



Legislative Assembly of Alberta

The 30th Legislature  
Fourth Session

Standing Committee  
on  
Families and Communities

Ministry of Education  
Consideration of Main Estimates

Tuesday, March 7, 2023  
9 a.m.

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**Legislative Assembly of Alberta  
The 30th Legislature  
Fourth Session**

**Standing Committee on Families and Communities**

Lovely, Jacqueline, Camrose (UC), Chair  
Sigurdson, Lori, Edmonton-Riverview (NDP), Deputy Chair  
Armstrong-Homeniuk, Jackie, Fort Saskatchewan-Vegreville (UC)  
Carson, Jonathon, Edmonton-West Henday (NDP)  
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Smith, Mark W., Drayton Valley-Devon (UC)  
Turton, Searle, Spruce Grove-Stony Plain (UC)\*  
Yao, Tany, Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo (UC)  
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\* substitution for Martin Long

**Also in Attendance**

Gray, Christina, Edmonton-Mill Woods (NDP)  
Hoffman, Sarah, Edmonton-Glenora (NDP)

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**Standing Committee on Families and Communities**

**Participant**

Ministry of Education  
Hon. Adriana LaGrange, Minister



9 a.m.

Tuesday, March 7, 2023

[Ms Lovely in the chair]

**Ministry of Education  
Consideration of Main Estimates**

**The Chair:** I would like to call the meeting to order and welcome everyone in attendance. The committee has under consideration the estimates of the Ministry of Education for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2024.

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. My name is Jackie Lovely. I am the MLA for the Camrose constituency and the chair of this committee. We will start to my right.

**Mr. Turton:** Good morning, everyone. Searle Turton, MLA for Spruce Grove-Stony Plain.

**Mr. Smith:** Good morning. Mark Smith, MLA for Drayton Valley-Devon.

**Mr. Yaseen:** Good morning. Muhammad Yaseen, MLA, Calgary-North.

**Ms Armstrong-Homeniuk:** Good morning. Jackie Armstrong-Homeniuk, MLA, Fort Saskatchewan-Vegreville.

**Mr. Yao:** Tany Yao, Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo.

**Ms Fir:** Good morning. Tanya Fir, MLA, Calgary-Peigan.

**Member LaGrange:** Adriana LaGrange, MLA for Red Deer-North and the Minister of Education. With me I have Andre Tremblay, my deputy minister. I have Christine Sewell, assistant deputy minister of finance services and capital planning. I have Emily Ma, executive director of K-12 fiscal oversight. I have Matt Hebert, assistant deputy minister of systems excellence; Jeff Willan, assistant deputy minister of strategic services and governance; Jennifer Cassidy, assistant deputy minister of the First Nations, Métis and Inuit education directorate; and Kindy Joseph, assistant deputy minister of program and system support. I also have my chief of staff, Nicole Williams, and other staff members Savannah, Erin, and Annaliese with me.

**Ms Hoffman:** Sarah Hoffmann, Edmonton-Glenora. I'm also the Education critic, and I'm grateful to have Emma and Sybil here today with me.

**Ms Gray:** Good morning, everyone. Christina Gray, MLA for Edmonton-Mill Woods.

**The Chair:** Okay. We have members joining us online. Please introduce yourself. Sorry, Richard. We can't hear you.

**Mr. Gotfried:** Sorry. Richard Gotfried, MLA, Calgary-Fish Creek.

**The Chair:** Welcome.

I'd like to note the following substitution for the record: Mr. Turton is substituting for Mr. Long.

A few housekeeping items to address before we turn to the business at hand. Please note that the microphones are operated by *Hansard* staff. Committee proceedings are 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 turn your camera on while speaking and to mute your microphone when not speaking. Remote participants who wish to be placed on a speakers list are asked to e-mail or message the committee clerk, and members in the room should 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. This meeting is the first three hours for consideration of the ministry's estimates. Standing Order 59.01(6) establishes the speaking rotation and speaking times. In brief, the minister or member of Executive Council acting on the minister's behalf will have 10 minutes to address the committee. At the conclusion of the minister's comments a 60-minute speaking block for the Official Opposition begins, followed by a 20-minute speaking block for independent members, if any, and then a 20-minute speaking block for the government caucus. Individuals may only speak for up to 10 minutes at a time, but speaking times may be combined between the member and the minister.

After this, speaking times will follow the same rotation of the Official Opposition, independent members, and the government caucus. 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. If members have any questions regarding speaking times or the rotation, please send an e-mail or message to the committee clerk about the process.

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 a break? Okay. We'll have a break, then.

Ministry officials may be present and, at the direction of the minister, may address the committee. Ministry officials seated in the gallery, if called upon, have access to a microphone in the gallery area and are asked to please introduce themselves for the record prior to commencing.

Pages are available to deliver notes or other materials between the gallery and the table. Attendees in the gallery may not approach the table.

Space permitting, opposition caucus staff may sit at the table to assist their members; however, members have priority to sit at the table at all times.

If debate is exhausted prior to six hours, the ministry's estimates are deemed to have been considered for the time allotted in the schedule, and the committee will adjourn.

Points of order will be dealt with as they arise, and individual speaking times will be paused; however, the speaking block time and the overall three-hour meeting clock for the first segment of the six allotted hours will continue to run.

Any written material provided in response to questions raised during the main estimates should be tabled by the minister in the Assembly for the benefit of all members.

The vote on the estimates and any amendments will occur in Committee of Supply on March 16, 2023. Amendments must be in writing and approved by Parliamentary Counsel prior to the meeting at which they are to be moved. The original amendment is to be deposited with the committee clerk with 20 copies. An electronic version of the signed original should be provided to the committee clerk for distribution to committee members.

Finally, the committee should have the opportunity to hear both questions and answers without interruption during the estimates

debate. Debate flows through the chair, please, at all times, including instances when speaking time is shared between a member and the minister.

I would now invite the Minister of Education to begin with your opening remarks. You have 10 minutes, Minister.

**Member LaGrange:** Thank you, Chair, and thank you for this opportunity to discuss Education's budget and main estimates. As I've already named all of the team that is with me today, the one item that I failed to mention is that they are the best team in all of government. They are an A-team who have so much care and concern about education, and it is an absolute privilege and honour to work with them each and every day. I just wanted to make that clear for the record.

I've also been looking forward to today's discussion because we have all worked so very hard on this budget to ensure it reflects the many different ideas, perspectives, and concerns we've been hearing from students, from parents, from teachers, from trustees, from school administrators, and from school leaders right across this province. I want to take a moment to thank all of our teachers and administrators, trustees and system leaders, who I speak with on a regular basis and who have shared their thoughts and concerns and continually want to strive for improvements. They've shared many of their ideas, many of which are included within this budget.

