



Legislative Assembly of Alberta

The 30th Legislature
Third Session

Standing Committee
on
Families and Communities

Ministry of Education
Consideration of Main Estimates

Wednesday, March 9, 2022
3:30 p.m.

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Third Session**

Standing Committee on Families and Communities

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Standing Committee on Families and Communities

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Ministry of Education

Hon. Adriana LaGrange, Minister

Emily Ma, Acting Executive Director, K-12 Fiscal Oversight

Andre Tremblay, Deputy Minister

3:30 p.m.

Wednesday, March 9, 2022

[Ms Lovely in the chair]

**Ministry of Education
Consideration of Main Estimates**

The Chair: Welcome back, everyone. I'd like to call the meeting to order. The committee has under consideration the estimates of the Ministry of Education for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2023.

I'd ask that we go around the table and have members introduce themselves for the record. Minister, please introduce the officials who are joining you at the table.

Member LaGrange: Just a moment. I thought we were not needing to do that again. Do you know what? I'll just let everybody introduce themselves because we do have a very large group. Obviously, to my left is my deputy minister, Andre Tremblay. To my right is Emily Ma. To my left, further left, is Christine Sewell, ADM of finance.

I have a huge gallery of people here behind me, an amazing team of people who do a fantastic job each and every day in Education, and I'm so grateful and so blessed to have them working with me.

The Chair: Welcome, everyone.

My name is Jackie Lovely. I'm the MLA for the Camrose constituency and the chair of the committee. We will begin starting to my right.

Mr. Hunter: Grant Hunter, Taber-Warner.

Mrs. Frey: Michaela Frey, Brooks-Medicine Hat.

Mr. Gotfried: Richard Gotfried, Calgary-Fish Creek.

Mr. Smith: Mark Smith, Drayton Valley-Devon.

Ms Hoffman: Sarah Hoffman, Edmonton-Glenora.

Member Loyola: Rod Loyola, Edmonton-Ellerslie.

The Chair: Now we'll go to members participating remotely. Please go ahead, Member.

Mr. Amery: Good afternoon. Mickey Amery, Calgary-Cross.

The Chair: I'd like to note the following substitution for the record. Member Loyola is substituting for Mr. Sabir.

A few housekeeping items to address before we turn to the business at hand. Please note that the microphones are operated by *Hansard*. Committee proceedings are being live streamed on the Internet and broadcast on Alberta Assembly TV. The audio- and videostream and transcripts of meetings can be accessed via the Legislative Assembly website. Members participating remotely are encouraged to have your camera on while speaking and your microphone muted when you're not speaking.

Remote participants who wish to be placed on a list are asked to e-mail or send a message in the group chat to the committee clerk, and members in the room are asked to please signal to the chair. Please set your cellphones and other devices to silent for the duration of the meeting.

Hon. members, the standing orders set out the process for consideration of the main estimates. A total of six hours has been scheduled for consideration of the estimates for the Ministry of Education. For the record I'd like to note that the Standing Committee on Families and Communities has already completed three hours of debate in

this respect. As we enter our fourth hour of debate, I will remind everyone that the speaking rotation for these meetings is provided for under Standing Order 59.01(6), and we are now at the point in the rotation where speaking times are limited to a maximum of five minutes for both the member and the ministry. The member and the minister may each speak once for a maximum of five minutes, or these times may be combined, making it a 10-minute block. Please remember to advise the chair at the beginning of your rotation if you wish to combine your time with the minister's.

One final note. Please remember that discussion should flow through the chair at all times regardless of whether or not speaking times are combined.

With the concurrence of the committee I will call a five-minute break near the midpoint of the meeting; however, the three-hour clock will continue to run. Does anyone oppose having a break?

Hearing none, when we adjourned this morning, Mr. Hunter had just finished his portion of the exchange between himself and the minister. I will now invite the minister to complete the remaining time in this rotation. You have five minutes, Minister.

Member LaGrange: Thank you, Madam Chair. The first question was around red tape reduction, and yes, indeed, we have been very diligent in my department, looking for every opportunity to reduce that red tape, because it saves time. I know school authorities have, you know, in the past had to hire additional staff just to deal with administrative burden in terms of documents, et cetera. We've looked at eliminating duplication. Absolutely, we want to hold school authorities accountable for the dollars that they do receive from us, but if there's an opportunity to get rid of some of that – there's no better way to say it – red tape, then we absolutely have done that. We have eliminated 25.4 per cent. That's above our target of 23 per cent, and we are on track to eliminate 33 per cent by the end of the next year.

The balanced budget was the next observation and, you know, how does that affect Education? Well, obviously, having a balanced budget, a provincial balanced budget, certainly ensures that we are on a sustainable track, that Education will continue to see increases as we move forward, as we see enrolment growth, that we have the dollars that are needed for social programs and all of the other supports that are necessary not just in Education but right across this province. It's really, really important that we have sustainability and have the ability as a province to make sure that those dollars are allocated.

I'm so proud that this year we have over \$700 million being allocated over the next three years to support enrolment growth and increased cost pressures within our school jurisdictions, that they do have healthy reserves, that we started with \$363 million at the start of the pandemic – we're now at \$464 million in reserves – that we have \$191 million additional to allocate towards curriculum implementation, that we're also looking after our most vulnerable. On top of the \$1.4 billion that we spend on special needs within the \$8.4 billion budget – it was \$8.3 billion; it's now \$8.4 billion. On top of that \$1.4 billion, we are going to add an additional \$110 million. It is much easier to have those increases when we have a balanced budget in this province and that we're taking care of, you know – that we don't have to spend as much in costs due to interest rates, et cetera. Balanced budgets are always good budgets.

Francophone school authority was another question that was asked of me during the last session piece, and I'm very happy to say that since 2019 there have been six new francophone school projects announced and are in process or have been built. In the last decade, in the last 10 years, there have been 21 projects to address francophone education in this province. We are one of the fastest growing francophone education communities across Canada. We

are seeing growth, and we are continuing to fund for that growth. I'm very pleased to continue to work with our francophone partners to make that happen.

They also benefited from a modular school that will be created for the francophone community in the last announcement, which kind of leads me to your last question, which, I believe, was around modulars. Over the course of the next three years we are spending \$117 million. Last year we had the single largest investment in modulars, which was \$89 million, just shy of \$90 million. What that created was an additional 181 modulars, just that one announcement. That is three times the usual number because we do have a lot of asks.

I had promised that I would share the number that Edmonton public received in terms of modulars in last year's announcement, and that was 23 modulars. Edmonton public received 23 modulars out of that 181 modulars that were allocated last year. Unfortunately, we did have some supply chain issues and some labour issues, or at least the companies that were building these modulars had those issues. We've seen a bit of a delay on the actual movement of those modulars out to their designated areas, but I'm hearing that we will be caught up by the end of this school year. We will continue to invest in capital infrastructure, and I know that when I was speaking last, my deputy minister was going through that gated process. MLA Hunter had asked about: what does that continue to look like? He'd only gotten so far.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

We'll return now to the Official Opposition.

Ms Hoffman: Thanks very much, Madam Chair. I'll express my desire to go back and forth and see if the minister is willing to revisit that decision from this morning so we can have a chance to get more answers in.

Member LaGrange: No. I would prefer to go the block time so I can provide in-depth answers to the questions.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms Hoffman: Thanks, Madam Chair. One of the challenges is that about 90 per cent of the questions weren't answered this morning. Hopefully, there can be greater answers this afternoon.

I'm going to go back to capital a little bit more because some of the questions that weren't answered were about Calgary. Calgary public and Calgary Catholic didn't receive any capital announcements in the last two budgets prior to the one that we're considering today. In the one that's being considered today, the only schools within the city of Calgary – the minister might say: well, Calgary Catholic did get one. It wasn't in Calgary. It was for another community last year. The only schools within the city of Calgary for public or for Catholic students or for francophone this year, because there were no francophone schools anywhere in the province of Alberta in this current budget that we're considering, there were just two announced for the city of Calgary: one for the public district, one for the Catholic district. Certainly, that doesn't keep up with the significant growth we're seeing in the city of Calgary.

In terms of Catholic schools we know that we need new schools in Nolan Hill, a K to 9; in Walden, a K to 9; a high school for Catholic students in the west side of Calgary; and we need modernizations at St. Bonaventure, St. Teresa of Calcutta. For Calgary public students Diefenbaker high school is in need of a modernization. Nickle school needs a 5 to 9 modernization. And in terms of new

schools Saddle Ridge is in desperate need of a new school in northeast Calgary as well as Cornerstone requires a high school.

3:40

Essentially, the question that I would love to get some response from the minister on in this round, back and forth, is: does the minister think that the government's budget is actually keeping up, through you, Madam Chair, with the demands we're seeing for increased modernizations as well as new school space in the city of Calgary? Part of why I say this is because over the last two years we've been calling on the government to increase the spaces and to create opportunities for more staff to be hired, and one of the push-backs that we've received repeatedly was that you can't build schools overnight. Certainly, this government hasn't built any public or Catholic schools in the city of Calgary, no new commitments in the last two budgets prior to today, and in this one only one for each of those two school divisions. We certainly are playing a significant – we need to make up for the significant neglect that the city of Calgary has faced under the budgets under the current provincial government for the last three years.

Given that there are significant additional revenues in this budget and that the Premier just yesterday – or maybe it was the day before – talked about how there could be potentially even \$10 billion in additional revenue if oil prices stay at the rate they're at today, would the minister commit? What are the additional schools that – she said, you know, that you can only fund so many. What are the next schools on her list of priority for Calgary public and Calgary Catholic students? If she wants to speak to francophone students in Calgary as well, I certainly know that they were hoping to see some commitment to the decisions around the need for reparations and restoring opportunities for French language learning throughout Alberta. And specifically, you know, if the minister thinks it's appropriate for Saddle Ridge students to be bused, many over half an hour, to get to their closest public school. Those schools that are closest rarely have room, so students are often being bused even further than that.

These are some of the questions that families in Calgary have raised repeatedly for me. Just to reiterate, these are from the capital plans for the public and the Catholic boards within the city of Calgary. Nolan Hill, K to 9; Walden, K to 9; west Calgary, high school: those are all Catholic needs for new construction. For public school new construction: a need for Saddle Ridge, 5 to 9; Cornerstone, a high school. Those are the new builds, and then I did mention some modernizations.

If we really do want to demonstrate a desire to support choice, that includes choice for families to be able to choose public, Catholic, and francophone schools in the communities where they live. There have been well-articulated public documents submitted to the minister highlighting the need for these schools, new schools, and modernizations with the city of Calgary. What does the minister have to say to families in Calgary who are waiting?

The Chair: Thank you, hon. member.

We'll return now to the minister.

Member LaGrange: Thank you so much for those questions, and I'm glad the member opposite, MLA Hoffman, agrees that a balanced budget allows for all of us to have more services available and that there's the ability to improve right across the province.

First of all, again, the gated process. You know, obviously, there's a lack of understanding on how that gated process – I don't choose these. These are school divisions putting forward their top requests, and Calgary has been very diligent in putting forward their top requests. I can actually share that currently in process there are

one, two, three, four, five, six, seven schools in Calgary for either Calgary Catholic or Calgary public in the process of being built. That's without the two that we just allocated as well. I know that they're very pleased that their issues in terms of growth areas are being addressed.

When the member opposite was mentioning this morning that they were building something like 60 schools a year is what I believe she said – when I counted, we're actually building 66. I did have a look at their – that is the cumulative number, but when I look at the actual projects that were approved under the previous government from 2015 to 2018, there were actually only 70 projects total approved during that time period, or 17.5 per year as an average. When I look at the number that we've already approved in just the three years we've been in office, it averages out to 17.7 per year. Obviously, we always want to build more schools, but we give great deference to school authorities in terms of what their top priorities are, and they put that through the gated process.

I know that my deputy minister didn't have time to finish what that gated process looks like, so I'm happy for him to continue on so that everybody is enlightened as to the 10 steps that have to be gone through before a project rises to the top.

Mr. Tremblay: Thanks, Minister. I just want to correct a number that I used earlier this morning. I said that there were over 600 projects requested through this process; actually, this last year it was 382, but still a significant number of projects requested versus dollars available.

I'll just recap a number of the criteria that are used through a scoring system that prioritizes each of the projects that are put forward by school authorities. I mentioned that it's not just a matter of health and safety but also improved program delivery services. Enrolment is a huge part of that consideration process. Also, overall potential growth within the catchment area of that school or in that area of the community. Also, functional capacity in the school board or school authority's ability to deliver specialized programming. In some cases we'll have a school authority coming forward with a unique program proposal, and they made need special capital investment in order to facilitate the delivery of that program. That's a key consideration. When considering refurbishments or renovations, there's a very significant building condition or asset depreciation evaluation process that's undertaken by school authorities, that are considered when we are looking at construction projects.

Another key function of our process is also around efficiency solutions. That was a key component that was added in 2018. If a school authority comes forward with a new construction or refurbishment and it meets some of these other criteria and it provides better overall efficiency from an energy usage perspective or from a building products efficiency perspective, schools will be considered based on that as well.

Another key component that has emerged through the 2018 gated process is community partnerships. If a school authority is partnering perhaps with a municipality on a joint-use facility, which in many cases would be a school and also a community centre or other recreation facilities, and they come to the table with that overall partnership, we will score that project accordingly as well.

The Chair: Thank you so much to the minister and your team.

I see that independent Member Thomas Dang has joined us. Hon. member, it's your turn to speak.

Mr. Dang: Thank you. Would the minister agree to share time?

Member LaGrange: No. I'd prefer to go with block timing. Thank you.

Mr. Dang: Thank you, Madam Chair, and thank you, Minister. I have to say I'm quite disappointed. I know this is my first opportunity to speak at this committee, and it's been going for . . .

The Chair: Hon. member, comments will go through the chair, please.

