the question becomes: will the minister amend Bill 7 to require the timely posting of any application for an interbasin water transfer on the government's website for Albertans to review? Why make this a hidden process driven by a minister's office? And why would any minister really want this type of risky decision, a unilateral decision, through a ministerial order? If not, why is this government removing Albertans' ability to be informed on government decisions related to freshwater use that might directly affect their community, families, and livelihoods? How will the minister assure Albertans, particularly those in northern Alberta, that the minister will not be influenced by political priorities in approving lower risk water transfers? Albertans living in rural and northern communities are concerned about the loss of local water security for UCP political considerations if lower risk interbasin water transfers are determined in the minister's office, Mr. Speaker.

And it's not only Albertans in rural areas; it is also our neighbours in other jurisdictions, Mr. Speaker. We'd like to remind the UCP government that Alberta is a signatory of the Mackenzie River master agreement with the Northwest Territories, B.C., Saskatchewan, Yukon, and Canada. This bilateral agreement was signed between the Northwest Territories and Alberta in 2015. Alberta does not have power over freshwater use. Each jurisdiction makes decisions within their boundaries, subject to limitations. They must give notice to partners and protect this integrity. By not respecting our bilateral agreements on water and ignoring our existing cross-border agreements, Alberta could risk triggering federal oversight under the Constitution Act.

Mr. Speaker, in closing, I want to say that, yes, it has been more than 50 years since the Water Act has changed. Of course we need to keep up with times and update and amend the act. I would argue because Alberta has been in a 10-year-long drought – and farmers would tell you any day they have felt it the most – we should be looking into ways to amend the act in a way to protect the water and find conservation solutions and opportunities for us and for future generations. Through Bill 7 the UCP government is choosing to open one of our most important resources to political mismanagement and interference. It is reckless. I think this bill is not it, and I cannot support it.

The Acting Speaker: The Member for Edmonton-Rutherford. Go ahead.

Member Calahoo Stonehouse: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise today to oppose Bill 7, the Water Amendment Act, 2025, because this government is trading away public trust, scientific rigour, treaty obligations, and Indigenous stewardship for what it calls efficiency. Our rivers, our wetlands, our headwaters, and generations who depend on them deserve more than a minister's signature and an invisible process. Water is not an industrial input to be shuffled around on a map. Water is life. Water is law. Water is the foundation of culture, of food, of ceremony, of health, and of every single economic system in our province.

For Indigenous peoples water is not a commodity; it is our relative. Late Josephine Mandamin taught us water is alive: "I can hear it. I can sense what it's saying. Water is very precious and must be protected." Late Josephine Mandamin walked around the Great Lakes every single summer. She scooped a bucket of water, sang to that water, and poured it back in the same watershed. She never

contaminated or crossed watersheds because she understood that there was moral clarity that must guide our decisions about water. Her decisions, combined with western cumulative effects science, gives us a road map for responsible governance, precaution, reciprocity, data, and transparency. Bill 7 has none of that.

9:40

This government will say that Bill 7 makes water more available, but the mechanisms matter. Until now interbasin transfers required a special act of this Legislature, public scrutiny, scientific evidence, democratic oversight. Bill 7 erases all of that. It creates a new category of lower risk transfers and gives the minister the power to approve them, not in this House, not independent experts, not the public. That is not modernization; it is centralization of power. Bill 7 crucial decisions, including whether a transfer will move contaminants or invasive species, are left to the opinion of a director. Opinions are not science, and science cannot survive behind closed doors.

We know, from half a century of freshwater science led by the late Dr. David Schindler and the experimental lakes area that he did, that freshwater systems respond to cumulative stress in nonlinear and sometimes irreversible ways. Dr. Schindler proved that small nutrient increases, small flow reductions, small changes in timing, small introductions of invasive species can push a river past a tipping point from which it cannot recover. His peer-reviewed research showed policy-makers one core truth: the sum of all small decisions creates catastrophic outcomes. Bill 7 authorizes dozens of small decisions, taken privately without public data, without peer review, and without cumulative effects analysis. This is the exact scenario Schindler warned us about. To ignore scholarship is reckless.

Mr. Speaker, Alberta's wetlands and northern water stores are not decorations on a map. They are living sponges that protect us from drought, from fire, from pollution. We lose wetlands every year. Northern Alberta has most of the province's water. Southern Alberta has most of the demand. Moving water from one basin to another sure makes it easier in the short term, but it depletes resilience over time everywhere. This is not leadership; it is ecological negligence. This bill points to treat industrial water, waste-water use, and rain capture as alternatives, but standards are left to future regulation. This minister can approve transfers before the rules are even written. Albertans deserve to know: what is the treatment quality? What monitoring will be required? What contaminants will remain? Bill 7 answers none of that.