We are increasing our year-over-year funding by a significant amount so that we can deliver timely and meaningful improvements in four main areas. To set Alberta students up for lifelong success, we are increasing operational funding to the education system by nearly \$2 billion over the next three years. This is a very significant increase, and it means that we are setting yet another new record for funding in Alberta Education. School authorities will be able to hire approximately 3,000 more education staff, including teachers, educational assistants, bus drivers, and school support staff. The department's consolidated budget for the upcoming fiscal year will be \$8.8 billion, which is equal to \$44 million every day students are in school.

In my remarks today I'm going to focus on four of the budget's main accomplishments: building and modernizing schools across Alberta, providing more funding for enrolment growth, addressing classroom complexities, and mitigating cost pressures caused by inflation.

Building new schools and modernizing existing ones is a major focus of this budget. It's important to the government that students have world-class learning spaces and facilities to help them grow, and by investing in new and improved schools, we are not only supporting our students, but we're also creating more jobs in the construction industry and adjacent sectors of local economies across the province. Budget 2023 invests \$2.3 billion over three years to increase the number of schools in growing communities, continue work on previously announced projects, and maintain existing schools. This is an increase of approximately \$300 million over last year's capital plan.

We have heard that building and modernizing schools is a priority for Albertans, and we're delivering. We announced and are supporting a total of 58 projects, which include 13 full construction projects, 20 design funded, 14 planning, and 11 preplanning projects, again for a total of 58 new projects. In total, there will be nearly 25,000 new and additional spaces for students.

The Official Opposition has claimed that we will spend more money on private and charter construction than public, separate, and francophone combined. This is demonstrably false and shows a complete lack of understanding. The government does not spend any money whatsoever on private or independent school infrastructure. As has been the case for decades, the government provides

operational funding at 70 per cent to independent authorities but no capital funding.

Independent schools and private early childhood service operators represent about 6 per cent of the total student population, and the proportion of funding directed to them is just 4 per cent of the Education budget. We recognize that the vast majority of Alberta students attend public schools, and accordingly there is a vast majority of funding that goes directly to those schools. Nonetheless, Alberta's government has a strong tradition of funding choice, which includes many different kinds of schools, including independent schools, because we are committed to supporting each and every student in the province.

**9:10**

When it comes to Alberta's children, we will not pick and choose which students to support and which not to. Our education system leaves choices in the hands of Alberta's parents. We strongly believe that parents deserve to be able to choose the type of school that will actually provide the most benefit for their child. The budget does include \$171 million to support charter school infrastructure, but as I mentioned earlier, the total amount for schools in the capital plan is \$2.3 billion.

Furthermore, charter schools are, in fact, public schools. Public charter schools are nonprofit, and they exist to enhance the public education system, not to compete with it. Wherever a public charter school exists, it is because it offers something that was not previously available to students and that parents are looking for. In fact, there are 20,000 children on waiting lists for charter schools. Public charter schools are finding ways to improve student learning outcomes, boost research and innovation, and collaborate more closely with other learning institutions and business, industries.

The government's investments in public charter schools and collegiate schools are a critical component of our commitment to prepare students for a rapidly changing labour market. The variety of Alberta's schools reflects the diversity of our students, and each and every one of them is unique. Each and every one of them deserves to choose the option that will help them learn best, and they deserve to learn in the same quality of environment.

We are constantly working to make the education system as welcoming as possible for all students. With Budget 2023 we are fully funding enrolment growth. We are increasing funding to school authorities by more than \$820 million, specifically to support a growing number of students. This funding will empower school authorities to hire more teachers and obtain more resources for students. The funding will be provided through our framework in a flexible way, allowing the local boards to make decisions on how to best use the funding to support their students.

We are also significantly increasing the funding rates for a variety of grants to school authorities. Funding for the base instruction grant will increase by 6 per cent, and funding for specialized learning supports – program unit funding, English as an additional language, francization, refugee students, and First Nations, Métis, and Inuit students – all of these grants will increase by 10 per cent. We are also providing a 20 per cent increase to the school nutrition funding program in recognition of the significant impact inflation has had on the price of food.

This is all being done in the next school year alone. Budget 2023 also includes targeted funding of \$126 million over three years, including \$42 million in '23-24 to help school authorities hire more educational assistants or increase their hours, provide more training opportunities for staff, and/or hire specialists such as counsellors, psychologists, interpreters, and even more specialized teachers. It's important to note that we are helping to avoid more administrative

burden for school authorities by building this into their base funding amounts rather than requiring them to fill out applications.

In total, Budget 2023 provides \$1.5 billion in learning supports funding, which benefits Alberta's most vulnerable students and children with specialized learning needs. This is an increase of 6 per cent, or \$84 million, from the '22-23 budget. In addition to addressing students' diverse and complex needs, another key focus of this budget is mitigating the impact of rising inflationary pressures which school authorities have been experiencing.

We're providing school authorities with an additional \$18 million of funding in '23-24 and \$80 million over the next three years to help with the increased costs for utilities, insurance, and supplies for maintaining schools. This increase of 5 per cent for the operations and maintenance grant is in addition to the previous increase in Budget 2022, which provided \$4 million in '22-23 and \$6 million in future years.

We know that school authorities and families are also facing cost pressures for student transportation as well as long ride times. That's why we're increasing our investment in transportation by 32 per cent in the '23-24 fiscal year. Over three years this reflects an additional investment of \$414 million. We are working on changes so that students who live closer to their designated school will become eligible for transportation services and provincial funding. We are also going to change the way we calculate that distance so that it is based on a driving route rather than including walking paths, which will help address parent concerns around safety. With these changes, transportation will become accessible for more students and also more affordable for parents. We anticipate that parents will save over \$20 million in transportation fees. We will also continue the fuel price contingency program to give school authorities relief on fuel prices, and we're providing funding for driver training, which will help address concerns about driver shortages.

This year's budget includes a wide variety of sizable increases to the department's existing funding mechanisms as well as new grants, initiatives, and targeted investments to make . . .

**The Chair:** Thank you, Minister.

For the hour that follows, members of the Official Opposition and the minister may speak. Hon. members, you will be able to see the timer for the speaking block both in the committee room and on Microsoft Teams. You'll just see it above the clock there.

Members, would you like to combine your time with the minister's?