Mr. Dang: Yes, of course. Through you, Madam Chair, as I was saying, I'm quite disappointed in the minister not wanting to share time. I know this is the first time that I've joined this committee over six hours, and I know that there's quite a bit of time for debate, but I will ask my questions. It seems as though the ministry is unwilling or unable to answer a number of the questions and . . .

The Chair: Hon. member, you have five minutes; now left to four and a half minutes, so please proceed with your questions. And just to advise, hon. member, there was a morning session. The minister has been with us.

Mr. Dang: That's why it's been over six hours. Yes, Madam Chair, and that's why I'm continuing with my questions at this time.

The Chair: Please proceed.

3:50

Mr. Dang: Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

I'll get into my questions. I think that it seems as though the minister has been unable to answer many of them that were asked this morning and this afternoon now, but certainly I'll start with page 115 of the fiscal plan. In 2021-22 school and health fees were down by \$118 million cumulatively. I'm wondering: how much of that is attributed to school fees or other school revenue? One of the big questions I have, and I think my constituents and Albertans are going to have, is: how much of those fees are expected to be coming out of parents' pockets? How much more is this government asking parents to pay? In the same document we see that fundraising and donation revenue is not expected to rebound and that those estimates are, frankly, probably conservative because of economic conditions. So, to be clear, it appears that in the government's fiscal plan and in your fiscal plan, Minister, through you, Madam Chair, clearly, there is a significant amount of funding that the school districts are going to have to make up on their own. Of course, I believe that the only way to do that is going to be through school fees, and I want some clarity on that.

Of course, I want to move on to capital grants. I only have a few minutes left here and, unfortunately, we're not able to have that back and forth, but in the estimates document under capital grants, on 2.3 – and I asked the Minister of Infrastructure this yesterday, and unfortunately he directed me to come and ask, through you, Madam Chair, the Minister of Education today – I asked the minister yesterday that despite growing capacity strains, Budget 2022 provides the Edmonton public school district with no capital funding. Considering that Edmonton Catholic is receiving some capital allowances this year, could the minister please explain for me the variance of funding between these two school boards?

I'm going to move on to the fiscal plan, page 129. Overall operating funding to the school system is increasing by just 1.7 per cent, which, according to the fiscal plan, is meant to cover cost pressures, including staff and enrolment growth. Now, of course, we know the government is currently in negotiations with the Alberta Teachers' Association, and we're hoping to see enrolment rebound from the 2021 enrolment of just under 105,000 students, the lowest enrolment we've seen since 2016-17. Assuming teachers receive an increase in line with the arbitrated settlement reached between the government and the AUPE, salary pressures are going

to be around 1.5 per cent. So how is the approximately .2 per cent increase left to operating supposed to cover enrolment growth, inflation, and other cost pressures?

Also, in the main estimates, line 5.2 on page 73, the Alberta schools alternative procurement program, I see debt-servicing costs are decreasing year over year. I'm wondering: why is this decrease being forecast, and is this a trend or a one-off change? How did that debt-servicing cost compare when we look at P3, public-private partnership, schools compared to the capital debt servicing for traditional builds? I think that's something that's very important for people in my area. Of course, in my constituency and across Edmonton there are a number of P3 schools that had a number of issues in the last number of years. Do we have an estimate for how much more these costs will change as a result of increasing interest rates and other pressures that are external to the government as well?

Further, in the main estimates, line 5.2 on page 74 and still on the Alberta schools alternative procurement program but moving into the capital investment line, there's roughly an \$800,000 increase year over year. Could the minister please walk us through some of that investment as well?

Could the minister please walk me through, on page 129 of the fiscal plan, a bit more information about the school safe indoor air initiative? How is that funding going to be allocated? How many schools, roughly, will the funding be able to be directed through?

I see I'm running out of time here. I've only got a few seconds left. I know that the minister won't have time to answer all of my questions today, if she chooses to answer any of them, but I'd ask that, if possible, the minister please provide richer responses to all of my questions through the committee.

Thank you. Hopefully, the minister will be able to give a bit more information than she has given previously.

The Chair: It started to cut out there just a bit at the end, hon. member. I think the minister probably heard your request.

The time has ended, and now we'll turn the time over to the minister and her team.

Member LaGrange: Thank you very much. It's unfortunate the member was not here this morning, because I did answer every question.

Ms Hoffman: Point of order.

The Chair: A point of order has been called.

Member LaGrange: I apologize and retract.

Ms Hoffman: Thank you.

The Chair: Okay. Please proceed, Minister.

Member LaGrange: Thank you for your questions. I did answer all of these questions before, but I'm happy to answer them again in great detail, so here we go. Starting with the first question, which was in terms of school fees, we did hold harmless all school authorities, and you will be happy to hear that while we funded 730,000 students, only 716,000 students actually attended. So all of those additional dollars that would have been returned to Alberta Education were actually left within the school authorities so that they can in fact make sure they use them, you know, with COVID and with just all of the uncertainty around enrolment numbers, et cetera, that they had access to those dollars. We were very diligent on that side of things. As you may be aware – or maybe you're not – school fees are the purview of school authorities. Now, they can

only charge school fees for transportation to recover costs. They can't go up and above. If they have a surplus, then they either have to use it in the next year for transportation or return it to parents.

School fees are collected for items that are not basic instructional items such as textbooks and school supplies. These are for other things such as extracurricular, hot lunch programs, the field trips that students are going on. Obviously, in the last year and a half, two years under COVID all of those things went down considerably. Also, rentals of school facilities were down considerably as well. Now, that increase in school fees in terms of other licences, et cetera, means that we are getting back to normal, that our students are going to be able to go on field trips. They're going to be able to enjoy the things that they used to enjoy in extracurricular activities. Again, this is just for that reason.

On capital expenditures for Edmonton public I'm happy to repeat what I repeated this morning to the opposition member who asked the same question. Edmonton public school divisions in 2016 had five new schools completed. In 2017 they had 10 schools completed. In 2018 they had three new schools completed. In 2019 they had two schools completed. In 2020 they had three schools completed. As of August 2021 there are six current projects under way for Edmonton public school division. Their jurisdiction current capacity is for 131,746 student spaces while their projected enrolment for 2022 is 107,337 spaces. This does not include the 23 modulars that were also allocated just last year for Edmonton public school division, which will of course add additional space.

Therefore, Edmonton public – I cannot control Edmonton public's list. They are in full charge of their list that they put forward to capital to review. On the top of their list, their top two asks were underutilized schools. They were under 70 per cent utilization, and they were not health and safety issues. As my deputy minister was going through the process just recently on the 10-step gated process that has to be gone through, obviously those projects did not make the list. But we are always happy to work with Edmonton public. In fact, I contacted them through a letter and through my office to set up a meeting so that we can further assist them. We want to see them having new schools in their area.

You mentioned negotiations. The increased funding to Education – there's \$700 million over three years, and that will go to support enrolment growth, inflationary costs for supplies. There's a 1 per cent increase to base. There's a 1 per cent increase to operations and maintenance. There's a 4.6 per cent increase to transportation, which is above the 5 per cent that we increased last year and an additional 5 per cent prior to that.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

We'll now move over to the government side. Please proceed.

Mrs. Frey: Thank you, Madam Chair. Minister, thank you for being here today. I wanted to ask you some questions about student transportation and insurance. As you know, I sat on your transportation task force with a few other MLAs, some of them who are now in cabinet. We prepared a report for you, which I was very happy to take part in. I'm specifically referring to page 78 of the estimates. I see that student transportation funding is increasing from \$377 million to \$386 million. And line item 3.4 on page 73 of your estimates continues to relate to transportation.

I'm just curious, Minister, if you could elaborate on how your department's investment in student transportation in Budget 2022 – how these changes will fit into the \$319 million found in line item 3.4 of your estimates. I'm also curious if you could please provide the committee with an update on the work being done to implement the recommendations that our task force worked so hard on. And I'm curious if you could let us know what your ministry is doing to

ensure school boards are delivering transportation costs as effectively as possible. I know we were touring the province. There were a lot of different ways to get that done. I'm just curious if you could tell us exactly how your department is getting that done.

4:00

We've heard a lot of this in question period. We've talked about increased fees – we've heard about increased fees in question period. I'm curious if you could explain why the opposition keep saying that fees will increase when you're actually providing more money for things like transportation. I'm curious. If there's any truth to that, what could those fees possibly be referring to?

Secondly, I'm going to ask you about insurance, like I said. On the insurance question we've heard from school boards about increased insurance costs. I know for a lot of schools in rural Alberta this is a major concern as well. Of course, as I'm an MLA who represents Brooks-Medicine Hat, we do have a lot of rural school boards, and in fact I'm hearing this in my office quite a bit. I've actually even come to your office to talk about this. I was wondering if you could elaborate for the public about insurance costs. I'm curious if these increased insurance costs will be downloaded onto families who require busing for their children. We know that a lot of rural families and a lot of rural students – those students will spend up to an hour on the bus just one way. I was curious what our government is doing to ensure that these increased insurance costs that are coming are not pushed onto Alberta parents who already face the impacts of inflation themselves and the crunch on their household budgets.

With that, I will resign the rest of my time to the MLA for Drayton Valley-Devon, I believe it is. Yes, it is.

Mr. Smith: Thank you, Minister. We're going to be looking at the Acme school here – okay? – in my question. We know that this budget's focus is around building pathways to success for Albertans with Alberta at work and that a large part of this, obviously, centres around people that are already in the workforce. We know that laying a strong foundation in the education system is equally important to success. Now, many students may choose the traditional path that, for instance, I took, coming straight out of high school and going straight into university, but increasingly many are choosing to go a different path. I'm going to be referring to key objective 1.2 on page 31 of your business plan because it recognizes that this might not be the case for all students. By putting resources into increasing opportunities for hands-on learning through things like collegiate high schools, apprenticeship programs, and vocational education, it seems to me that your ministry is putting an effort into building pathways for those who may wish to pursue a different path as they enter their professional life or postsecondary life.

Of note for this is \$13.7 million over three years that's been targeted towards the modernization of Acme school. I've got three questions. Can the minister explain a bit more to the committee about what Acme school is and what they do? How will this \$13.7 million be used? And how is funding the modernization of Acme school going to support the goals of Alberta at work in building pathways to success for our students? That goes back to page 159 of your fiscal plan, that number there for \$13.7 million and for the modernization. If you could help us to better understand this new idea, this new project that you're doing in Acme, that would be great.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: All right. Is that it, then, Member?

Mr. Smith: Yes.

The Chair: All right. Thank you so much. I guess that wraps it up for the government side.

We will now be moving over to the minister for a response.

Member LaGrange: Thank you again very much, and thank you to MLA Frey for being part of the Student Transportation Task Force. I'm really thankful for the input of time that she gave along with other members to do this really responsible work that we need done so desperately. Just to put it in perspective, we have 300,000 students riding a bus to school every day, travelling more than – I think I said 10 million this morning, but it is actually 100 million kilometres per year. So it's very significant that we address these issues.

Budget 2022: school transportation funding increases by \$39 million over the next three years, so \$9 million for '22-23, and that is simply because of the adjustment in the calendar. We have a different calendar than the fiscal calendar. I can always turn it over to Christine. She can explain it very aptly, as can Emily. In subsequent years it's \$15 million for each of the next two fiscal years.

What we're doing is providing school authorities with the additional funding to help address increasing costs for insurance, fuel, parts and supplies, and training so that those rising costs aren't passed on to families. I know that's of great concern to everyone. We're also encouraging school boards to take a collaborative approach to transportation planning and to consider how they can deliver these services more effectively. Again, I just want to remind everybody. I know I've said it a couple of times, but it bears repeating. This is 4.6 per cent on top of a 5 per cent last year on top of a 5 per cent from the previous year as well.

When we look at the recommendations from the student task force, they were, you know, very much around making improvements and strengthening the overall systems. We're continuing to do that good work that was started by the task force, and you may know that we've been doing the audits that were recommended, that we go in and do a deep dive into school authorities to really audit and find out what needs to be done, what needs to be addressed. I'm awaiting the report. My understanding is that because of COVID and a few of the things that happened, they had to delay or they needed an extra little bit of time, and I wanted to make sure they actually got the information that we needed, so I allocated that extra bit of time for them. I'm awaiting their report, and I'm assured it is coming to me very soon.

As part of the second phase we're working to enhance regional co-operation among school divisions, and as part of the third phase we want to have that completed by September '22. A student transportation funding model will be developed, and we're hoping to have it in place for '23-24. That is still our target.

The current legislated student transportation requirements, including eligibility criteria, will be reviewed as part of that work. I know that that's something you would have heard of a lot: that 2.4 kilometre eligibility needs to be relooked at, that schools of choice eligibility needs to be relooked at, that safety hazards need to be relooked at, that student transportation fees and ride times need to be looked at. As you know, my husband and I farm, and we have seven children, so our children spent a lot of time on the bus. Even though we're just minutes out of Red Deer, sometimes their bus rides were that 35 to 40 minutes, sometimes even an hour depending on if they were first on and last off. It got to be a very long day, so I'm very aware of all of the issues in that area.

When we look at the number of school authorities that are co-operating right now, we have approximately 43 out of 61 boards, which is about 70 per cent, that have entered into co-operative

busing arrangements. That represents nearly 100,000 students, but we're always encouraging to look at efficiencies across the boards.

When we look at Budget 2022, the \$319 million that will be allocated to school boards and transportation funding for this year is an increase of 4.6 per cent. I just want to highlight – I've said it before, but it bears repeating – that school boards cannot charge more than the cost of the service. They can only charge to recoup their own expenses. That is very important. Local boards continue to be responsible for transportation fees, and they're accountable to parents for those fees. In fact, I want to give a shout-out to Calgary public school division, that last year refunded school fees for transportation because they had some savings that they were able to actualize. They actually returned those funds to those parents, which is laudable, for sure.

When we look at the increased insurance costs, that again was something that came to myself and my department, and we were diligent. We connected with the Minister of Finance . . .

The Chair: Thank you so much, Minister.