Then there's the invasive species and contamination risk. Under emergency powers the government could approve transfers of untreated water between watersheds. That is a biological highway for aquatic pests and industrial contaminants. You don't need a PhD to figure out what that means: collapsed fisheries, polluted drinking water, and billion-dollar damages for everyone.

Now, Mr. Speaker, it also breaches legal and treaty responsibilities that the Crown is required to uphold. The Mackenzie River basin agreement governs transboundary water. Alberta cannot unilaterally redefine basins that alter the flow without triggering obligations. Bill 7 jeopardizes this. First Nations leaders across treaties 6, 7, and 8 have already condemned this bill.

Chief Troy Knowlton from the Piikani Nation, the Blackfoot grand chief of the confederacy, said that this government is "robbing Peter to pay Paul" while stripping "away accountability and minimiz[ing] Indigenous oversight on decisions that impact our peoples' health, [our] wellbeing and [our] futures."

Okimaw Vernon Watchmaker from the Kehewin Cree Nation, Treaty 6, demanded an immediate stop. "All legislation [must] . . . uphold our Inherent right to govern water in our . . . territories . . . Water is not a commodity for industrial convenience; it is the lifeblood of every person on this land."

Chief Rupert Meneen, Tallcree Tribal Government, Treaty 8, reminds this House, quote: our rights to hunt, to fish, to trap, and to gather are meaningless without clean, sufficient water. Water given to all of us by the Creator is secured under treaty. End quote.

Message undeniable, unmistakable. Bill 7 violates Indigenous jurisdiction, abandons treaty obligations, and was advanced without meaningful consultation, without free, prior, and informed consent again. To proceed despite is not reconciliation; it is a breach of trust.

Indigenous water protectors like the late Josephine Mandamin and elders have been clear. Comanagement, water budgets, and Indigenous-led monitoring are the only long-term strategies that actually work. Indigenous water governance is not a box to check; it is the backbone of sustainability.

Mr. Speaker, my colleagues in this House have asked a few simple questions. Why are we changing the boundaries? Where is the data that supports this? Where is the evidence? Where's the peer-reviewed science? Where's the cumulative-effect analysis? And the answer so far: none. No public data, no transparency modelling, no consultation, just trust us. It's carelessness, and it's masquerading as confidence.

When I was completing my master's of science in resource economics, I had the honour of studying under Dr. David Schindler. His work shaped my understanding of water governance. The systems collapse not from one catastrophic decision but from a thousand small ones made without humility, without data, and without regard for cumulative harm. Bill 7 is built on exactly that kind of small, cascading risk.

This government says that Bill 7 is for farmers and rural families, but farmers and rural communities will be the first to suffer when the ecosystems fail, when the wetlands dry, when the invasive species spread, when fisheries collapse, and when the wells run low. Good water policy is made with evidence, not with anecdotes, not with slogans, not with political impatience.

We have been warned by elders. We have been warned by scientists. We have been warned by legal experts, by the treaty chiefs. There will be consequences for reckless decisions made about water. Inherent and treaty rights are not optional, and ecological tipping points do not care about political timelines. This bill is dangerous, and it experiments with the public commons. It gambles with the ecological infrastructure that every Albertan relies on. It shrinks oversight, it disregards science, it ignores treaty rights, and it amplifies cumulative harm.

The late Josephine Mandamin's teachings and the decades' work of Dr. Schindler tell us the same things: be careful, be rigorous, be public. Bill 7 fails on all three.

Hay-hay. Nanaskamon.

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

Ms Wright: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'll begin by echoing some of the comments that have already been made by my extraordinarily learned colleagues. We know that an update to the Water Act is certainly overdue. We know that there are issues that demand and need clarity, particularly since we're living in a time of drought conditions. There are wildlife and habitat concerns. Climate change, of course, is a major issue. So I very much appreciate that this work has begun. I do appreciate that there was some consultation, and I also understand there's more consultation to come. I also understand that there's increased support for reporting and monitoring, which, of course, is always a good thing.

However, there are still some incredibly pressing issues, which, I think, need a little bit more of a moment of pause, Mr. Speaker. That moment of pause means that folks like myself, like my colleagues on this side of the aisle, like the folks on the other side of the aisle – what we need to do when we're taking that moment, that pause, is to really reflect on what it means to be a treaty person, to reflect upon that relationship that is an obligation that we all must meet.

It isn't just about meeting that obligation; it's also about understanding that obligation. A very wise, wise friend of mine recently put things into a little bit of perspective for me when they talked about: it isn't just about a duty to consult. Duty, you know, we kind of go: oh, I really don't want to do it. You procrastinate about it and that sort of thing. It's more about an understanding of the importance of relationship. Treaty at its heart, Mr. Speaker, is about relationship, and that relationship was established in 1763 between Indigenous peoples when the Royal Proclamation was signed.