**Ms Hoffman:** I think that's the best way to get answers.

**The Chair:** Minister, what's your preference?

**Member LaGrange:** I'd prefer block timing.

**The Chair:** Okay. We'll go with block time, then. Please proceed.

**Ms Hoffman:** Thanks, Madam Chair. It certainly is disappointing. I've been through this about 15 times, and I will say that when there's a back and forth . . .

**The Chair:** Sorry. If you could please just direct your conversation through the chair at all times, and if we could just kindly get to your questions.

**Ms Hoffman:** Through you, Madam Chair, I have to say that I've been through this about 15 times, and I will say that when there are opportunities for back and forth . . .

**The Chair:** Member.

**Ms Hoffman:** . . . I find it most conducive to good conversation.

**The Chair:** Member.

**Ms Hoffman:** I will very happily ask my questions. Just like the minister had 10 minutes to do an introduction, I'd like to be able to preface my remarks as well.

**The Chair:** Please proceed with your questions.

**Ms Hoffman:** Thank you very much, Madam Chair. To begin with, certainly this has been an incredibly difficult time for everyone, including folks working in Alberta Education and the department. I want to commend them all for the work that went into delivering on the minister's vision through their presentation of budget documents and thank them for their attendance here today and the work that went into it.

I'm going to begin with some very high-level questions, like I did last time. There have been a number of areas that we're seeing less public reporting on than we did previously. One of the biggest ones, of course, is the lack of timely information about student enrolment and class size. The student population statistics on the government of Alberta website: most recent data is still preliminary for 2021-22. Student population statistics – we do know an actual student enrolment used to be reported on September 30, Madam Chair. Now it's reported, I'm sure, in a number of different ways, but the budget, of course, is just based on projections, projections that were submitted in January when students actually attend in September, projections and actuals from the two prior years. Student population statistics information, I think, is important for us to know whether or not what we're here to consider is adequate.

Again, the preliminary number: that's on the government of Alberta website. Student population is, for preliminary 2021-22, 744,809. That's broken down by public, Catholic or separate, francophone, charter, private operator, private school, First Nations, federal, and so on. I don't need all of that level of detail, but I think Albertans deserve to know how many kids actually went to school in 2021, how many went in 2022, how many are going in the current fiscal year, and then how many we are projecting for the upcoming fiscal year. Those numbers, just like the 744,809 number, for the following years, two of which were already complete, and the current year as well as next year's projection, which we're here to consider, I think would be an important starting point for all of us to be able to determine the adequacy of the budget.

The current year's actuals I think are important for us when it comes to projections as well as some of the demographic makeup. In the last two rounds of budget estimates we talked about how kindergarten enrolment was down significantly from projection. I'm hopeful that that number is back up for this year. Having a breakdown of what the kindergarten projections are I think is important for all of us. Then generally we could have a div 1, div 2, div 3, div 4 for each of those. I think that that would help lay the foundation for what the last two years have looked like and what the projection is for this year in terms of student enrolment.

**9:20**

We do know that enrolment is growing at an incredible pace, particularly in the largest urban centres of our province and surrounding communities, but there are many other parts of the province that are growing as well. I often hear about how frustrated growing divisions are, which, again, Edmonton, Calgary, Lethbridge, surrounding areas are all experiencing with the change to the weighted moving average funding, which for everyone's awareness, again, is 50 per cent based on projections for January, not actuals for September, and then the two prior years as well.

Those that are seeing an increase, especially a dramatic increase, aren't getting funded for those new students in a timely way.

When I say timely, I'm not just talking about the year that they're going to school. Most of the time they're not getting funded for three years because of the three-year weighted moving component, at least not fully funded for three years. By then there are already new students. So those growing districts have really seen, I would say, the lion's share of the cutbacks when it comes to the minister's vision around how to allocate the resources that are available publicly to support public, Catholic, francophone, separate, and charter education.

For example, when I was first elected trustee in 2010 – and I think the minister was already a trustee by that point as well – between that time and today just on the board that I was a representative of, Edmonton public, there are 30,000 more students. That's not that long ago, and that is more students than many districts combined. So the fact that 20 per cent is based on two years prior – or 30 per cent on the previous year and then 50 per cent based on the projections for one year prior basically, nine months prior to when kids actually show up, is incredibly detrimental in those areas that are growing so quickly.

That's why I think it's so important for us to have the overall enrolment, so we know what the trend is. As well, it would be great to have a breakdown for where – because everyone submitted in January, what their projections are. Which divisions are anticipating the most growth based on their January projections that inform the creation of this budget and the allocation of both base funding and other grants? It is foundational to understanding the conditions upon which this budget was formed.

Again, I want to say that for divisions where enrolment is flat or declining, I have no problem with a weighted moving average. I think it creates a bit of a cushion for if your school is losing a significant number of students to not have to cause so much trauma all in one year. If you're going to be down 20 students, you're maybe not losing a teacher immediately if it's a small school. You might have three years to make that plan and to ensure that students have reasonable offerings and programs.

Where it is incredibly detrimental, though, is if you're getting hundreds of new students and you're not being funded for them. That simply drives up class sizes, especially in those large urban schools. So questions around: is there any vision in this year's budget around moving away from the weighted moving average, particularly given how disproportionately harmful it is to school divisions like Edmonton public and separate, Calgary public and separate, francophone divisions, Lethbridge, those growing areas, particularly urban areas, where enrolment is going up?

Again, no problem where enrolment is declining. I think it is fair and reasonable to have some type of formula in place to offer a bit of a cushion, but this certainly shouldn't be done at the cost of kids in classes with 45 students in an urban high school.

Previously, for example, during that time when I was on the board – and many boards have a site-based decision-making model where the province gives money to the school divisions, the school divisions decide how to distribute. Some of them have central decision-making models, and some of them have site based. Previously we used to be able to allocate to every school in Edmonton public \$6,000 per student, and it looks, from all of their budget documents that are public, which, of course, this year's isn't yet, but all of the budget documents from last year, that they're about \$4,800 now that they're able to allocate per student.

That is a significant decrease from the \$6,000 just a few years ago, before weighted moving average came into play. That, I think, is a clear example of just how harmful the past few budgets have been. Again, the question is around enrolment, around its

projections for the upcoming year, and if the government has taken the opportunity to reflect on the fact that \$1,200 less per student – and, again, I'm most familiar with Edmonton's numbers, so I use those, but I trust it's in that ballpark for other large and growing districts as well, districts that are seeing enrolment growth. Twelve hundred dollars per student is a significant hit when it used to be \$6,000. Now it's \$4,800.

That would be the main thread of this first block of time. I really do hope that we can get into some meat around the general allocations and the projections around enrolment for the upcoming school year.