We'll now move back to the Official Opposition. Please proceed, Member.

Ms Hoffman: Thank you very much, Madam Chair. Through you, absolutely, transportation fees will be going up because the Transportation budget hasn't gone up the same amount as the costs for increased insurance costs, and increased fuel costs are on school jurisdictions. Through you, Madam Chair, like, this is completely a continued downloading of costs onto ordinary Alberta families. That is a given, and clearly the report that was received – there haven't been significant moves by the government after the report was received more than a year ago to actually address affordability for Alberta families, including the cost of transportation.

4:10

One of the ways you reduce the cost of transportation is by building more schools, Madam Chair, close to where kids live so that they don't have to take the bus. These rides that the minister references are certainly typical rides in rural communities and also in urban communities now the more the government fails to build schools close to where kids live.

There were some documents tabled this afternoon that were referred to as a response to what was asked in this committee. But what was actually asked for this morning was the current year's actual numbers and projections for the upcoming school year, and what was tabled continues to be projections or estimates for the current school year, which we're more than halfway through. I would certainly expect that the government would be able to provide actual numbers for the current school year. They still say "preliminary" for the 2021-2022 column on this document. That is problematic when we're trying to make decisions around the appropriateness of funds, Madam Chair, for the upcoming school year and the government still continues to not even give the actual numbers for this current school year through what was tabled and what's posted on their website.

Even so, with what was actually tabled, the preliminary numbers for grade 1 show that there were 3,000 fewer grade 1 students in school this year than there were the previous year, which would lead one to believe that many of those kindergarten kids didn't come this year either, the kindergarten kids who were missing in such huge numbers last year. That is a significant concern to me and, I imagine, to many Albertans who want to make sure that every child has their legislated right to an education upheld. One of the questions for this exchange – it would be great to get an answer – is: what happened to all of those grade 1 students? Or are the preliminary

numbers that out of whack that they are deflated by more than 3,000 just for the grade 1 row within the tablings that the minister provided today?

I also want to take a few minutes to talk about the weighted moving average and some of the challenges that we've seen as it relates to education funding changes that have been made by the current government. I do want to say that there are some districts, particularly districts that have seen a decline in enrolment, that the weighted moving average has been able to insulate them and prevent a reduction in funding for at least a few years, and that's fine. That's good. I want to make sure that every kid in Alberta has an opportunity to top-notch education, through you, Madam Chair.

I guess the big question, though, is that there are districts that are growing, and they are not getting funded in real time for the kids that they are educating in that year. They're getting 50 per cent funding for the current year, 30 per cent for the prior year, and 20 per cent for the year prior to that. It just simply isn't fair, Madam Chair, that when kids show up to school, they're not being given fair resources for their education. I guess one question could be: does there have to be one formula, or can we actually adapt and be creative to address the current number of students that are showing up in growing districts while insulating districts in declining enrolment? This doesn't need to be fighting over a shrinking pot of resources. Can we actually create the appropriate resources to meet kids where they're at and make sure that we fund properly for education?

Another example is the change in high school funding that was implemented last year. It has absolutely hurt particularly small rural schools where you used to get credit unit funding. If a teacher was ambitious and worked one on one and offered a class beyond the regular requirements for a student, the school would get additional supports and funding to support that and to recognize that work that went above and beyond, and now it's flat funding. Basically, if you teach into a fourth year or a fifth year, your funding gets cut even more severely. A student who is back for a fourth year of high school usually needs just as much help as they had in their third year but will only get half the funding they had when they were there in their third year, and that just simply isn't fair, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Thank you so much, hon. member.

We'll return now to the minister for her response.

Member LaGrange: Thank you for those questions. Very much appreciated. Transportation is always top of mind. As I indicated earlier with the previous set of questions, with so many students on the bus, et cetera, we need to continue to do everything we can to lower our costs. I know that early on, when we were elected and we were able to get rid of the NDP carbon tax, we heard from school authorities how much they were saving in terms of fuel, because, of course, a lot of the transportation costs revolve around the fuel costs.

The fact that we were able to eliminate that carbon tax really saved school authorities lots and lots of dollars. I would invite the opposition to join us in fighting the federal carbon tax because I know it's adding upwards of 40 cents, and that's going to continue to rise as of April 1. We need to do everything we can to lower those costs, and while we have as a province declared that we will be getting rid of the provincial tax on fuel, we do need to look at that carbon tax and getting rid of that because that is adding additional costs to our transportation system.

Again, school authorities only can charge enough to collect in terms of meeting their costs, as I indicated earlier. Again, another shout-out to Calgary public, who was able to return dollars. In fact,

I have heard that part of the reason that school authorities have had their reserves growing was because, in fact, they were able to save in this area.

Again, we're continuing to provide the supports and the services that are needed. We're in constant conversation with all of the school partners, particularly the Association of School Business Officials of Alberta, ASBOA, who are the secretary-treasurers. They lead the way in this area, advocating, you know, whether it's for insurance or what the actual costs are in transportation. Thank you for that great question.

On the number of students I believe that the member was looking at a different chart. The one chart she should be referring to is the funded head count chart. It is the last table that is on our website, and I invite her to go to the website and look at that table because, in fact, that is where you will find those numbers that are the funded head counts of students.

At this point in time let me see. Do I have time to go into the next ...

The Chair: Two minutes left, Minister.

Member LaGrange: I still have two minutes.

Is there anything that I should add on that particular piece, team?

Mr. Tremblay: No. That's good.

Member LaGrange: No. It's on the website, okay? Just refer to the website, please.

On the weighted moving average, as I indicated earlier on that student enrolment growth, the historical perspective, 2007 to 2022, we were seeing escalating costs on the operational funding of school authorities that way outpaced the enrolment increases and inflation increases. Just for those that weren't here this morning, I'm happy to repeat them: operational funding increases in the 2004-2005 school year to 2018-2019 were 80 per cent whereas enrolment growth went up 25 per cent and inflation went up 33 per cent. In the 2007-2008 year to 2021-22 operational funding went up 48 per cent versus enrolment growth of 24 per cent and inflation of 26 per cent.

We have made a commitment to ensure that we are indeed well funding our education system but also containing these escalating costs. The weighted moving average works really well to smooth out the bumps and provide that sustainable, predictable funding. In the past – and I was a trustee for 11 and a half years, so I'm very well aware of this – we would have to wait till the end-of-September student count before we actually knew what dollars we had. Now the school authorities will have their funding profiles with actual numbers available to them by the end of March of this year. They have the knowledge and the dollars available to make the decisions that they need to make for their school authority. This gives them that surety.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Minister.

I see that Member Loewen has joined us from the independent side. Please proceed, hon. member.

Mr. Loewen: Okay. Thank you very much. Minister, did you want to do block time or back and forth?

Member LaGrange: Block time, please.

Mr. Loewen: That's fine.

Member LaGrange: Thank you.

Mr. Loewen: I didn't have a lot of comments today, but I just wanted to touch base on a few things. I know some of them you may have taken care of already, but I just wanted to go into them anyways. Again, thank you for being here, and thank you to the staff for being here, too. I appreciate the opportunity to ask questions.

The first question is going to be on the Valleyview school that was announced. I just wondered if I could get a bit of a rundown on the process, the timeline, and the amount of money that's coming over the next period of time on that project. It's appreciated in the community. I haven't been able to find anything specific on that though it may be there. If you could kind of indulge me with a little bit of those details, and if you don't have it here, you could just provide it afterwards. That would be fine, too. I understand if you don't have it right in front of you.

4:20

Also, with the curriculum process I still get, you know, a few calls on concerns with the curriculum. The calls are anywhere from "Scrap the whole thing" to "Leave it just the way it is." I'm guessing that you're somewhere in between as far as still listening and still addressing concerns. I'd just like a bit of an idea of where you are in that process and where people can go and how much influence they could have on that process and the curriculum where it's at right now. Again, that's something you could undertake if you don't have that information, but I think you've probably already addressed it to a certain degree already today. If you could do that for me, that would be great.

The last thing is the transportation budget. That's always a concern in rural Alberta, and I know you've done some things to address some of those concerns. I just want to get a bit of an outline on what you've done in this budget for transportation for education.

I'll leave the rest of the time for you, Minister, to respond to that. Again, if you need some time to prepare on that, I understand.

The Chair: Are those all of your questions, Member?

Mr. Loewen: Yeah.

The Chair: Please proceed, Minister.

Member LaGrange: Okay. Thank you so much. The Valleyview school is certainly an important project. It was advocated for for a very long time. It did have to go through the gated process that we have, and it has risen to the top of the list. I know that last year it received planning dollars. This year it is receiving design dollars, so now you can get into the actual detailed work on what that looks like. We did not release an actual amount just yet because, of course, it has to go through a fair RFP process to ensure that we don't give anyone an unfair advantage on that particular piece, but it is now in the design stage, which then leads to building right afterwards. I know that the community is very appreciative of that project because it is much needed. There is a very well-loved but very tired school that needs to be replaced. I'm happy that that rose to the top of the gated process, and now we're able to move forward on it.

On the curriculum process, yes, it's been a very transparent process. When we brought forward the curriculum draft last March or last May – sorry; it's all blending together – when we brought it forward last spring, we had embarked on what would be probably the most transparent and most engaged upon draft of curriculum ever in Alberta history. We have had tens of thousands of everyday Albertans weigh in. We've had educators, we've had postsecondary, and we've had ethnic communities, cultural communities. Anyone who's wanted to have a voice has had the opportunity to have their

voice heard. We have been addressing and refining the drafts that have been out there.

Just before Christmas we announced that we would be concentrating and focusing on three subjects for implementation in September of 2022; that is, mathematics, English language arts and literature, and physical education and wellness. Further to that, we also announced that we would put together a Curriculum Implementation Advisory Group made up of system experts who know how to implement the curriculum into the schools, taking into account all of the considerations that are out there, including COVID. We've also had piloting teachers weigh in. We've had 360 teachers piloting the draft curriculum. So there are many pieces.

The other piece that I would mention before I move on is that I've also delayed the social studies. We've gone back to scope and sequence, which is the blueprint. We went back. We heard a significant amount of concern around social studies. That was by far the subject that we received the most input on and feedback on, so we are continuing to refine that. We put out a refined scope and sequence. We're consulting on that, and then we will further look at the draft.

We are still going to implement in September of 2022 those three subjects. The Curriculum Implementation Advisory Group is in fact advising us on how we go forward with those three subjects. I look forward to sharing more information on that very, very soon.

We're doing exactly what we said we're going to do. It's all up on the website. You can go have a look at it. What we've done to date is all there and how we're moving forward, and as more pieces become available, we will be putting that forward as well.

I know I had a question asked earlier this morning about social studies and if we would in fact have information on Ukraine culture and history. That certainly is something that – because the draft is just that, a draft, we are looking at ensuring that we have all of the information available as we get into those details. Yes, in fact, we've heard from many cultural groups that for the first time ever they're going to see themselves reflected in the curriculum. I think that's exciting, and many individuals see the opportunities that exist through that.

We were just talking about transportation, and transportation is huge, 300,000. I'm not sure if you heard that we have roughly 300,000 students that take transportation buses every single day. A hundred million kilometres a year are being travelled, so we are doing everything we can.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Minister.

At the beginning of our meeting today I stated that I would like cellphones and other devices set to silent for the duration of the meeting. I keep hearing something beeping, so if it could either be turned off or removed from the room. I'm finding it distracting. I'm not sure where it's coming from, but whoever has that, please remove it from the room.

Now I will move over to the government side for your next section of questions. Please proceed, Mrs. Frey.

Mrs. Frey: Thank you very much. Thank you, Minister, again for answering my questions about student transportation. That's extremely important to me, and I see it's a theme around the room. It's good to hear that's top of mind for everyone.

I'm also going to ask about school choice, something that's very important to me and many people in my riding. I see that key objective 4.2 under outcome 4 of your business plan stated, "Support choice with a variety of schooling options for students and parents within the education system." One of the things that we all campaigned on and we've always stood by is that parents, not politicians, are always in the best position to make decisions on how

their children should be educated. I just wanted you to maybe elaborate on – and I want to give you a little bit more time for this. How is Budget '22 supporting parent choice in education, and what has been built into the capital plan specifically to allow for that choice?

Then I'm also going to ask you some questions referencing back to key objective 4.2 and expanding to 4.4. I wanted to ask you: related to increased schooling options for students and parents – more specifically, key objective 4.4 references changes to financial and governance practices for private schools, which we know in Alberta are more commonly referred to as independent schools – can you please explain why this is a priority for you and your ministry and speak a little bit about the changes that you are pursuing with these financial reporting changes?

Minister, we hear from the opposition members that funding is being taken away from public schools in order to increase funding for private schools and charter schools. I actually have a few questions about this as well. First, can you confirm if charter schools are publicly funded by the government or if they receive funding independently through tuition? I'm also wondering how much actual funding goes to the charter schools specifically, proportionately. Lastly, I've heard that there are long waits to attend charter schools, which makes them elite and difficult-to-access programs. Can you tell us how many students actually attend charter schools in Alberta and how long their wait-lists are and if you're planning to address this? I assume that the earmarked funding in the capital plan might address these issues, but I'm just wondering if you could elaborate on that for us, please.

I'll resign my time.

The Chair: Okay. Please proceed, Minister.

Member LaGrange: Okay. Thank you very much for those questions, that question, many questions. Thank you so much. Parental choice, absolutely, is something that our government is very concerned about and has always advocated for. We are very blessed in Alberta to have so many choices. You can attend a public school, a francophone school, a separate school, a Catholic school, an independent school, a public charter school, or a home-school. There's definitely the opportunity for parents to make that choice. With the enhancements that we did in the Education Act and the Choice in Education Act, that just further solidifies that we have a proud history and that it, in fact, is working because, of course, we see great successes throughout all of the education system that is provided.