9:50

That's where this comes from in terms of the sovereign nation to sovereign nation relationship. That's why we talk about this even now still today. This is why we teach children about this in our schools, Mr. Speaker. That sovereign nation to sovereign nation relationship could almost be looked at as like a sibling-to-sibling relationship: brother to brother, sister to sister, sister to brother.

It might be appropriate, then, to also perhaps consider that when you're dealing with a province, which is not a sovereign nation, that province in its capacity as being a relative is more like a niece or a nephew. I'm not certain about a whole bunch of folks, but I know that when my aunts and uncles were talking and when they were providing me with lessons, I learned from those lessons. I listened to them, and I hearkened all those things that they were trying to teach me, Mr. Speaker. That indeed is what this province should do, and that indeed is what I think this province has really failed to do.

As colleagues have already talked about, the chiefs steering committee has an awful lot of really important concerns, and all those concerns are rooted in that treaty relationship, Mr. Speaker. That group, that chiefs steering committee, has been around for a while. It serves First Nations in treaties 6, 7, and 8 across Alberta. It's about representing and supporting the interests and needs of First Nations, but it's also about looking specifically at issues concerning water, housing, health, education, and infrastructure. While they are indeed concerned with federal issues, they're also concerned with provincial issues, too. The idea is to support Alberta, support this province, support that need and that recognition and that responsibility that we all have toward treaty. What I would recommend that this government do is, again, take that step back and really consider what some of these folks are saying.

The CSC certainly let folks know what they think about this bill just a few weeks ago in no uncertain terms. They talked about the fact that they simply condemned the bill. They talked about the fact that the bill seeks to introduce lower risk interbasin water transfers on treaty territories, which you just heard my colleague speak about. They talked about the fact that the CSC views this legislation as an abhorrent failure of legally required consultation and a direct threat to the inherent and constitutionally protected treaty rights of First Nations to water in jurisdiction over lands and territories.

As they note – and for me, this particular paragraph actually was the most telling because it really does speak to that relationship and one's responsibility to make sure that one is doing things in the right way, Mr. Speaker. Here's what they say.

> Since there was memory, our peoples have been connected to the vast lands and waters that Premier Smith purports to take ownership.

I'm quoting here.

> Our stories, our songs, our rights under the sacred Treaties affirms our peoples' rights to hunt, fish, trap and gather medicines and to continue to be who we are as First Nations peoples – rights that are meaningless without clean, sufficient water given to all of us, including non-Indigenous people, by the Creator and secured under Treaty.

They note that the proposal is alarming and that it risks too much. They note that the amendment disregards the ecological integrity of rivers and downstream livelihoods, which, of course, include First Nations who depend upon the flows. They note that after significant drought season after season and increased pressure on water systems and climate, Mr. Speaker, any government action has to not only be balanced, but it also has to be sustainable, and that, as my colleagues have also noted, those changes were developed without legal, proper, meaningful consultation with First Nations.

As my colleague just stated, the Alberta government continues to undermine that treaty relationship with the Crown in the name of prosperity. These chiefs are wondering, Mr. Speaker: at what cost? As a result, they are demanding that this government stop all action on Bill 7, and they insist on real and legally required dialogue to establish a modern water management strategy that doesn't just, in their words, "pray for rain." The chiefs are clear, and quite frankly, Mr. Speaker, this government should listen.

And if folks care to sort of take a little bit of a deviation with me – it's not really a deviation – when you look at what some of the background is in terms of the relationship with water, we can learn an awful lot from the Keepers of the Water, which is a movement that began in 2006. I do think that their teachings can help us all put that relationship, particularly the treaty relationship but also the relationship in terms of water itself, into an awful lot of context.

The Keepers of the Water tell us that "water was never surrendered – it was not something we agreed to give away . . . water is life itself . . . it was a relative, a sacred being with its own spirit," and sacred beings are deserving of respect. They're deserving of ceremony, and they are deserving of protection. This act does not do any of those things, and it does not provide any of those things. They note that in terms of an Indigenous understanding of water governance, which really is what we're talking about here, it sort of hearkens back to that idea of the two-row wampum, where there are two people side by side, working alongside each other but not crossing. "Water is not a resource; water is a relation. We are of the earth, and water flows through all life – to harm water is to harm ourselves." We do not own water. We do not have dominion over water. It is its own thing.