Another thing that used to be broken down is information around disability in code. I think it would be important for us to acknowledge that the majority of students, particularly in those larger divisions where the minister is noting that there are a number of different choice programs, the vast majority of students with disabilities, especially severe disabilities, attend public education institutions and an acknowledgement that currently we are underfunding for the amount of staffing that's required. For example, interactions classroom. Often with a number of – interactions is autistic students, typically nonverbal and high needs. Most of those class sizes would be eight to 10 students. It's an incredibly small number of students, Madam Chair, in those classrooms.

Given the fact that allocations don't meet the demand for teacher unit cost of about \$100,000 a year for a teacher, educational assistants, Madam Chair – there are often two or three educational assistants in those classes who make far less than \$100,000 a year but nonetheless deserve an opportunity to be compensated fairly for the important work that they provide and the fact that, with those additional staff, often there are students who don't have control over many of their physical needs and require that educational assistant to support them through that. So an acknowledgement of what's being done in this budget to address supports for disabled students would be important for us to discuss. If anyone is wondering where this relates to specific budget document numbers, I would say most clearly under government estimates item 3, which is operating support for school jurisdictions. That's probably the biggest one.

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

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

**Member LaGrange:** Well, thank you to the member opposite for the questions. Happy to respond to all of the questions that were brought forward. When we look at the reporting that exists, there've been a number of changes that we have put forward at the response of the system as a whole. One of those changes is that school authorities wanted till the end of November to be able to assess their special-needs students so that we could get accurate numbers, as well as the fact that we had growing displaced Ukrainian student numbers last year. At the end of the school year we were at roughly about 800 students; by October we were at 2,500; we're now at over 3,400, close to 3,500 students. It takes time to validate those numbers.

The numbers and statistics that I can share with the member opposite that are actuals is that in 2019 we had approximately 711,000 students. In 2020 we had 705,000 students. In 2021 we had 716,000 students. And I might add that during 2020 and 2021, due to the new funding model, school authorities projected 730,000 students would be in attendance, so we actually have been funding through Budget 2020 and the 2021 year 730,000 when only 705,000 that one year and 716,000 in 2021 actually attended school. In this current year of 2022 we have over 730,000 students, and because



we do have for the first time over that 730,000-student mark that we have been funding for for the last three years when we didn't actually have the students in those seats, we have provided supplemental enrolment growth funding to those school authorities so that every student is funded.

On the kindergarten projections we are seeing returning numbers, but the other great thing that we're seeing is that we've had an influx over the last year and a bit of over 200,000 people to Alberta. They're migrating to Alberta because it is a great place to be. It's a great place to find a job, raise their families, and what we're seeing is that, as a result of that, they're coming with their families. They're not just coming here to work and then going back home; they're bringing their families along as well. So we are seeing growth, and we're going to address that growth. That's why we're adding \$820 million for enrolment growth over the next three years, in total \$1.8 billion, close to \$2 billion to my overall funding. I just want to remind everybody that my budget in 2019, when I first started as Minister of Education, was \$8.223 billion. Last year it was \$8.4 billion. This upcoming budget that I'm announcing, that hopefully will be passed here on the 16th of March, is \$8.8 billion, and then it goes to over \$9 billion. Continual increase, Madam Chair. I can just share that, you know, I often hear there were cuts to education. There have been no cuts to education, so I want to be very, very clear on that.

9:30

When we look at the weighted moving average, we know that when I entered as the Minister of Education, the funding was way outpacing the level of enrolment growth and inflation, and it was not sustainable. What I heard – and I was a school board trustee for 11 and a half years prior to becoming the Minister of Education – and what we always advocated for was sustainable, predictable funding so that we didn't have to rely on September 30 counts and have those big fluctuations in the funding model.

That is exactly what the weighted moving average has done. We've been able to tweak it as we go along when we've seen areas that needed to be addressed. We continue to refine it, and that is something that I know school authorities have very much appreciated, that ongoing collaboration to look at, you know, where there is extreme growth. A small amount of growth is captured under the weighted moving average, but when we have seen extreme fluctuations, we've added, including the supplemental enrolment growth funding.

When we look at – you know, the member opposite had mentioned that school authorities are allocating dollars to their schools, and some use site based and some use central. But ultimately what the member opposite failed to mention is that 98 per cent of all my funding goes directly to the school authorities, so they have that flexibility to choose how they provide those funds. And I can share that those school authorities have very healthy reserves, so the decisions that they make they will have to own in terms of why they're not sending out more dollars to the schools themselves if, in fact, their reserves continue to grow, as I've seen them grow to over \$400 million over the last number of years.

When we look at the specialized supports – I was a rehab practitioner prior to becoming a school board trustee. That was my career choice. I had a younger brother who was born with Down syndrome, and that led me into my career path. So I've worked with vulnerable students all my life as well, and right now, out of my \$8.4 billion, we spend \$1.4 billion on our most vulnerable students. In the next budget we are growing that by 10 per cent, so it will be \$1.5 billion, an \$84 million increase just to make sure that our most vulnerable – because I do believe in early intervention. We have SLS enhancement. The PUF funding: we've been able to tweak that

over the years as well, ensuring that it was tiered, ensuring that we have the family programs allowable, the teacher-directed family programs, where they can go into the home and help the parents adjust. Those numbers have increased. I've added a code 48 for mild-moderate language delays. We've seen a net increase year over year in this area of funding to make sure that our most vulnerable students are provided for.

We've added low-incidence funding. We just announced it went from \$1.8 million to over \$5 million, and that's to provide additional supports for our most vulnerable who have vision loss or hearing loss. We continue to look for opportunities to make sure that our students and our children are supported during this time period.

When I look at the budget and all the great things that we've been able to do in the budget, we have been able to ensure that the students that we have, that are coming to us, are in fact looked after through also the investments that we're making into capital infrastructure to ensure that every student has a safe place that they can be able to learn, that we have the teachers.

We've seen the number of teachers that have been hired grow across the last number of years. We've had over 1,100 teachers and over 700 support staff just in the '22-23 year be hired. Now we're looking, with the supports that we're giving, the additional increases, that we will grow, that the system will grow by approximately up to 3,000 more staff members, many of whom will be teachers and educational assistants. I've always said that what makes the biggest difference is who is in front of the students, and that means the teacher, the support staff, those individuals that they're able to access for additional interventions. Whether it's occupational speech pathologists – there are so many individuals that make our systems successful.