4:30

You asked a question around: how is it built into the capital plan? Budget 2022 also provides \$25 million over three years to support collegiate programs and charter school expansions in the education system. This would cover costs associated with facility leases or expansions like rentals or third-party spaces. We haven't actually seen any new charter schools since 2008. Only recently, after the improvements and enhancements that we did in the Education Act and the Choice in Education Act, have we actually seen a couple of new charter schools start. It's roughly about 500 students that that has added into the public charter system. Currently in the public charter system, in the '21-22 year, there were 15 charter schools in the province serving 10,519 students, and they were projected to receive roughly \$94.3 million. Provincially they represent 1.5 per cent of the student population choosing charter schools, but they receive only 1.2 per cent of the overall funding. The 2022 capital plan also provides \$47 million over three years to support school infrastructure for public charters and collegiate schools to provide

new and improved student spaces across the province, you know, and also to acquire furniture, equipment, leasehold improvements, those types of things.

I would say that on the collegiate side this was a platform commitment. It was an idea that NAIT along with Edmonton public and Edmonton Catholic – they had been working on this project for a number of years to create this collegiate concept. Really, it's an alternate pathway for students to be able to get into postsecondary and also into the trades, vocational-type programming. Unfortunately, for whatever reason, it wasn't able to be implemented, and it was something that we put in our platform commitment. Those dollars were allocated in the platform to ensure that we see it through to its completion.

The reason that we're looking at, on the independent side, making some changes in terms of – really, what we're looking at doing is cutting red tape, making sure that we have more accountability and assurance and transparency. Those are all things that we're looking to do. We review all of the education system on an ongoing basis to make sure that we can cut red tape where it's necessary, make sure we streamline processes, and it's no different in the public charters or in the independent areas. Sometimes, you know, things have happened for a number of years, as I said, in the public charter realm. There had not been a new charter since 2008, so we have to certainly look at the ability to – what has worked in the past? Maybe it isn't working now, so how can we streamline that process, make sure that, you know, the application process is equitable and streamlined? We cut red tape but not at the expense of accountability and assurance for the public because these are public dollars. Public charters are indeed public schools. They get full funding, and they are also tied to postsecondary and research, so we want to make sure that there is accountability for those dollars.

You were correct in saying that there are long waiting lists. Some parents put their children on the waiting lists for a public charter school at birth. Right now my understanding is that there is an excess waiting list of over 5,500 potential students.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Minister.

We will now return to the Official Opposition for their questions. Please proceed, MLA Hoffman.

Ms Hoffman: Thank you very much, Madam Chair. If I could begin, included within my time, of course, to explain – I brought a CO₂ monitor. This is very similar to the monitors that our public and Catholic schools and other provinces like Ontario and Quebec have been installing in their schools. It certainly wasn't my intent to disrupt anything. It beeps every time the levels reach a high level of concern, and this is something that many families have asked that we ensure are available in schools across the province.

I was hoping it wouldn't beep at all today, but every time it's beeped – my apologies – it's because the air in this room isn't circulating properly, and we certainly don't have a filtration system here, like with many schools. Many schools across the province don't have HEPA filters, don't have adequate ventilation.

Mrs. Frey: Point of order, Madam Chair.

The Chair: We have a point of order called. Please proceed, Member.

Mrs. Frey: I believe there was a ruling today in the House where the Speaker actually cautioned against using props. I'm not sure where exactly it is in the standing orders, so maybe just a point of clarification if props are allowed to be used in estimates if they're not allowed to be used in the Chamber.

The Chair: Thank you so much. I will just pause for a moment to seek consultation.

Ms Hoffman: Can we pause the clock?

The Chair: The individual speaking time stops, but the time for the meeting continues.

I've made my ruling – although I do not find this to be a point of order, I did ask and I read through the instructions – that the device causing the noise please be removed or turned off.

Please proceed, Member.

Ms Hoffman: Thanks, Madam Chair. I'm happy to tie this to the performance metric in the business plan, item 4(a) performance measure, satisfaction that school provides a safe, caring, and healthy learning environment. This morning I asked that we please get the numbers from the department officials who are present. We see what the targets are for this year, next year, and the following year, but what have the actuals been over the last three years while this government has been in place for performance metric 4(a), which is page 32 of the business plan? I think it's important for us to know if the targets that we're being asked to approve through the budget process align with the actual realities that families are facing today in schools. One of the realities is that they would like there to be an audit of ventilation systems. They'd like to make sure that when they send their kids to school, everything is being done from the government's responsibility to keep them safe and in good working order. Knowing how this relates back to air quality in schools would be a piece that I think would be worthy of consideration.

I'm going to stay in the capital plan in the time we have remaining and just touch on the business plan around school facilities. We see that in this year's estimate we are asked to consider – the government total number on page 33 is \$928 million, but that drops quite a bit next year by about a third and to about a half the year out, that by 2024 the government is planning on only investing \$451 million, which is half of this year. This year, arguably, only 11 projects are actually being funded. Many would say that that is far from sufficient given the needs of families right across the province either for new or modernizations to existing schools. Through the budget that's being presented today in the business plan, how many projects does the minister expect to be able to deliver with, you know, a third less budget next year? Would it be safe to assume that there'd be a third fewer projects, actually, that we're asked to consider in the three-year target as we're considering the budget estimates here today?

A couple of other pieces that have been asked as it relates to safety of schools. I know that when I was on a school board – and I imagine when the minister was on as well – we had an estimate every year for what deferred maintenance was for buildings. We also had an estimate for what asbestos abatement would be for the existing infrastructure we had. I would like clarification from the minister. I'd like an answer as to what the deferred maintenance is for buildings in the province of Alberta under her roles and responsibilities, of course, as the minister responsible for K to 12 education and also, through you, Madam Chair, what the expected asbestos abatement costs would be for those same schools to make sure that students are indeed learning in safe and healthy learning environments.

You know, there are only four metrics that are actually put in the business plan, but I'm glad that that is still one because, of course, if kids are unable to feel safe when they go to school for a variety of factors, they are unable to be successful and focus on math and

language arts and everything else we want them to be able to focus on when they do arrive in that school building.

4:40

The information measuring what the results were for safe and caring healthy learning environments for each year that the UCP has been in government so that we can assess whether or not these targets are realistic: I think that would be something that the minister or her department officials should have handy and be able to deliver to this committee.

I appreciate that the minister flagged that the last chart had what was actually funded this year, the head count actuals, but it's not broken down by division or by grade, which is what the top chart on the very same web page has, projections, preliminary analysis for each grade level. We're more than halfway through the school year. How many kids are in grade 1 . . .

The Chair: Thank you, hon. member.

We have five minutes for the minister to respond. It's just the red clock here.

Member LaGrange: Thank you so much. Just on the last point raised by MLA Hoffman in regard to the projection numbers, for the '22-23 they will be released once they're finalized with boards later this spring, so out of respect for that process the numbers that are on the website are the most current numbers at this point in time. The actual head counts for this school year are posted, so please refer back to that chart.

In regard to air quality within our schools, obviously, you know, COVID has certainly drawn attention to this. We have school authorities that have been looking at this as well as we as a province have, and of course we look at it interjurisdictionally from across Canada. There's work being done on this very item.

When we look at the fact that in Alberta we accelerated \$250 million of capital maintenance and renewal funding to school authorities right when they needed it most, when we were coming back into schools, I know that \$44 million of that was used for filtration systems. We continue to have over \$665 million through operations and maintenance and infrastructure renewal, IMR funding as well, available.

This is, you know, on top of the \$1 billion of accessibility by school boards to deal with issues as they arise. If, in fact, they have issues, we know that the use of high efficiency particulate air, which is HEPA filters, has not been required in the past. Key information on Alberta's considerations for managing COVID and respiratory illness, including ventilation, was provided to all school authorities in our general guidance document, and this came on the recommendation of the chief medical officer of health and her health department. So we've worked very closely with them.

We also worked with occupational health and safety as well, and that is another area that has taken a keen interest in ventilation in Alberta. As was indicated this morning, there is \$13 million in additional funding for federal safe indoor HVAC ventilation, which we will – they have some very strict parameters. This was top-up funding the federal government did provide, but it has very strict parameters as to how that can be used, so we will be looking to disburse those out as per the parameters as soon as possible, of course, once the budget is approved in the House.

If school authorities choose to use portable air filters with HEPA filters, we know that it's recommended that they use a combination, which is established by public health measures, considering the impact that they may have on overall air quality and ventilation. Actually, I've been told by some experts that, in fact, when you use the stand-alone systems, if you don't have an engineer who

understands how the airflow circulates within a classroom or within a room, in general that stand-alone can actually disrupt air quality and be more harm than positive.

Again, there are recommendations around those portable HVAC air purifying systems that have to be looked at. They have to take into account the size of the room and the area where they're being used. All of those factors are being addressed and looked at.

We also have deferred maintenance I think was a question that was being asked. Again I want to draw your attention to the fact that we have record numbers of investment in operations and maintenance grants, in capital maintenance and renewal, and infrastructure maintenance and renewal funding. When we look at the '21-22 school year, total operations and maintenance, which is O and M, and infrastructure and maintenance renewal was \$651 million. In '22-23 we're actually going up to \$655 million, an additional increase of \$6 million to address the most urgent needs of school authorities. O and M grant will consist of 75 per cent school space, funding utilized and underutilized space, so we're actually still funding underutilized space.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

We will turn now to the government side. Proceed please, Member Gotfried.

Mr. Gotfried: Great. Thank you, Madam Chair, and thank you to the minister and all the staff. We've got quite a full gallery here today to answer our tough questions, so thank you for that and for the time to find out a little bit more about what's happening in our educational ministry.

Minister, following on some of the questions from my learned colleague the MLA for Drayton Valley-Devon, on page 10 of the fiscal plan we discussed the Alberta at work initiative, which is of great interest to me. It says, and I'll quote from the fiscal plan:

In partnership with post-secondary institutions and industry partners, collegiate programs will be well integrated within the K-12 system and will provide clear pathways for students into post-secondary education and to careers that are in high-demand.

Minister, I know that the work that I'm doing in the Alberta Strategic Aviation Advisory Council, for example, there is much talk about building the interest among students at a younger age, the demand capacity building and, really, I guess, early career path opportunities, particularly within the aviation sector, aircraft maintenance but also in other areas. I can imagine there are dozens of other highly appropriate industries that have the same concerns, and particularly postpandemic concerns, about attracting and developing a qualified workforce, which is really what it's going to be about in terms of the economic recovery plan that we're moving towards. People are one of the greatest concerns, and workforce concerns are certainly very, very key and almost top of mind with everyone.

I've heard, particularly with the aviation program, comments from people, including aviation interest in junior highs, high schools, and in partnership with one or more postsecondary institutions. This is a concept I'm very excited about. I've heard comments from SAIT, from Portage College, and I know even Mount Royal University has been talking about a degree program that they're coming up with, certainly, that they would like to launch, which would be very different than aircraft maintenance and very different than some of the operational side, but more people in marketing and communications and various other areas of interest could be very, very stimulating, because everybody loves airplanes. Many people do, for sure.

Given that I'm highly supportive of the concept, I'd like to ask a few questions to better understand what this initiative will look like

as it's rolled out in Alberta. Firstly, I'd like you to explain to me and to Albertans what distinguishes and differentiates a collegiate program from current educational streams within our publicly funded educational system. Following on that, it's my understanding that currently there actually are no collegiate programs operating in Alberta. If that's the case, who will receive the funding that's been allocated – and I believe it's \$25 million in operating expense and \$47 million in capital investment – for this initiative to actually come to fruition? I guess my other question on that is: how can interested parties, like those interested in the aviation programs, actually find out more about this and find out how they can access some of the capital and operational funding for them to move forward with this? I think those are very key to me.

Also, Minister, in the fiscal plan the Alberta at work initiative – and I really like this program: a broad brush, and I know it's across many ministries – as it's outlined, it's clear that it's a high priority not only for Education but across many of your other ministries as well because it's not going to be just one group; it's going to be yourself and Advanced Education and Labour and Immigration to fulfill this vision. Page 10 notes that some of Education's funding is allocated to that plan, and specifically it talks about strategic investments that will be made in the education system with a focus on science, technology, engineering, and mathematics, the STEM curriculum, and also the parity of esteem which we, of course, hear the Premier talk about in terms of trades. That's always been a theme that's come through, that parity of esteem that we can move into our trades. We can also see that the Alberta at work program will also support the engagement and attraction of underrepresented populations into areas of emerging career opportunities, which I think we can all get behind and is very much a theme also in the aviation world.

4:50

My other question would be, now that you've got my attention, certainly, in this – I think it's a great initiative, and I think across the province we're going to hear people very interested – can the minister tell us a little bit more about Education's investment in and specific role with respect to supporting the Alberta at work program and why you think it's such a great initiative, particularly in light of our rebounding economy and some of the opportunities that will unfold as we move forward? Those are my questions to the minister, and I would be very grateful for some answers and some insights on the Alberta at work plan.

Thank you.

The Chair: Well, thank you so much, hon. member.

I will now turn it over to the minister for her response.

Member LaGrange: Thank you so much. Again, happy to talk about this. Of course, we know that we're going to be at a deficit for workers the way our economy is heating up, with all the great news and, you know, attracting 130,000 jobs back to our province, more people working, more investment coming all the time. We need our students, whether they're in K to 12 or whether they're in postsecondary, to be able to rise to the challenge. We know we're going to be short roughly 30,000 tradespeople here in the next decade, maybe even more the way we're going. Of course, we need to look at all of these initiatives that we're doing. The collegiate schools are really looking at another avenue, and they're just another avenue. We have an excellent education system that provides many opportunities.

One of the pieces – and I'm sorry. I have to apologize to MLA Smith that I didn't get to his question earlier on Acme school, which is a Golden Hills public school division school initiative where they

actually pair students up – they spend a good portion of their day in school, but in the afternoon they are paired up with businesses. They have a business – actually, they have more than one business for every student to attend and connect with so that students can go and try out different businesses. They can go out and try different trades. They can actually find – you know, some of them find employment with those individual businesses. Some of them actually then apprentice in various trades, and they are finding – it's really unique, it's community, it's business, it's the school all coming together and really investing.