I'll finish by saying these things, which I also got from the water keepers. Governance cannot solely be about short-term economic gain. There is a responsibility to future generations that must be at the centre of it all. Water cannot be governed only through policy regulation and ownership. Governance must be seen through ceremony, oral law, and kinship. Finally, Mr. Speaker, water is not simply a resource to be extracted and managed. It is relational, it is alive, and it is sacred. This is why I cannot support this bill.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you.

Are there any others to speak?

The hon. Minister of Environment and Protected Areas to close debate.

Ms Schulz: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I am pleased to rise to close second reading on Bill 7, the Water Amendment Act, 2025. The first number I'll start with is 1999, which was the year

that our current Water Act was proclaimed. To put that in perspective, in 1999 our population here in Alberta was about 2.9 million. Today we're looking at 5 million people living in our province. Our economy has diversified, our ag sector has intensified, our communities have grown, yet we're still trying to manage our most precious resource on a regulatory framework that is built for a province that doesn't exist today.

Now, Mr. Speaker, I've got to say that praying for rain is not a policy. We need to make better use of the resources that we have, especially after the last two or three years of drought conditions that we've seen.

First of all, I want to thank my department for the two years of engagement that they undertook to make sure that we got the components of this act right.

I do want to respond to some of the comments by members on the opposite side and answer some of the questions and concerns that they raised. When we talk about our relationship and transboundary agreements with the Northwest Territories, I do want to be clear. This does not in any way impact any transboundary agreements. We've always and will continue to meet our transboundary obligations throughout this process. My department met with the Northwest Territories. I myself met with the minister in the Northwest Territories, and we spoke about this on a number of different occasions. In fact, on the day that the bill was tabled, my department reached out again to make sure that their department was aware.

When it comes to the merging of basins, the Peace and Athabasca rivers converge within Alberta, forming the Slave River that flows as a single watershed into the Mackenzie River system in the Northwest Territories, Mr. Speaker. We did engage on this. Various members of the public and water users identified the split as a barrier to practical and efficient water sourcing.

10:00

Merging these smaller basins together will bring the Peace-Athabasca-Slave basin similar to how the South Saskatchewan basin is recognized and managed. It doesn't change water allocations in the basin. It doesn't change watershed planning work or conservation objectives or any other planning aspects to the work undertaken by watershed planning advisory councils, Mr. Speaker. Every licence decision still has to go through the necessary scrutiny and review of any impacts before it's approved, and that is not changing.

When we look at the questions, Mr. Speaker, about the merging of those basins, Bill 7 does spell out maximum diversion rates for approving lower risk transfers for each basin that prevents excessive transfers from being approved. There are surface quality management frameworks in place for most of the eastern slopes, including the South Saskatchewan region, North Saskatchewan region, and upper Athabasca region.

Mr. Speaker, I know interbasin transfers have been a big topic of the discussion. They have been for two years, and that's why we took the time to get it right. Like any licence, proponents will first have to provide evidence of need, risks, mitigation of said risks, including potential harm or impact to the environment and other users. The application has to be reviewed. To be considered, it has to be limited to adjacent basins, not transfer invasive species, follow strict limits on rate of diversion, comply with all other limits and regulations. Of course, this is based on data and flow rates, and those are specific to each of the basins that we are talking about.

Mr. Speaker, I also want to remind this House that strong consultation requirements remain in place. Both lower risk interbasin transfers and high have the same application requirements, which include mandatory public notice and opportunity for public consultation. Higher risk applications always require public consultation, and the minister can still require that at any point on a lower risk transfer if that is needed. But there are times when flexibility is needed and common sense is needed. If a farmer needs to move water a few hundred metres across a subbasin boundary to water cattle, they currently have to wait for a full debate in the Legislature. That is bureaucracy beyond common sense, and I think it really has an impact on our producers.

We will continue to gather feedback, but the feedback that we received over the last two years has really helped us to make sure that we get this right.

I would also say that, you know, there were some questions around all-season resorts or data centres. Mr. Speaker, any decisions still have to go under decisions based in the Water Act, whether that's an all-season resort, a data centre, or any other business that is coming to Alberta. Those standards are still maintained with the changes that we're making. Our high environmental standards remain.

We did reach out and consult by e-mail and registered mail to all First Nations across our province, provided capacity funding for involvement and participation in the process, and I'm sure grateful for all of the municipalities, First Nations and Métis communities, and industry groups who took the time to give us feedback on this act, Mr. Speaker.

Thank you very much.

[Motion carried; Bill 7 read a second time]

The Acting Speaker: The Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Williams: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I think that we have done a lot of work and debate today, and we will be returning to more debate as we continue with the rest of our session. But for now I move that the Assembly be adjourned until 1:30 on Wednesday, November 19, 2025.

[Motion carried; the Assembly adjourned at 10:04 p.m.]

Table of Contents

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