What I'm really proud of is that in my mandate letter I also have the opportunity to look at authentic wraparound services and work with my fellow ministers to develop an actual path forward where we can develop authentic wraparound services, which many out in the education system would know. We have mental health and wellness. We have Health. We have Children's Services. We have community and social services. We have Justice. We all need to be working together for the betterment of our children, and I am so excited to be leading that particular area. There is just so much happening in Education. I am very proud of this budget because it is, in fact, meeting the needs of our students, and it will continue to grow as the needs are identified.

I believe I've answered all of the questions that the member opposite has put forward but happy, if I have missed anything, for them to bring back to the forefront in the next few seconds.

**The Chair:** Thank you so much.

We return to the Official Opposition.

**Ms Hoffman:** Thank you, Madam Chair and Minister. I just want to repeat the questions that we didn't get an answer for, and thank you for the commitment to getting that information. What are the 2023 actuals given that we're more than halfway through the school year? What is the actual enrolment for kindergarten? I am glad to hear that it's up, but what is the actual enrolment? I'd also like the enrolment for divisions 1, 2, 3, and 4. That's information that is on the government of Alberta student population statistic data, but it was for projections for 2021. I appreciate that some of the rolled-up numbers have been shared for total enrolment. But, again, the breakdown for 2023, the current year that we're in, the kindergarten number; divisions 1, 2, 3, and 4; and then the projection for the upcoming year, the year that we're considering: what is the projection for those areas as well?

Then another question that was asked that I think would be helpful for all of us to be able to make informed decisions on through debate and decisions around the budget is: which divisions are growing according to the January submission for projected student enrolment? It's safe to, probably, assume that they are the same ones that have grown for the last 10 years, but which divisions are actually growing, given that the minister has that information through budget submission processes, and are we going to see any accounting for that through the fact that when the weighted moving average came in, the weighted moving average was going to see significant decreases for funding for a number of those growing divisions?

I know that bridge funding was allocated to ensure that boards didn't see a decline immediately when the weighted moving average came in, but this year I understand that bridge funding is over and that there is a significant concern that there will be a number of divisions seeing an incredibly difficult budget year even with the pre-election increases that are being campaigned on through this budget, Madam Chair. So allocations to make up for the fact that bridge funding is gone, I think, would be important to know how that change is going to be accommodated through this, because while growth is actually going to be funded for the first time in four years, that bridge funding was important given how broken the weighted moving average formula is.

Yeah. Those would be the repeat of the ones that we still are waiting for answers on and then the addition of the bridge funding acknowledgement there.

I do want to say that I joined the minister in advocating for stable and predictable funding, but the other piece we also advocated for was adequate: adequate, sustainable, predictable funding. Certainly, being able to anticipate what your money is and knowing that it's not enough to properly educate students isn't adequate for most of us who want to see students thrive in public, Catholic, and francophone schools.

The minister did talk about inflationary pressures. Recently Statistics Canada data was compiled showing that in Alberta we fund per pupil at the lowest rate in the entire country. It probably doesn't surprise people that Quebec funds at the highest, over \$14,000; Newfoundland, \$13,500. The national average in Canada is \$12,703 per student country-wide, but in Alberta it's only \$10,936, a significant decrease from the national average, putting us on the bottom of the pile. Of course, I think we all are aware that the cost of living is higher in Alberta generally than in most of these other provinces and that salaries are typically higher, too.

**9:40**

Naturally, the consequence to that is that we have the highest student-to-teacher ratio of any jurisdiction in Canada again. Again, this is using StatsCan data that's available publicly through their website. It shows that the national average is 12 students per educator. That doesn't mean you'll have an average class size because, of course, there are a variety of components we've talked about, the fact that autism classes will often have eight to 10. We will have principals and other staff that we need to hire that aren't necessarily teaching in classrooms. But the average number of students per educator, when you take teaching certificates and the number of students, nation-wide is 12. In Alberta it's 16.4, again, the highest number of students per educator anywhere in the country by a long shot.

Again, I appreciate some of the remarks that have been shared about in relation to inflationary pressures, but the truth is that we are starting from the depths of the national average. We are the worst funded per student, and we also have the largest number of students per educator of anywhere in the country.

Business plan objective 3.2 talks about strategies on attracting and retaining teachers, but clearly there is a funding problem. Even the MacKinnon report confirmed that we were below the national average and that there were other jurisdictions who were funding at much higher rates per student. Again, now we know, confirmed by Statistics Canada, that that is true.

In terms of business plan objective 3.2 I have to say that I expect that that will be a massive uphill battle and also given that there have been recent surveys released showing that about a third of Alberta's teachers are considering leaving the province or their profession in the next few years if things stay on the current trajectory. That's deeply concerning and, I think, will limit the current government's ability to deliver on that objective.

Yeah. I want to take a little bit of a shift – and it's still related to weighted moving average – in the next four minutes to talk about high school pressures in particular. There have been a number of changes to the way funding is – the shell game of funding in the province of Alberta over the last few years, and the piece that I hear regularly from high school parents, administrators, and educators as well as students about is the lack of support for options and for components like dual credit. I do have to say that I believe that the change in how high school students are funded has played a significant role in limiting these options, particularly in smaller communities.

For example, I know that in northern Alberta many communities were able to do dual credit around health care programming that ensured that high school students were on a career path in health care. They were getting a credential. They were working in local lodges, nursing homes, long-term care, and assisted living facilities, and, ultimately, many of the times taking care of their family members and other people that they'd grown up with in their communities. Given the change in funding, a number of those programs are no longer being offered, particularly in smaller communities because they just aren't compensated in a way that recognizes the additional work that's being put into it, both at the postsecondary level and at the local school or jurisdiction level, and I think that's detrimental to the objectives that we have around creating career pathways for students to find success, beginning in their K to 12 years.

Of course, I've been a strong advocate for expanding financial literacy since the time that both the minister and I served on school boards, so ensuring that we have a pathway that's supported with a minister and a government that actually believe in creating opportunities for students to begin on that career path in high school if not sooner and seeing the negative impacts of the funding formula, particularly as it relates to high school. Large class sizes. Many divisions' high school teachers are being asked to teach eight for eight, meaning no prep time outside of their own personal time, which means that it's harder for them to be able to create these opportunities for authentic learning in relation to the community, which, again, is counter to what's articulated in the business plan as one of the key objectives: 1.2, strengthen career education programming.

I would say that 3.1 and 1.2 are two of the main outcomes in the business plan that I'd like to hear a response on. I would like some information, some hard numbers, on the actual numbers of students that have been able to complete dual-credit programming over the last budget year – probably the prior one as well would be important – and projections for the upcoming one. If it's possible to go all the way back to 2019, I think that that's a telling arc of what's happened under the current government. But knowing what I'm hearing from members throughout the province, particularly those in rural and remote communities, about the negative impacts of the high school funding, I think it is an important thing for us to reflect on here, and

if we're bringing forward a business plan that will actually enable us in achieving those outcomes with the budget, or if we are moving in the wrong direction. I would say that it comes back to me over and over again that it's in the wrong direction.