The community – it's a very small community – is investing \$1.3 million towards this Acme school hub. I'm going to get back to the collegiate because I know that's the main question, but I didn't want to lose the fact of what a great initiative this is. They've grown it over years, they've invested, and what they're finding – this is a rural community – those students go on to apprentice, they go on to get jobs, and they go on to stay in the community, growing our rural communities. It certainly is a model that can be replicated, and they're going to provide virtual training to their students, because it's hard sometimes to retain and attract those specialized teachers in those communities. They're going to have a virtual hub where they can do that.

They've partnered with two postsecondaries, Grande Prairie College as well as Red Deer Polytechnic, at this point in time and are probably looking to expand that. The reason I mention them is because this is what's happening. Right now the proponent that was successful to start the NAIT collegiate is a charter school, but there's no reason that our public schools, public charters but also public publics, cannot go out and be part of this exciting new endeavour. I know that there's a lot of interest. I'm hearing from school authorities right across this province that are interested in doing that. Really, a collegiate is to provide another pathway to postsecondary, to give students another way to connect, particularly in STEM and vocational schools, to that community, and to really follow their passions and start to foster those passions at a younger age and build them up.

You mentioned the aviation program, and I'm excited to share with you that it is Prairie Rose school division that just started a brand new South Alberta Flight Academy. It runs out of Dunmore in Medicine Hat airport. There we go. It is very exciting. I know that that is something that young people are going to gravitate towards, because there is a shortage in those areas. Sometimes young people – and, as you know, I have seven children – don't know what they don't know. They don't know what the opportunities out there are in agriculture, in aviation, in so many of these other disciplines and professions that we need more people in, so the more that we can do to expose young people to those opportunities, the better chances we have that they will actually explore it and then follow through.

When we look at what we're proposing in a collegiate, there are dollars allocated to create a permanent facility at NAIT and, in the future, SAIT. SAIT is now looking at what a SAIT collegiate would look like, and I anticipate they will put out an RFP at some point in time in the near future.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Minister.

We will now return to the Official Opposition. Please proceed, Member.

Ms Hoffman: Thanks very much, Madam Chair. I want to spend this block talking about the curriculum, which is something that, as the minister said, many Albertans are very frustrated, angry, and have rejected. I don't think those are the words the minister used. I

think she said “gave feedback on,” but that’ll be my summary, through you, Madam Chair.

I would say that the research has shown, through the engagement sessions, that there is significant push-back to this curriculum still. I know that many people are relieved that some of the worst parts aren’t moving forward, but we still have fewer than I believe it’s 1 per cent of K to 6 teachers actually piloting this curriculum in their classrooms, which would not be an adequate sample size by most research standards to be able to ensure that there is buy-in and support for the curriculum when it moves forward. So one of my questions would be for further clarity.

I want to note that here we are in the middle of Alberta Francophonie Month, and we have no francophone schools that are piloting this curriculum, no French schools, I believe, at all that are piloting this curriculum, and they’re expected to implement this in the next few months for the three slash four subjects that the minister has mentioned previously. That is a significant issue in terms of confidence in the actual curriculum, and it’s been rejected by the francophone community. I guess: why such urgency? Isn’t the minister concerned that by not having an adequate trial of this, there will be unforeseen consequences, to quote my colleague? Mr. Smith used to say “unanticipated consequences” a lot when he was in opposition. I feel that this is doomed for failure given the significant public push-back and the lack of actual piloting.

Next I want to say that Mr. Smith and I both went to a number of teacher conventions, and at teachers’ convention when there was new curriculum coming, you’d always have a chance to look at the textbooks, to have in-services about what was changing in the curriculum areas, be able to have professional development and servicing, and actually have some time to go through the materials. Here we are, well into teachers’ convention cycle, and there are still no resources available for teachers. This at a time when educational staff are more exhausted than they have been probably in any other calendar year, and now they’re being asked to take on a completely updated – or backdated, depending on your perspective – curriculum for seven grades, K through 6, in just the next few months.

I have significant concerns, as do many academics, teachers, members of the public, that the curriculum is not going to set kids up for success. Does the minister have any employers that she knows of who are confident in standing up and saying that this will make for somebody who’s better trained and ready to enter the workforce? Not necessarily in grade 6, but what they’re telling kids to learn in K through 6. What employers are willing to stand with the minister and say that this is going to make kids better prepared for the world of work? I haven’t heard from any. In fact, I’ve heard from many who are deeply concerned about the direction that this curriculum has taken.

Resources would be one area of question and concern. The validity of the pilot is another significant area of concern. And what types of supports will be in place to ensure dedicated professional development and training so that teachers can be successful? They’ve been cut out of the actual process that was in place under the previous ministerial order around creating curricular outcomes and partnership. Will the ATA be provided with an increase to their grants to support professional development across the province? That’s something that’s happened many times in the past.

5:00

Simply, this sample size is not sufficient, and I have fears that the demographic information for the students piloting is not representative of the diversity that we see in our province. How many Indigenous students, francophone students, students of varied socioeconomic backgrounds, newcomers are actually engaging with the content that the minister is trying to force on schools this

September? The minister might say that it doesn’t matter how many students were Indigenous or francophone or low income or high income, but certainly it does. We know that the research is very clear that kids need to see themselves in the curriculum and that they need to be able to connect with it on a very personal level. What resources will be put in place? What’s the demographic of the kids? How many are in certain grades, and what are their diversity factors or equity-seeking factors? And how can the minister possibly think that this curriculum is ready for prime time when so many Albertans have rejected it?

The Chair: Thank you so much, hon. member.

I’ll just mention to everyone that we’ll pause for our coffee break at about 5:15. I hear that there’s going to be fresh coffee then, so you’ll all be able to enjoy that.

Now we’ll return to the minister.

Member LaGrange: Thank you, and I am looking forward to a fresh cup of coffee, for sure.

First of all, I would state that I was not sure which page the member opposite was actually referring to in the fiscal plan that highlighted the curriculum, but I am happy to share the fact that Budget 2022 includes \$191 million over three years. This is \$59 million in the first year that we are allocating to implementation of the new curriculum. I was a trustee for, as I’ve said before, 11 and a half years. I know that the member opposite was a school board trustee as well, sometimes over that same time period. We have been talking about renewing the curriculum for well over a decade. There have been significant dollars to date, \$64 million, spent by previous governments to bring us to the point, like today’s portion, with no actual curriculum in front of our students, no finalized curriculum.

What I would say is that, you know, we had made a promise to Albertans, the over 1 million Albertans that elected us to office, that we would in fact look at making sure that we have a new, updated curriculum in front of students that has the knowledge and the skills that they need to be successful. We knew that when we brought it out, we would have to spend significant time ensuring that everyone had an opportunity to see it, because there was a perception that the previous government had created their draft of the curriculum in secrecy. We were very transparent. We have a website up with all of the pieces on it. Every step of the way, we have included that on the website. There have only been nominal times when we protected names of teachers so that they would not suffer having their privacy invaded and protected students.

Referring to the member opposite’s question on piloting, I just want to remind everyone that in past curriculums it was very rare to see anything piloted. In fact, it was: here you go; this is your new curriculum implemented. The curriculum is under the purview of the Ministry of Education. It is approved by the Ministry of Education, the Minister of Education to be implemented, and it is the responsibility of school authorities to, in fact, implement it. They have a legal obligation to do so. We’ve worked collaboratively with school authorities. In fact, there was approximately a million dollars put out to school authorities.

This is on top of all of the other engagement sessions that we’ve had. I know there are people on my team here behind me that could go into great detail of all of the different pieces, all of the people who’ve been involved, but in particular the school authorities, the school partners, the education partners that have been involved: the College of Alberta School Superintendents, the Alberta School Boards Association, the Metis Settlements General Council, the Fédération des conseils scolaires francophones de l’Alberta, the Council of Catholic School Superintendents, the Alberta Catholic trustees’ association, the Association of Alberta Public Charter

Schools, the Stoney Nakoda-Tsuut'ina Tribal Council, the Association of Independent Schools and Colleges in Alberta, the Blackfoot Confederacy, the Tribal Chiefs Ventures Inc., and the confederacy of Treaty Six, just to name those ones that were able to take part in the grant funding that we provided.

I'd like to turn the rest of the time over to my deputy minister, who can go into the actual teachers, the seconded teachers, the teams that we have in place, the team that we put together for resourcing, et cetera. Andre.

Mr. Tremblay: Sure. Thanks, Minister. I'm obviously accountable for staffing within the department, and within our department we really take pride in the staffing model that we've adopted to support curriculum development. Much of our curriculum division is actually comprised of interchange teachers and from the system. We have an interchange program. What that ultimately means is that we work with school authorities to bring front-line teachers into the department to help develop curriculum, to help develop our resources to support curriculum implementation, and to actually help in professional development training and information provision.

The Chair: Thank you so much to the minister and her team.

We will move over to the government side for your set of questions or your question and then back to the minister, and then we'll have the break.

Mr. Smith: Thank you, Madam Chair. Can you hear me, Minister? We're good?

Member LaGrange: Yes.

Mr. Smith: Okay. I've got several questions here. For those of you that know me a little bit, I could probably talk about education for the rest of this hour and well into another hour or two if that's what you really wanted to do, so I'll break my questions. I've got many of them, and we'll see how many we get through here in my five minutes.

Minister, in the fiscal plan it looks at staffing figures in Alberta schools. We've heard from members of the opposition that you've laid teachers off, so I would like to know if that's true. It looks to me that the numbers of both the certificated and noncertificated staff are increasing in the 2022-23 budget, so if you could talk a little bit about staffing, if the opposition is correct, what that means. There must have been a decline somewhere in previous years. Can you speak to where those numbers came from? Why would there be a decline? If layoffs did occur, who's responsible? If the school boards felt that they didn't have enough funding to hire staff, what options do they have besides layoffs in order to deal with those things?

I'll also sort of – you talked earlier in your conversation this morning about graduating more teachers, and that got me wondering here. Do we have statistics on how many education students actually graduate every year in the province of Alberta? I don't know if you have anything like that at your fingertips. How many students actually get jobs, say, within three years of graduating in Alberta? Those would be also interesting if you've got them at your fingertips, if you have any answers to those.

I'd like to spend a little bit of time here on curriculum as well. There are many questions that I could go down the path here, but I think that one of the things that I've heard the most when I've talked with a lot of former colleagues in div 1 and div 2 is that there have been some concerns about age appropriateness and the amount of content that had been found in some of the – we've gone to a knowledge-rich curriculum, which I think is actually a really good idea. I love that movement, but they have had some concerns about

age appropriateness and the amount of content. So just a question – and maybe it's best for Mr. Tremblay or somebody else to answer; I don't know. How have we tried to address this?

I know that we've reviewed. I know that you made some changes in the social studies curriculum as we've gone through this process, and you've commented on how we have changed that. What kinds of changes have we made in social studies or in the other disciplines that we're working through in order to try to deal with the concerns of age appropriateness and/or the amount of content that's actually in the K through 6 curriculum?

5:10

You've also done something. When I first talked with – when I was the critic for Education in 2015, '16, and '17, I remember having conversations with the ATA and then president Mark Ramsankar. I voiced some concerns at that point in time: you know, we're doing something different here in our curriculum that we've never done before, and that's that we're dealing with all of the disciplines all at once from K through 6, and were there any concerns? There didn't seem to be any concerns by the then president and Minister of Education and the ATA. At that time there didn't seem to be any concerns, and I was really mystified because I just saw it as a teacher that's taught for 30 years, having to deal with all of that all at once. I think it was a good choice for you to decide to split that up and to roll out some of the disciplines first.

But I guess the question I've got – and I've got 50 seconds here – is this. Why these disciplines here for the first round? Why these over the other disciplines? Then, secondly, what other disciplines will be rolled out? Are the rest of the disciplines going to be rolled out in the next year after that? Are there any cost implications to doing this and to, you know, separating them and bringing them out over the next, I guess, two or three years now?

I think I'm just about done here. I know that there are teachers that I have talked with in my constituency. If we could go through some of those questions about the curriculum, especially the age appropriateness and the amount of content.

The Chair: Thank you so much, hon. member.

Now we'll go to the minister for her response.

Member LaGrange: Thank you very much for those great questions. Just to start off by addressing the staffing questions that you were asking, to make everybody aware, because I sometimes don't think people are aware that Alberta Education as a ministry does not hold contracts with teachers, it is, in fact, school authorities that hold the contracts with the teachers and support staff, and 98 per cent of all the funding in Alberta Education goes directly to school authorities to manage their staffing levels and the supports that they need.

Given the fact that we have increased funding to Education's overall budget, it is very much with the mind that we address where there is the most impact to students, and that's on the front lines – that's teachers and educational assistants – you know, making sure that that funding is there and flexible for school authorities to use as they see fit and to ensure that the special-needs students and the complexities within certain classrooms and certain areas are addressed. Those are the very reasons that we wanted that additional increase to Education's overall funding envelope of \$700 million. Again, it's an \$8.4 billion budget. It's very significant. It's the second-highest budget in all of Alberta, so we want to make sure that we are addressing that.

In Budget 2022 we restated that the '21-22 full-time equivalent staffing figures using updated staffing numbers were provided by school boards, so public school boards are reporting a total increase

of 160 in staffing over the previous year. The number of certificated FTEs is projected to increase by 107, and the number of noncertificated FTEs is projected to increase by 53. Increased funding rates for base funding and operations and maintenance by 1 per cent will provide \$342 million over the next three years, including \$36 million in '22-23, to help school authorities address cost pressures such as staffing.