There are only a few more seconds, so maybe I'll leave those questions at that point. I have many other areas to go into but welcome responses from the minister on those outstanding questions from the first block and those in the second.

**The Chair:** Okay. Thank you so much.  
Please proceed, Minister.

**Member LaGrange:** Happy to. Thank you so much. Those numbers, the enrolment numbers, et cetera, will be up on the website as soon as they're verified.

I want to talk about the bridge funding because that has been something that was very important to school authorities, particularly when we were transitioning from the old model to the new funding model. Bridge funding was something to keep the school systems whole. We wanted no one to be disadvantaged; we wanted to make sure that everyone was kept whole, and therefore that bridge funding over the last number of years has really ensured that school authorities were able to do what they needed to do.

We have always mentioned that when we got to a point where COVID was no longer an issue and that we were able to move forward, that bridge funding would remain within the overall envelope of Education, and that's exactly what we've done. So \$352 million of bridge funding is actually moving to the framework, and it is going to be used to increase grants. It will increase grants throughout the whole system, particularly around base grant funding. When we look at all of the funding that we're providing, this will be increased on a line-item-by-line-item area.

Operations and maintenance is growing by \$79.8 million over three years; transportation is growing by \$413.9 million over three years; classroom complexity by \$126 million; the teacher agreement settlement, \$420 million; and budgeting for enrolment growth is \$821 million, which altogether comes to that \$1.8 billion over three years that we will see in additional funding. School authorities have benefited, as I said earlier. The fact that we have been funding 730,000 students for two years when there were only 705,000 students and 716,000 students certainly has benefited those school authorities because we kept everyone in a positive situation.

When we look at the numbers that – you know, the member opposite said that we have not been funding increases. Last year we had a 1.7 per cent increase to education funding, and what that created was that over that '22-23 year – what we have seen is actual numbers that schools have given to us as of November 30, 2022 – 1,166 more certificated staff were hired. That's an additional 1,166 teachers, and 711 noncertificated staff were also hired in this current school year as of November 30, 2022. Given the fact that we've also added supplemental enrolment growth funding, that number may be even higher now. I'm just giving you those initial numbers, but they may be even higher now.

**9:50**

Under affordability in Budget 2023 we're providing more than \$820 million over the next three years to hire additional teachers and classroom support staff, as I've said. We allow the flexibility for school authorities to manage their class sizes. Of course, the member opposite and all of you would probably know that school authorities, school boards are the ones that hire the teachers and the support staff. They get 98 per cent of all the funding in Alberta Education, and they hold the contracts with the staff members themselves.

We're providing \$126 million over three years so that school authorities can add supports to complex classrooms and give students the focus, time, and attention they need. School authorities will be given an additional \$414 million over the next three years to support school busing improvements and rising costs. School authorities will receive \$80 million over the next three years for utilities, insurance, and supplies for maintaining schools.

I want to give my department a shout-out because they met with all of the secretary-treasurers across the province and really drilled into the numbers. So we have an accurate reflection of what the actual costs are and how we can make sure that we're addressing real costs for school authorities.

We also know that there are rising costs to food prices, and that's why we've added an additional \$20 million, or increased the overall nutrition program to \$20 million in the 2023-24 area.

There are so many things that we're doing to ensure that affordability is something that is being addressed in this budget for school authorities.

We also know that Alberta is a great place to live. Contrary to what I heard just recently here from the member opposite, there are so many affordability measures in Alberta. We don't have a sales tax. We have lower overall corporate taxes, which is, you know, enticing people to come to Alberta. Unfortunately, we do have to contend with the carbon tax, and the members opposite, I know, support Justin Trudeau and Jagmeet Singh in their continuation of that carbon tax. That has created such inflationary costs in this province. Of course, all of our food and a lot of the items that we have in our stores, in our grocery stores and our clothing stores, are trucked in, so those higher costs have to be passed on to the consumer, and that's a real shame. If we could ever get rid of that carbon tax, that would be fantastic. I know that we got rid of it as a government when we came into office.

Moving on to Stats Canada, I know that the member opposite talked about Stats Canada. Those numbers in Stats Canada: I really want to know if they're comparing apples to apples or apples to oranges. There's very little data as to whether they compare what our actual numbers are to the other provinces. No other province has a weighted moving average. They have different models of funding. Our funding model is unique and has obviously done what it needs to do in terms of making sure there's sustainable, predictable funding for school authorities. Also, the fact that growing reserves indicate that we have healthy reserves in our school authorities, that, in fact, our school authorities are being well funded, that they're able to set aside for a rainy day those dollars that they need.

I also want to bring to everyone's attention that we fully funded the teachers' supplement, that our teachers, in fact, remain some of the highest paid professionals in all of Canada. We look at the fact that there was a settlement of .5 per cent, 1.25 per cent, and 2 per cent. That alone totals \$206 million. But over the next three years that number is actually \$420 million that will be going to our teachers. You're right; they deserve to be well funded. They work really, really hard for our children. They care so much.

You know, I started, actually, the teacher advisory council for the first time ever. There was never a teacher advisory council before for the Minister of Education. I started that teacher advisory council because I wanted to hear directly from teachers, how they are doing and what's going on. The one thing that I heard – because I met with them, actually, face to face here just recently, probably about three weeks ago or so, and I have about 40 that sit on my advisory panel. The one thing that they were talking about – and some of them were high school teachers. Some of them were elementary school teachers that are actually bringing in new curriculum.

But the ones that were high school teachers, going to the member opposite's question about high school: they were really concerned about the complexity that they are seeing in their high schools. Some of the students that require additional supports, the mental health and wellness challenges, and all of the things that we are looking to address through not only the mental health and well-being pilots, to which we have allocated \$50 million to 80 pilots right across this province, which is on top of the \$1.4 billion, soon to be \$1.5 billion that we are going to be spending each and every year for our most vulnerable students. They are concerned, and they were very appreciative of those dollars that we are spending on mental health because they are seeing it within their classrooms.

The other area I'd love to get into and that I could talk for hours on is the Career Education Task Force. I put together that task force for the very reason that while we do have dual-credit and apprenticeship programs, et cetera, we have never had or taken the opportunity to drill down into those programs. Are they actually meeting the needs? Are we funding them appropriately? What needs to happen so that we can grow? We know we're going to be short 30,000 trades over the next decade. How do we incentivize and how do we attract our young people into these great-paying, wonderful jobs that are just as valuable as any other job that's out there. So we continue to work.

I'm expecting the recommendations from the Career Education Task Force by the end of the month here, and I'm excited to see what possibilities are there. Not only did they work with teachers and administrators; they worked with industry leaders; they worked with postsecondaries. Those recommendations I think will really . . .

**The Chair:** Thank you, Minister.

Back over to the Official Opposition.

**Ms Hoffman:** Thanks very much. I will just start by saying that the StatsCan data is pretty simply aggregated. They take the number of total education allocated dollars per province and the total number of students and divide it. They take the total number of students and divide it by the number of certificated teachers. So it would simply appear that it is a very clear apples-to-apples representation and that Alberta is failing: the lowest in the country on allocation and the highest number of students per teacher, according to public StatsCan data with a simple calculation.

I'm going to pivot to the capital plan because I know that the minister is talking about many projects, but the number – and, again, going through the minister's own press release and going through capital plan submissions from each of the divisions, there are only five new schools that are actually funded for construction in the budget that we are here to consider. There are lots of promises around projections and announcements made about things that might happen in out-years, but there are only, from the current government, five new schools funded in this budget: one in Airdrie, one in Calgary, one in Edmonton, one in Lethbridge, and one in Raymond. That's it. There are needs, of course, in areas in addition to new school construction, but that's why I've been asking all the questions around enrolment growth and projections, because I think – for example, we have members here from growing suburban neighbourhoods that know that there's pressure when it comes to capacity and school utilization, that they aren't seeing their schools reflected in a funded way by the government in this budget.

There are only five new schools actually funded for construction in the year that we're considering, in this year's budget. Let me tell you a little bit about the scope of what the needs actually are. For example, Calgary Catholic school division is getting the one new school being built for Calgary, Nolan Hill – incredibly important –

but there were also six other projects in their year-1 needs assessment: Chestermere, Redstone, Range View, Bishop McNally, St. Bonaventure, and St. Benedict. Some of those are modernizations; some of them are new school construction.

That's why the piece on having enrolment numbers – and being told, you know, "We'll post them on the website when they're available," well, the website is three years behind, right? We still have projections for 2021, and we as members of the Assembly are being asked, Madam Chair, to make decisions about the adequacy of this year's budget to meet this year's needs for students. I think it's incredibly important, before we're being asked to make a decision on this budget, that that information be made available to members. So I again ask – and if it isn't available here, so be it – that it be tabled so that we can all review it prior to being expected to make a decision on the budget, so that we know what were the grounding indicators that went into making decisions about this budget.

Those seven projects I outlined for Calgary Catholic are just their year-1 needs. Many of the things that the government chose to announce last week are planning or preplanning dollars, which maybe, if they were committing to the year-3 commitments, would make sense because those almost certainly will take at least three years to get off the ground and none of them were committed to.

*10:00*

In year 2 there was Walden, Airdrie, Calgary west, Our Lady of the Rockies, a junior high, as well as St. Catherine, southeast alternative, Carrington extended learning centre, St. Monica, St. Andrew, and St. Sylvester elementary. So there are a significant number of projects that Calgary Catholic has asked for. They have done their assessment; there are 19 projects, and only one was actually funded this year. That is not keeping up with the demand for Calgary Catholic students.

In terms of the Calgary board of education I think that they were trying to really scale back their asks so that they could maybe say that the government came close to funding all of their needs. They have incredibly scaled it back; they only have four projects that they put in their year 1 needs assessment. With more than twice as many students it's safe to say that they probably need twice as many projects if they were doing their submission in the same way as the Calgary Catholic board, which, again, had seven further year 1 needs assessment. So probably needed 14; they asked for only four, and all of them were major modernizations because of the significant deferred maintenance experienced in Calgary schools. They've only asked for junior highs and senior highs. One was funded. That's it: one out of many, many needs that they've identified.

Then in terms of year 2 and year 3 we would've hoped the government might at least say, "We're going to pick some of those to do some planning money for," which, again, isn't a commitment to actually funding it, but at least it's posturing a little bit that maybe one day, possibly down the road, on the horizon – and the government's own budget documents say possible school project; they don't even commit that those projects that get preplanning money will ever come to light under the current government.

In year 2 the CBE said Saddle Ridge, Cornerstone, Annie Foote, Altadore, Cedabrae, and then a further expansion in year 3 for Saddle Ridge, Cornerstone, Ranchlands, Janet Johnstone, and Queen Elizabeth schools. So a significant number of projects, and, again, only one was actually funded under the current government in the year that they're campaigning, in the year that usually governments say: hey, look at all the great stuff we have planned for you. The Calgary board of education only saw an actual commitment to funding for one project, not anywhere near the 8,000 new students that those divisions saw just this one year alone, just the current

school year. They're reporting that number publicly, whether the government chooses to do so or not.

Eight thousand new students for Calgary public and Catholic divisions and only funding for one project that will accommodate 900 students. Not anywhere near the demand that we're seeing in our largest city and one that is growing incredibly quickly as well, particularly as it relates to families choosing public, Catholic, and francophone education. To say that we support choice but not actually funding the choices that parents are making when it comes to enrolling their students in schools is one of the reasons why this budget is seen as so disingenuous.

If we look at Edmonton public schools, another division – and, again, both of these have been overlooked many years. Under the current government: only had one project funded in the last two years each and now one new build only for the entire city of Calgary. If you look at Edmonton public schools, they were encouraged by the current government to amend their capital plan mid-year and to expedite the needs in growing areas over mature areas. Fine; they did that. They submitted an amended plan back in September, and even still there are eight needs for year 1. Only one actually got funded.

Glenriding Heights, an important project, absolutely: we have also committed to that project as well as to Diefenbaker and other projects that were the five projects, essentially, that have been committed to in this year's funding and others for year 1 but not anywhere near the needs. The needs include Edgemont, Rosenthal, McConachie, Glenriding Heights, Delton, Spruce Ave, and a consolidation project if it will ever get funded under the current government. Good news: we have an election coming up, so there will be an opportunity to engage in that.

But that's just year 1. If you look at the three years, there are 23 projects that need to be funded, and this is a needs assessment that every division submits to the Minister of Education and department. I'm confident that the minister will talk about the gated process; I will say most divisions feel like it's a wall. They are incredibly polite and will say many nice things when they get anything, which is how most of us function when we're in the roles that we're in – we lead with politeness – but I will say that there is significant disappointment on the part of most school divisions when it comes to the lack of capital investment.