I just want to remind everybody that, in fact, school board reserves did grow during the pandemic. We started the pandemic with \$363 million in school board reserves. This is operational reserves only. I'm not even talking about capital reserves; they did grow as well. Operational reserves started at \$363 million. As of August of 2021 we're at \$464 million in operating reserves. If you add in the capital, we're upwards of \$700 million in reserves that school boards have access to. It is obviously within their purview to make sure that they have the workforce that they need, the composition that they need, and it's locally elected school boards and trustees that do that.

When I look at – I'm just trying to remember the rest of your question here so I don't miss any of it. I think we've covered that piece. I do believe that you asked a question in regard to how many students graduate. While I don't have the exact number in front of me, I did ask that recently, and I do recall that it's roughly about – I was going to say 2,500, but now I do have the exact number. In 2021 it's 2,614 – so I was pretty close; I was going by memory – students that are set to graduate.

I know that many school authorities across this province have already started to recruit new staff. There are job postings out there, and I know that, in particular in the rural areas and remote areas, there are always opportunities available. We certainly encourage teachers to go out to those areas and try it out. I was at the Rural Education Symposium just a few days ago – the days start to blend – Sunday evening. It was interesting that, in a part of the presentation, we're seeing that when student teachers go out and new teachers go out to rural, remote areas, they tend to stay there. Over 70 per cent choose to go and stay beyond the obligation that they've made in their initial contract, so that's very, very encouraging to hear.

In terms of the curriculum, yes, we did hear concerns, particularly in certain subjects. Some subjects we didn't hear as much concern about age appropriateness or content load that we did hear in certain subjects. When we looked at choosing math . . .

The Chair: Thank you so much, Minister.

We will pause now for a five-minute coffee break. When we return, we will go to the Official Opposition for their questions.

[The committee adjourned from 5:17 p.m. to 5:23 p.m.]

The Chair: All right. We will begin our next session here with the Official Opposition. Please proceed, hon. member.

Ms Hoffman: Thank you very much, Madam Chair. At this point I'm going to ask some questions as it relates to the construction of new schools. Yesterday I was in the Infrastructure estimates, and colleagues from the independents as well as our Official Opposition highlighted some of the significant challenges that were seen with P3 projects in the past for education. The minister is probably well aware that Conservative governments stopped the advancement of P3 construction for schools given the significant issues that were seen, particularly with a round of – at that time they called them ASAP schools, Alberta schools alternative procurement. Many of them opened in 2010 and had significant issues. Of course, they come with a 30-year operational agreement typically.

One of the issues, for example, is that Honeywell, who was the selected contractor who was in charge of maintenance for the

schools, including things like setting the temperature in the school, would do so from Toronto. Knowing what appropriate temperatures are for different dates when you're in Edmonton, typically you'd have that control with somebody who has a boiler certificate, a custodian in the school, and that adult who was in the school making sure that it was clean and safe also controlled the boiler. But when Honeywell was selected as the ASAP provider, it created significant issues around things as simple as setting appropriate temperatures in a classroom for the students that you're serving.

There were also examples of many years of frustration. The minister will know that parents were incredibly vocal around the failure to maintain school sites properly for students to be able to engage in, so there being massive mud pits in a field. Of course, the contract: one side interpreted it to say that the P3 partner was responsible for doing the remediation to make it safe for kids to play on the playground and to access the field, and the contract provider would say, "Well, no; we don't believe so; we think that we have met our conditions."

When these types of contracts get in the way of good public education, it has a significant negative impact on the children and on the broader community. This relates, of course, to school facilities on page 33 of the business plan, if the minister wants a specific line item to be able to refer to.

This is a significant issue. Prior Conservative governments admitted that P3s did not work for schools. They maybe still went ahead with them for some bridges or roads – we can argue the merits of those – but Conservative governments admitted in the province of Alberta that they didn't work for schools and that they didn't put students first. There is concern that with the current budget and the focus on P3s that that is not the case anymore under the current government's leadership. So what is the minister doing within the budget to ensure that we get an opportunity to build some more traditional procurement options that have local school authorities owning the buildings that kids are actually in rather than having these contract frustrations go back and forth?

One other little example. A principal told me about a kid kicking his soccer ball and his shoe going up on the roof of the school. According to the contract nobody was allowed on the roof of the school other than the Honeywell contractor. How ridiculous is that? Normally you'd be able to go up and get a shoe, a soccer ball, whatever is up there, and you have a custodian who's trained and has all their safety certification to be able to be that steward of a safe and healthy learning environment for kids.

I also will take just a minute to highlight some of the – I did mention some school jurisdictions that I was shocked were overlooked significantly in terms of capital. There are also significant needs in Lethbridge. It is also growing. There were, for the public district alone, two new schools desperately needed as well as I believe they had 11 modernizations listed as well in their capital plan, yet nothing again in this capital plan for Lethbridge. I guess some of the criticism that we've been hearing is that the gated process feels gated, that there is certainly a lack of transparency, a lack of consistent values and direction communicated back to those who are creating these capital plans. They don't create them to be rejected; they create them to meet the criteria and get kids quality schools in their local communities.

The Chair: Thank you so much.

Now over to the minister.

Member LaGrange: Thank you so much. I'm happy to be talking about construction, again, of new schools and major modernizations and to highlight that we are spending \$2 billion over three years for many projects. As you know, there are 51 projects – I've stated it

before – that are currently under construction and then an additional 15 new projects added to that list, so now we're at 65.

P3s, which is the public-private partnership – and, yes, I am familiar with P3s. I was glad to hear MLA Hoffman mention that in the past there were issues with the contract. My understanding and my experience has been that it was never the actual infrastructure itself. The schools themselves are beautiful schools. They're safe. They're great learning spaces. But the issue that was prevalent in the past was the contract. This falls under the purview of the Minister of Infrastructure. Minister Panda has done an amazing job. He heard from every school authority in this province; I can tell you that. He heard from myself and my department as well all of the information that we had received, and he engaged thoroughly.

5:30

In 2020 he did a really extensive engagement on P3s in particular. One of the values of P3s: because it is a public-private partnership, the private partners put money into it, and it stretches the government dollar further so that we can build more facilities. I know that he did this extensive engagement, and he really heard what the issues were, and he has looked to address those issues in subsequent P3 structures that have been announced.

Is there anything you'd add on that particular piece, Andre?

Mr. Tremblay: The only thing that I would add is just to mirror the minister's comments that in 2020 there was an extensive engagement undertaken with school authorities from across the province. We also undertake ongoing engagement with school authorities on projects that have been selected for a P3 investment. There have been a number of projects that were announced as part of Budget 2021 and Budget 2020. Our team, our capital group in the Department of Education, is in regular contact with Infrastructure capital staff as well, and we actually engage with the individual capital staff in the school authorities to make sure that we're in continuous contact around how the financing structures might work in order to maximize government investment in terms of bringing that school online.

There has also been significant engagement on the maintenance aspect of P3s. For those of you that are familiar with the P3 structure, it's not just the construction of the school. A lot of the value comes from reducing capital costs and also fixing maintenance costs through multiyear agreements between the private-sector investment group and the actual proponent of the infrastructure project. So we're not just engaging on the construction, but we're engaging and ensuring that we're hearing school concerns with regard to how the maintenance contracts are constructed in terms of term length, flexibility, how maintenance projects are identified within the context of the maintenance contract, and, really, at the end of the day, ensuring that whatever maintenance contract is put in place, it's reflective of the school's ability to operate that school on an ongoing basis.

We don't want situations where school authorities feel like they don't have the ability to operate a school within the context of a maintenance contract. All of that work is under way on a number of different projects that were announced. That work is done, again, in conjunction with our department's capital group and, of equal importance, our Infrastructure P3 team, who ultimately have accountability to deliver P3 schools within the system.

Member LaGrange: Thank you for that supplement.

I would just say that not every project lends itself to be a P3 because, obviously, P3s are bundled typically where you can have a provider that is able to . . .

The Chair: Thank you so much, Minister.

We will now return to the government side.

Mr. Smith: Do you want me to start?

The Chair: Sorry. I see that Mickey Amery has come onto the screen here. Member Amery, are you prepared to ask some questions of the minister?

Mr. Amery: Most certainly, Madam Chair, and thank you for that opportunity. My apologies to my colleague if I jumped in when I shouldn't have, but I do have some questions prepared for the minister if I may.

Minister, let's talk a little bit about the curriculum. I know that the curriculum has been a topic of discussion throughout our province, and it's been something that you've undertaken to deal with throughout the past, well, since the beginning of the term, essentially, and it's been a work-in-progress. I want to commend you and your officials for the work that you've done so far and the work that continues to take place with respect to developing something as exhaustive and as big a job as it is to design a brand new curriculum for this province.

I do have a number of questions about that, and as I said before, I don't want to talk a whole lot in preamble. I want to get right into the questions and, hopefully, give you that opportunity to answer them within the time allocated. I want to start by directing you to page 31 of your business plan document, key objective 1.1, where it's stated to be implementing a "new, province wide K-6 curriculum with a focus on English Language Arts and Literature, Math, and Physical Education and Wellness."

Now, as you know and as we all know, the UCP government has advocated for changes to the education curriculum here in this province, and it was a platform promise during the 2019 election. On page 129 of the fiscal plan it states that \$191 million has been allocated over the next three years for curriculum updates and \$59 million in fiscal 2022-23 to provide for teacher professional learning and additional teacher and student resources to assist in delivering the updated curriculum. I'm certainly pleased to see a prioritization of support for teachers in this budget – I think that's incredibly important – and a plan that they have the resources to provide the quality education that we have enjoyed for many years in this province.

My questions are as follows. Can you please explain how this \$191 million will be used to implement the updated curriculum and what line item we can find to explain the \$59 million under this fiscal year? What work is currently under way to implement the curriculum? Who is involved in that process, and where are we at? In addition to the implementation of that curriculum, I know that the ministry has been collecting feedback from education partners, piloting teachers, and Albertans from across the province on our draft curriculum. I know that you had recently asked for additional feedback, and I want to know if you can provide us with an overview of the feedback you've received so far, what's involved in those consultations, and how it is currently being applied to the overall development of this new curriculum.

I want to point your attention, Minister, to key objective 1.4 on page 31 of the business plan, which is focused on modernizing assessment. How will this benefit student learning, what does it essentially mean, and how does it interplay with the new curriculum changes?

I want to dive a little bit further into how teachers are supported within the new curriculum. On page 32 of the ministry business plan outcome 3 states, "Alberta has excellent teachers, school leaders, and school authority leaders." Key objective 3.1 explains that you plan to "identify potential supports . . . that may be needed, and options for providing these supports to school authorities, to successfully implement new curriculum." Minister, I want to give

you the opportunity here to please speak about what types of supports you're referring to here, how much funding you've allocated to this, how the \$59 million I've already mentioned earlier might fit into this consideration, and how that all might work in the overall plan that you have with respect to key objective 3.1 and beyond.

With respect to the assessments that are referenced in key objectives 1.3 and 1.4, I would like for the minister to speak to some of those assessments related to early-year assessments and online assessments. I'm wondering what assessments currently exist in schools and what changes could ensure that the students are more successful.

With that said, Minister, I'll give you the opportunity, as I see my time is running out, to answer those questions. I know they are numerous, but I'd love some answers.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you so much, hon. member.

We'll move now to the minister for her response.

Member LaGrange: Thank you. Thank you for those great questions. I know that curriculum is top of mind for so many people because we have been on this journey, as you say, for quite a long time. You are right. We are getting very close to implementing math, English language arts, and phys ed in September 2022. That is why we felt very strongly and I felt very strongly that additional dollars had to be present up to and above the current \$8.4 billion budget that we have for Education. We don't want those dollars that are needed for front-line instruction to be diverted to curriculum implementation, because this is up to and above what currently exists in our funding.

5:40

The reason that English language arts, mathematics, and phys ed were chosen as the first subjects to implement in September 2022 is their alignment to the learning loss/disruption dollars that we have invested in our early years, the \$45 million, where we are seeing a great impact of those dollars in improving and catching students up where there were previous gaps due to COVID. This is a further reinforcement of those subject areas that we found to be and that researchers have found to be foundational for all learning. Mathematics and, particularly, English language arts as well as key foundational subjects that every student is required to know and to master over time so that they can be successful in their lives.

And, of course, physical education and wellness: we've heard very much through the Child and Youth Well-being Review Panel and right across from teachers and parents and students themselves how COVID had impacted their ability to be part of team sports and to be active or as active as they had been in the past. So this is something that we really wanted to address.

The \$59 million in the first year is certainly going to go towards ensuring that we have the proper supports, whether it's professional development, whether it's sub time for teachers so that they can spend time with the curriculum, the finalized versions of the curriculum, so that they can look at developing and making sure that their classroom is ready to go and that just their overall structures are ready, that they're able to really spend the time that they need. It also will provide specific resources as well.

I'm going to turn it over to my deputy minister to go into some of the things that we've been doing. There's been just so much work, a tremendous amount of work, by so many individuals. We have a group dedicated to resourcing. We have a new LearnAlberta, which is a new website that will allow teachers to share resources and supports. Just before I turn it over to him, you know, we've talked

about the assessments, those early-year assessments. We did a scan of the current system as to what school authorities are using currently. We entrusted the College of Alberta School Superintendents, CASS, to do that work for us, and they provided us a report. So we're utilizing all of that to ensure that as we move forward, we're putting the right supports and the right assessments in place.

I'll turn it over to my deputy minister, Andre. Would you please supplement?

Mr. Tremblay: Sure. It looks like I have about a minute, so I'll talk a little bit about – and we tried to touch on this earlier in the session – the staffing within the department. Obviously, stakeholder feedback is critical. Feedback from the education system is critical. All of those input points are very important to shaping high-quality curriculum, but it's also important to build a staffing complement within the department that reflects the educational expertise that's required to develop high-quality curriculum. We have, actually, 91 teachers from the system, from a diverse cross-section of the education system: urban boards, rural boards, larger schools, smaller schools, from the entire system in terms of charter schools, and public, Catholic schools. We purposefully recruit that broad variety so that we can make sure we have that broad perspective to assign to curriculum redevelopment.

The Chair: Thank you so much to the minister and her team.

We'll now go back to the Official Opposition. Please proceed, Member.

Ms Hoffman: Thank you very much. I'm going to take a chance to ask some questions that were provided to me from a variety of stakeholders, and I'm going to try to keep them super short so we can try to get some answers.

Specifically related to page 32 of the ministry business plan, key objective 3.1 identifies "potential supports, such as professional learning as well as learning and teaching resources, that may be needed, and options for providing these supports to school authorities, to successfully implement new curriculum." How does the minister plan to implement the development of the curriculum advisory panel that focused on agriculture and natural resources in key objective 3.1?

On page 73, line 3.1 of the government estimates document, it states that \$1.4 million in funding will be allocated to learning support funding. What portion of this estimate is allocated towards the development of a curriculum advisory panel that focuses on agriculture and natural resources?

The Chair: Those were your questions, Member?

Ms Hoffman: Yeah. I'm just trying to get some more detailed answers, so I just thought I'll ask the two questions that are very specific, and we'll, hopefully, get an answer.

The Chair: Okay. Go ahead, Minister.

Member LaGrange: Thank you for those questions. I'm not sure I understand fully what those questions represent, but I will do my best to respond. The curriculum advisory group certainly is in place to advise on how we move forward with implementation of the curriculum, and we have already indicated that we are going to move forward with math, English language arts, and phys ed and wellness. Now, they are looking at: okay; how do we implement those three subjects in the '22-23 school year that will in fact make sure that we have the most successful implementation and outcomes at the end of the process?

In terms of 3.1, in terms of agriculture and natural resources, the curriculum as a whole looks at all of the different pieces. We are, again, focused on English language arts, mathematics, and physical and wellness, but in other subjects in terms of science and, you know, social studies, when we're at that point, and all of the other pieces that we have available, we will ensure that those areas are being addressed.

Again, I'm not fully clear on what that question was. I don't – you know, while you pointed to a line item, I'm still not quite understanding the question. So if you could rephrase the question, I would be happy to answer it.

Thank you.

The Chair: All right. That makes our time go back to the government side. I see the hon. Mr. Hunter has his hand up. Please proceed.

Mr. Hunter: Thank you, Madam Chair. I just wanted to ask a couple of questions here. I was also at the Rural Education Symposium on Sunday, as you know, and there's some really good information there, but certainly a theme that I heard quite a bit was the importance of transportation. I notice that you've increased the transportation grant during this budget, which we see on page 73 of the estimates, line 3.4. Now, we know that our rural communities in Alberta face many different issues versus the urban and metro communities, especially when it comes to transportation. Could you speak a bit about how this increased funding for transportation will benefit students in rural Alberta? Could you also speak to what other initiatives your ministry has in place to support our students in rural Alberta?

I also wanted to just ask you a bit about the discovery learning that was implemented by the NDP. I know that when I was door-knocking in 2019 in the election there, I heard lots and lots of parents throughout the province that were very concerned about that discovery learning. They were concerned because of their children's ability to perform simple arithmetic and just dismayed at the complete lack of focus on financial literacy. As global markets continue to grow and change, it is crucial that our students are provided with fundamental tools to understand the world around us, including the financial world. That is why I was so glad to see on page 130 of the fiscal plan that \$3 million is being put towards financial literacy over three years. Minister, can you point to which line item this falls under? And how will this funding be used to expand programming on financial literacy, and, in your mind, what benefits will this have for the students?

I also want to just talk a bit about page 31 of the ministry's business plan. It speaks of improving outcomes for First Nations, Métis, and Inuit students. In fact, those key objectives include strengthening education programs, policies, initiatives for First Nations, Métis, and Inuit students and supporting the development of education service agreements to enhance outcomes for First Nations students. Minister, could you expand a little bit on some of the programming that exists and how it can be improved to support First Nations, Métis, and Inuit students? I'm also wondering if you could expand a bit on what an educational service agreement is and what you're doing to support the development of these agreements.

I'll turn the time back to Mr. Smith to ask some of his questions to make up the rest of the time.

5:50

Mr. Smith: Thank you, MLA Hunter. Okay. We have about a minute and 45 seconds left. I asked a couple of questions in my last round here that I had with you about the other disciplines and when they'll be rolled out and if there were going to be any cost

implications with regard to rolling out the other disciplines. And then I would like you to consider – if you could give me some context on our provincial assessments for K to 6 in the new curriculum. I know that under the previous government we had made some changes to the PATs and we were into SLAs. Are we planning on going back to PATs? How is that going to roll out, and what's the cost for that going to be? Where is it found in our budget as we move forward?

I guess one of the things that I heard while I was, you know, in opposition was from some teachers that there was some concern that the first time we were actually going to be testing our students was grade 6, halfway through their education. If we got rid of the SLAs, if we got rid of the grade 3 PATs, what was going to take its place and where were we going to go with it? As we're rolling out this new curriculum, I know that an assessment is going to be a really important piece of that equation for the curriculum. So if you could give us some idea of what you're doing, or what we're planning on doing, for grade 3, if anything, and grade 6 and where we're going to go with that, that would be helpful to us.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you so much, hon. members.

We'll turn this time back over to the minister and her team for their response. Please proceed when you're ready, Minister.

Member LaGrange: Thank you. Again, that's a lot of questions. We could talk for hours on each one. I will do my best to look at all of the different pieces that were asked about. I was very gratified to go to the Rural Education Symposium, as well as MLA Hunter, because there was just an energy in the room. You know, they're very solution focused. They know that it's been challenging over the last couple of years, but rural education and rural communities in general have that resiliency, they have that get 'er done attitude, and I know that that is something that we value in Alberta and we are going to continue to support, particularly in education.

When we look at what we provide for rural communities to further support them, there are a number of things that we do to ensure that they remain viable. Rural small schools received a grant in '21-22 that amounted to \$129 million. That grant goes to address challenges associated with operating small schools in rural communities. There's also a geographic grant that provides school authorities better ability to address their geographic location contacts, enhance equity and fairness of educational opportunities, and that totalled \$161.6 million. So right there we have over \$300 million to address many of the concerns in rural communities and rural schools.

We have other things that we do to support. We have a northern student teacher bursary program. So, basically, what that program does is it provides bursaries to bachelor of education students who agree to return service as a teacher in northern Alberta school districts. We all know that sometimes it's really difficult to recruit to those northern communities. But in December 2021 the northern student teacher bursary program awarded 33 bursaries for a total of \$400,000, generating up to 83 years of returned teaching service in northern Alberta schools. So 20 northern school divisions, including public, separate, and francophone school divisions, as well as seven First Nations school authorities in the north have benefited from the program by employing the northern student teacher bursary recipients to return in service. As I indicated earlier, 71 per cent of bursary recipients have stayed employed in a rural or northern community beyond the return-of-service commitment. So a win-win situation for all of those communities as well as for the teachers themselves, because they are enriched by the opportunities that they have there.

We also have, you know, looked at all of the other funding envelopes as well that they benefit from, particularly the weighted moving average in communities with declining enrolments. The weighted moving average actually softens the dollars that they receive when, in fact, they have student loss. But that being said, we have held harmless to the 2021 school projected numbers, which is 730,000 students, even though in that year the actuals were 705,000 students, and last year in the '21-22 school year, or this current school year, we are keeping it at hold harmless again, so that additional funding that would have been lost is continuing, so funding 730,000 students when 716,000 students are in fact actually attending.

When we look at First Nations, Métis, and Inuit students, that is very near and dear to our hearts. We really want to ensure that they have every opportunity for success, and there are so many things that are being done – and I'm not sure that I have enough time because I think I'm going to run out in just a few seconds here – to support our students. We are collaborating with First Nations, Métis, and Inuit authorities to ensure that we are doing what they want us to do: establishing these partnerships; supporting school authorities to build relationships and engage with First Nations, Métis, and Inuit parents and families; developing culturally relevant learning resources and program supports; increasing the number of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit professionals in the educational workforce; providing professional learning in First Nations, Métis, and Inuit education to ensure that all students and teachers and school leaders . . .

The Chair: Thank you so much.

We will turn back now to the Official Opposition.

Ms Hoffman: I'm going to ask one more time if the minister – I know that there was a desire to have clarity on a question in the last exchange. It's really hard when we do the block. If the minister wants to try one back and forth since we're nearing the final 30 minutes of our time, I'm still open to that. Is that her interest at this point?

Member LaGrange: I would still prefer the block because it is much easier on my voice. Thank you.

Ms Hoffman: Okay. Then I'll ask a question about the Alberta School Councils' Association and the funding specifically for parents. There are two references to parents under key objectives 4.2 and 4.4. The Alberta School Councils' Association is the legislated body, by the government of Alberta, to ensure that parents' voices are heard in the operations of schools. Their funding was significantly cut in this last year specifically by the government of Alberta. What aggregated line item is ASCA's funding in, and what will their funding be for this year to ensure that parent voice is heard?

The Chair: Oh, that's the end of your questions?

Ms Hoffman: That's my question.

The Chair: Okay.
Minister.

Member LaGrange: Thank you for the question. I do not know which line item you were referring to, because there is no Alberta School Councils' Association grant that is provided on any funding line. I would just correct one item that I heard from MLA Hoffman, which was that this is a legislated body. In fact, that is not correct. School councils are legislated, but the Alberta School Councils' Association is an association. It's not a legislated body, but school

councils are legislated. Every school has to have a school council, so that is, in fact, in legislation.

6:00

We did introduce the Alberta school council engagement grant. There's a million dollars; \$500 going to every school council across the province to ensure that we have parental voice. We very much value the work that the Alberta School Councils' Association has done and continues to do. We have provided them a grant in this upcoming year. When there was a funding adjustment, it was in particular because of the fact that we do not fund associations for operating their associations. We do fund for specific projects, for specific roles that they can play in terms of whether it's, you know, connecting, providing research, knowledge, doing specific grant items. They have to put in a grant proposal. Every association, including the Alberta School Boards Association, the College of Alberta School Superintendents, and other education partners, does submit grant applications every year, and we look at those closely. If they align with our priorities and are not for operational reasons, then we do in fact proceed with those grants. Sometimes they are for lesser amounts than those grants have come to us for, but we really do assess it in terms of the needs of the overall system.

Again, we are looking to engage with parents. We certainly count on the Alberta School Councils' Association for providing us feedback and valuable input. They were on all our calls when COVID was in full bloom. We had the education partners call on a regular basis, and they were valued partners in those calls. We continue to have this grant going out to school councils specifically to engage with their communities. Further to that, to broaden the reach of parental engagement, I did put together a parent advisory council that has already met. They are providing us valuable input as well.

When I look at parental voice, I myself, having had seven children, have been very active in school councils. Also, I was very proud as a trustee to be acknowledged by the Alberta School Councils' Association with an award as a friend of the school council association, because I believe very strongly in the value of parental voice. It is the very reason that we brought forward the Choice in Education Act and the Education Act enhancements that we did very early on in our term, because it is the parent's voice that, in fact, influences the choice in education that they want for their child.

No one knows a child better than their parents. They absolutely are the first educators of their children prior to them entering into formal education in school. We very much value that parental voice, so anything we can do to increase parental voice is an added bonus. Having the Alberta School Councils' Association, having school councils themselves receive additional funding so that they can engage with their parents and their communities is very valuable as well as the parent advisory council. I'm finding that all of these different ways are great ways to have the input that we need to make good decisions in education.

Is there anything that you would add, Andre, to this, or any of my team?

Ms Hoffman: How much is the grant?

The Chair: The minister has the floor right now.

Member LaGrange: I believe that I'm hearing a subsequent question on the grant that is going out to each . . .

The Chair: That's the time. Thank you so much, Minister.

We'll now return to the government side, and I believe that hon. Member Gotfried has a question.

Mr. Gottfried: Great. Thank you, Madam Chair. Minister, there were a couple of things that have come up with respect to – obviously, many of the communities that are referenced in your business plan are remote and rural communities. I was just reflecting. I've got some home-schoolers in my area as well. I know that many of them use a lot of the online tools that were available through the pandemic, and I think some of those will be continuing. I had some questions. I know some of those were suspended, some of those are continuing, and some of those tools are very helpful for both home-schoolers and perhaps some in rural and remote communities. What is the future with respect to funding and some of the development of those tools that may be available for home-schoolers, which I know is becoming increasingly popular amongst many people postpandemic possibly as well, and then also as a resource for remote and rural communities as well? That's just a fairly simple question.

I'll pass to one of my colleagues to use up the rest of our time as well. Thank you.

Mrs. Frey: Okay. Great. Minister, I believe this is okay conventionally, but I wanted to ask you to elaborate on a couple of comments that you had made earlier. You've spoken about hold harmless, as well as you mentioned head count enrolment in relation to the hold harmless. My goodness; too many words today. Could you explain? I believe there are some tables posted by your ministry today, and I think that probably has to do with that. I'm wondering if you could elaborate on that.

You've also mentioned school board reserves and their growth. In fact, you gave accolades to one school board who actually returned some of their fees to parents as opposed to keeping them for themselves, and I think that's a really great thing to see. I know that in my region, with the driving costs of inflation, with, of course, household budgets getting more and more tight, anything helps. But, also, we hear a lot from school boards and a lot from, I guess, detractors, those who would like to perhaps vilify you, that, you know, things are really tight for school boards right now. I was curious about school board reserves and their growth because I've also heard that they have actually increased some of their reserves. Could you speak to this a bit more? How have school boards' reserves increased in recent years, how have they changed in recent years, perhaps maybe to 2015 and now, and what does that mean? Are reserves tracked as part of the consolidated budget for that school board? I think just having some clarity on that would be great.

I'm just curious if my colleague from Drayton Valley-Devon would like to use up the last two minutes.

Mr. Smith: I would be glad to use up the last two minutes here. Minister, we got cut off, and I don't think you had time to answer the questions that I had about provincial assessments. I just know that there's always a lot of discussion in teaching about just what should assessments look like and when should they be applied and what should provincial assessments – not teacher assessments; provincial assessments – look like. If you could help us understand where you think you want to go with this. I mean, there was a difference between the SLAs and the PATs, and just how are we going to roll that out? Are we trying to find out where the students are at before they go into a class and into a school year? Are we going to be looking at testing what they've learned at the end of the school year, like the traditional PATs were involved with?

You know, we're rolling out a curriculum. This curriculum is important for parents and for students to be able to see where we're moving and where we're going with it, and a part of that is the assessment. Teachers are going to need to know that. If you could

help us with understanding where we're going to go with the new K through 6 curriculum, that would be great.

I'm wondering as well – and maybe I'll save it. You can answer this in the next round if I get another round here, if we run out. The curriculum implementation advisory committee: if you could tell us who is on it. How do you find the members? Is that going to be funded from that \$191 million that you've put forward for resource development, or how is that working out as far as that committee? Maybe I'll get into the next group of questions later.

The Chair: Thank you so much, hon. member.

Now we'll turn it over to the minister for her response. Please proceed, Minister.

Member LaGrange: Thank you so much. Again, great questions, and I will try and get to as many as possible. Let's start with the distance learning. I know, in fact, we used to have one program which was called the Alberta distance learning consortia. What happened is that over time there were many more school authorities that delved into that realm, and what we found is that there was inequity as to how they were being funded and being utilized across the system. We now have over 38 school authorities that do provide distance learning. We have revised, under the funding model and under the funding manual, distance education. We are now providing a nonprimary grant to encourage school authorities to open the distance education programs to students from other school authorities. There are a number of things that we're doing.

6:10

Again, we're being responsive to the needs of the system. When we were doing engagement on the new funding model, we engaged right across the province. We were hearing from school authorities that, in fact, the Alberta distance learning program that was in place wasn't as responsive as it could be and that we needed to expand. At one time there was only one game in town, and we were able to expand that. Thankfully, that took place prior to COVID becoming the reality and the new norm because, of course, many of our programs had to go to online learning during some periods in the pandemic.

When I look at the costs of that program, the distance education primary grant is increasing by 1 per cent, so in grades 1 to 9 it is going from \$6,064 per student to over \$6,124 per student. Distance education primary part-time is \$190.58 per credit in the current year, going to \$192.49 per credit in the upcoming year.

We are just continuing to increase the number of school authorities that are able to provide service and also increasing the number of shared digital resources and courses because they are no longer – I'm sorry. I just want to get clarification.

Emily, could I turn to you to just clarify on the nonprimary grant that, in fact, there is no cost to school authorities on that?

Ms Ma: Right. Thank you, Minister. The ability for a school board to be a part of the distance education program and be a provider: a requirement is that if they receive this grant, they have to be willing and able to share their digital resources and courses with other school authorities at no cost.

Member LaGrange: Thank you. Thank you for that. Just some slight clarification there.

On the hold harmless, really, it's about making sure that – because we did see fluctuations in numbers, in enrolment numbers in school authorities across the province due to COVID, typically around the kindergarten age, the younger age groups. What I can share is that on the funded head count summary for the public, separate, and francophone and charter schools in 2019-2020 the

actuals were 667,223 students. In the projection for 2020-21 that was 683,764, when actually 651,818 students attended. The projection for '21-22 was 674,044 students, when in actuality 662,310 students attended.

When we go right down to the bottom, when we include all of the independent schools, the ECS operators, and home education, in 2019-2020 we had 711,843 students, and then the projected number that we have been funding to for the last number of years is 730,030 students. In 2020-2021 the actuals were 705,917 students, and the actuals in '21-22, which is our current year, is 716,000.

The Chair: Thank you so much to the minister and her team.

We'll turn it back now to the Official Opposition. Please proceed, hon. member.

Ms Hoffman: Thanks, Madam Chair. I suspect this will be my final block, so just to reiterate the last two very brief questions I asked, one was around employers, agricultural sector, economic diversification, around efforts that they have made. They've made significant efforts to be involved in developing the curriculum that have been shut down at every stage and referred to online processes to put in written questions and get talking points back. They're frustrated.

They want to know specifically, as it relates to the budget – and I mentioned the two line items – what kind of resources are going to be put into ensuring that Alberta students have opportunities to learn about agriculture, the employment opportunities that exist in it, the benefits and connection between the world of agriculture and opportunities for employment, as well as the connection to their food and to such a large sector in our province as an employer. This is one of the top three employers, and we want to create opportunities to support a diversified economy and to grow the diversification, and those questions were essentially ignored. It's a question specifically as it relates to agriculture in the budget, resources to ensure that the curriculum is aligned to support economic diversification in one of our top three sectors in this province.

The other question was about the Alberta School Councils' Association. It was a simple question about how much their grant will be within this budget and what line item we can find that within. I understand that they're aggregated line items, but it's important that parent voice – and I appreciate that the minister wanted to highlight that she's received awards and stuff. But parent voice has been under significant attack over the last few years, through you, Madam Chair, and ASCA has been a foundational voice for that. School councils through the Alberta School Councils' Association have received support in the past, and it has been decimated under the current government. Those were the two questions that I asked along that thread.

The next section I want to highlight, as it relates to outcome 1 and outcome 4 in the business plan, is that there was a report earlier – it was this past December – from the child and youth well-being panel. Their job was to look at the first three waves of the pandemic and bring forward recommendations on how things could be improved in this province to address the hardships that students have already experienced through COVID and generally. One of their recommendations was that they "recognize and enhance the essential role of schools in interdisciplinary wraparound services and supports for mental health and well-being of students."

The report repeatedly highlights that the common theme that emerged in engagement sessions was that the UCP's decision to end RCSD modelling to support wraparound services and build relationships within schools and address service gaps has resulted in serious negative outcomes for mental health supports for kids in

schools. It seems clear that the RCSD model was working better than what the minister has in place now and that it shouldn't have been ended. I'm not saying that it was perfect, but certainly from the feedback in this report, that the minister and government has had since December, it is very clear that what is happening now is not working for mental health for kids in schools.

So the question is: what are the actual, tangible mental health supports that kids can expect to see in their classroom as a result of this budget? Will there be money specifically directed towards guidance counsellors, mental health therapists, school counsellors? What are the actual, tangible bodies so that kids will be able to see and feel that the recommendations through the child and youth well-being panel, presented to the government back in December, are actually reflected in the decisions that this government has made through their budget and are actually addressing student mental health?

The other piece I want to touch on very briefly here is the significant hardship that disabled students have faced, particularly in the last three years. Some of the most horrific cuts, I would say, are cuts to PUF for kids in kindergarten, specifically. Many needed additional classroom supports – SLPs, OTs, PTs – and family-oriented programming. This was again something that a member of the public – family-oriented programming around mental health support starting with three-year-olds that is being cut under the current government has resulted in significant hardships. So mental health would be the main theme of this block, specifically around: what can ordinary families actually expect to see? What kind of access will they have? Will there be mental health therapists in school-specific targeted grants? How many people will serve kids in that regard? Then the piece around family-oriented programming as it relates to the three-year-olds and the targeted attacks on PUF in the last budget: has the minister reversed these cruel cuts in this budget?

The Chair: Thank you so much, hon. member.

We'll turn it back to the minister.

Member LaGrange: Thank you so much for those questions. In fact, on the special-needs programming, that was the last question asked by MLA Hoffman, we, in fact, did do refinements to the funding model last year and tiered the hours of instruction as well as increased the family orientation program piece, the FOP piece, and my understanding, because I've heard from the system that it was very well received, is that, in fact, we are meeting the needs of our students and their families. We will continue to modify and refine the funding model as required.

Again, I want to highlight the fact that I have a background as a rehab practitioner working with the developmentally disabled. That has been my background. I am a firm, firm believer in early intervention and believe that the sooner we can help students address their needs, help parents and teachers address the needs of students with special needs, the better successes we have throughout their whole educational journey and in life in general. I am really proud of the work that we've done there, and we're always looking for opportunities to make that even better.

6:20

Now, I fully understand the question that was asked about agriculture. I'm happy to say that the input that we received from every individual and every group that wanted to provide input has been incorporated into the draft science program, so when there is a new version of the science program, I'm sure that they will be able to see that work. Perhaps people don't know that my husband and I do farm. We're on an active farm. My husband is a third-

generation farmer, second generation on the land that we currently own, that his father settled in 1942, so agriculture is another item that I'm very passionate about.

I actually served as the classroom agricultural zone co-ordinator for quite a number of years for the central zone, and that is a group that goes into grade 4 classrooms and really provides additional information to young people about where their food comes from. Farmers, the agricultural community: they're great stewards of the land, the water, and the air. They make a living at it, so they have to be great stewards. We will definitely have information in our draft curriculum that will be embedded.

We also have the green certificate program. We have amazing schools that have started, innovative schools in New Humble, Altario, the Acme school that is connected to one of the largest greenhouses in all of Alberta. We have the Irvine school by Prairie Rose school division that opened up an Agricultural Discovery Centre. There are just so many great, innovative situations in schools and programs that have started up in agriculture, and, yes, we're taking those even into urban areas and connecting them with metro areas. My understanding is that there's a lot of synergy that's going on. Again, sometimes students don't know the opportunities that exist until they're actually exposed to it. Lots and lots of great things happening.

Then the last real area that the member opposite was asking about was, you know: are we using the child and youth well-being panel recommendations? Are we going to act upon them? Absolutely. This is another area that I feel very strongly about. That is why last year we added an additional \$40 million to the line item to support our most vulnerable students. The fact that we are looking – and I have added an additional \$30 million, \$110 million over the course of the next three years, to address mental health issues and concerns as well as learning disruptions. We will be coming out shortly as to how we're going to spend those dollars, but we want to leverage those dollars. We want authentic wraparound services. When I was a school board trustee, one of the things that we repeatedly asked for and advocated for was authentic wraparound services where ministries came together.

When we were doing the engagement on the funding model, the new funding model, we heard from school authorities, the vast majority of them, that the RCSD model was not working, that professionals were spending more time behind the wheel of their car, in front of their windshield, than they were actually interacting with students. We needed to correct that, and those dollars went directly back into the school authorities to use.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Minister.

This last segment will go back to the government side. Please proceed, Mrs. Frey.

Mrs. Frey: Thank you, Chair. Minister, you've talked a lot today, and I'm sure you could probably continue for another six hours because, you know, you do have one of the larger budgets in the province. It's super important that Alberta parents and Albertans know just how important education is in our economic recovery as well as how important it is to you and how important those students are. So I'm curious if you could speak generally about: what are the key takeaways you'd like Alberta parents to take away from your budget, as well as how will our government continue to support students and parents in the future?

Member LaGrange: Thank you. That's a great question. I guess the key takeaway is that students and teachers and education are extremely important to our government. We made a commitment that we would, you know, keep the education system strong, that

we would target resources to the front lines, that we would, when appropriate, increase funding to education, and we are following through on all of those things. We cannot stand still just because there was a pandemic. Yes, it was very important – it affected our lives, and it affected our students and our teachers – but we need to continue to move forward. We cannot stall or put the curriculum on the back burner, which has happened. That's why we do not have a new curriculum. That's why we've spent well over a decade talking about putting in a new curriculum and not actually putting in a new curriculum. We're going to continue to do the good work of education.

I want to give huge credit to the people behind me here, all of my team. We have approximately 500 people in my department, who have a vested interest, who care about education, who want the very best for our students, as do I, as does our government. When we look at students' success, it is only because of the hard work of all of the people that put in their time and effort and go above and beyond each and every day. I cannot tell you the countless hours that my ADM provided during COVID, the countless meetings, the number of weekends that have had to be given up. The same can be said of the curriculum group as well. You know, I could name every single one of them and find tremendous things to say because everybody cares so much.

When I first came into the position, I know that, you know, I would say that I felt like I went from having seven of my own children to having 700,000 children, because I really do put myself in the role of looking out for every single child. We really did try and ensured that we did our very, very best with the new funding model – yes, it was a new funding model – so that we could provide sustainable, predictable funding for school authorities so that they knew what they had and what they could count on. That was very important to the system.

But beyond that, we wanted to ensure that we were not leaving any child behind, that we are trying to put strategies in place that will positively affect their educational journey, that we would provide supports for special-needs children and increase those as they're necessary and look at gaps and, again, look at authentic wraparound services so that we put the child at the centre of education, that we put the child and their family at the centre of learning but also of their whole health journey as well. We know that often a child is in school a good percentage of their day, and we need to ensure that they're safe and that they have a great education but also that their social, emotional needs are being met as well as their mental health and wellness needs. But it's not just the child; it's their whole family, it's the whole educational community.

I want to give a huge shout-out to our teachers, our administrators who have gone above and beyond, particularly through COVID. It has been really stressful. They've had to deal with not just the situations of the students that come into their class each and every day but also their own families having gone through various struggles and having to deal with COVID. So a huge, huge shout-out to the whole educational system. That's why I felt very strongly that we needed to hold all of the budget harmless for those that were experiencing great fluctuations but that for those school authorities that were indeed showing enrolment growth, we are actually funding that enrolment growth, that we are going to have additional dollars for curriculum implementation, that we are going to add additional dollars to address mental health and wellness issues.

Overall, I just want parents and the general public to know that we really care and we are doing our absolute best. It hasn't always been perfect, but we've always gone in with the best of intentions, always looking to ensure that our students are safe and that they are provided the best possible education that we can give them. I am

very proud of the work that my department and all of the education system has done to address the needs of our students.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Minister and to your team.

I apologize for the interruption, but I must advise the committee that the time allotted for consideration of the ministry's estimates has concluded.

I'd like to remind committee members that we are scheduled to meet tomorrow, March 10, 2022, at 9 a.m. to consider the estimates of the Ministry of Community and Social Services.

Thank you, everyone. This meeting is adjourned.

[The committee adjourned at 6:30 p.m.]