Again, Edmonton public schools, eight projects in their year 1; in year 2, Hawks Ridge, and the list goes on. There are significant needs throughout the city, a growing city with significant space issues. Students are riding the bus upwards of 40 minutes. We're entering into more schools going to lottery, meaning that even if you live in the immediate attendance area, there isn't enough room for you. You could literally live across the street from the school and have your name be included in a draw to see who's allowed to go to that school and who isn't. There were five, I believe, this year that were on lottery, and I think it's set to be seven in Edmonton public alone for this upcoming year. It's safe to assume that similar trends are probably happening with the Catholic division and in Calgary and probably Lethbridge and other areas as well, so not anywhere near meeting the adequacy test.

The minister might say that, well, there is preplanning money committed for some projects or design funding committed for some projects. These year 1 projects are needs for immediate funding. They're not in their year 3 list. If they were funding year 1 and making preplanning commitments for year 2 and year 3, maybe people could have some understanding of where the current government is coming with that. But significant frustration, I would say, on behalf of many families when it comes to the lack of commitment to capital.

Edmonton Catholic schools: completely shut out of any actual funding commitments for this year. Let me tell you about their capital needs assessment: Heritage Valley and Kavanagh need a new school – that was their number one ask – a replacement school for Rundle Heights, St. Jerome Catholic elementary, and others in that area.

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

We'll go now to the minister.

**Member LaGrange:** Well, thank you. There's a lot there to unpack, and I'm happy to do it. You know what? I'm happy to report on our government's progress on capital infrastructure. In fact, I'm happy to compare ourselves to the former government, to the NDP, any day of the week.

When I look at the fact that we have announced 106 schools and are working towards building 106 schools, these are actual projects that will move forward because they are priority projects that have been identified by school authorities. The member opposite was a school board trustee. I was a school board trustee. She knows how it works. In the three-year Education capital plan school authorities put forward their top asks. They prioritize what they need in their school authority.

This year we had 377 requests from school authorities across this province. As I said, 58 were announced in Budget 2023 by our government, 48 previously. I just want to highlight that the members opposite during their four years only announced 47 school projects during that whole time period.

What does that look like in terms of student spaces? We are currently funding 62,500 more spaces. That is what we are creating through those 106 investments that we have been doing during our government whereas the NDP only approved and created 34,000 spaces. That's double the amount of spaces that we're creating. I'm happy to talk about that all day long.

When we look at the NDP, in Calgary they announced 11 projects. We, in fact, since 2019 have announced 18 projects for CBE and Calgary Catholic, 11 which alone have been announced in Budget 2023. In the four years that the NDP were in government, they only announced eight projects for Edmonton, Mr. Speaker. Sorry; Madam Chair, not Mr. Speaker. You can see I'm excited about these projects. This is such good news. Since 2019 our government has announced 18 projects for the Edmonton area and for Edmonton Catholic and Edmonton public, nine of which were announced in Budget 2023.

When I look at the overall utilization rates of those school authorities, CBE has an 87.1 per cent utilization rate, Calgary Catholic has an 81.9 per cent utilization rate, Edmonton Catholic has an 87.2 per cent utilization rate, and Edmonton public school division has an 83.2 per cent utilization rate, so they're very good utilization rates. We will continue to work with those school authorities to make sure that we're addressing all of the needs.

**10:10**

Yes, we know that the new process is new, but that being said, the gated process has been around for a long time. The auditor-approved gated process, actually, was passed under the previous government in 2018. It is a 10-step gated process. What we've added this year is a transparency for school authorities to see where they are in the pipeline of school builds. That's the one thing they were always asking. "Where are we on the list? You know, I know you get 377 asks, but where are we on the list?" This is a way for us as government to be very transparent and open with school authorities so that they can actually see where they are on the list. We know that they want to know that, yes, they may have put

forward five, 10, sometimes more asks than that, but where are they on the list? This is very good news for our school authorities.

When I look at – I know the member opposite mentioned Edmonton public school division, one of our fastest growing school authorities, as I said. They have an 83.2 per cent utilization rate. Of course, sometimes schools aren't where they need to be – they're in older neighbourhoods – so transportation becomes something that school authorities rely on to get students to where they have more space. I'm also glad to see that Edmonton public school division had many discussions with myself and my department last year so that they understood the process and would actually prioritize communities of growing students and growing communities. In the past they actually had prioritized areas that had low utilization. They had put forward schools that had low utilization and didn't have health and safety issues for modernization or replacement.

School authorities, the school boards themselves, are the ones that are putting forward their priorities. I often tell parents: if you feel that there's a need in your area, you need to go to your school authority, to your school board because they're the ones that are making the decisions that then come to government, that then go through the gated process, that rise to the top, that then become the ones that are funded. We are in fact funding all of these projects.

I can get into how the – obviously, design funding and construction funding is something that everyone is familiar with. But when we look at the funding of preplanning and planning, what are those dollars for? Some of the biggest frustrations from school boards and I know myself as a school board trustee are actually when you get funding for a school or an announcement for a school and all of the work that has to go into it, the preplanning, the planning dollars – we're giving \$4 million for planning. We're giving an additional over \$1 million for preplanning.

The school planning is intended to allow for further development of project scope and site investigation and work to help clarify potential risks and identify mitigating strategies and costs. Like, there's nothing more frustrating than getting an announcement for a school and then it having to be delayed for a number of years because there is an issue with the geotechnical work that has been done and it finds problems with the soil compaction, et cetera. The goal is to remove barriers and better position the project for consideration of design and construction approval in a future budget cycle so that when you get design funding or construction funding, you can go straight to work, shovels can go into the ground, that that work is ready to go.

I have to also state that in the preplanning and the planning dollars, it doesn't mean it's an additional step that those school authorities have to go through. In fact, it's intended to remove steps and barriers. Therefore, preplanning and planning: if the work can be done during that time period, projects can move right to construction. These, again, are projects that are in queue, and school authorities can be assured that these are priority projects not only for them but for government, that they will move forward.

Some of the benefits of planning are early identification of project risks, which provide cost certainty; advanced development of mitigation strategies; alignment with the government's capital planning strategy and process development; supporting development of partnerships; supporting the elimination of nonviable options before a fully funded commitment, allowing for more efficient project delivery. On the preplanning side this funding is intended for projects that currently have a low to medium priority but are anticipated to significantly increase in priority in the next three to five years. These are in areas where school boards are identifying: "You know what? It has not grown yet, but we know that in the next couple of years there's going to be a community that really needs this school in this area."

This would include projects to newer, developing neighbourhoods or projects that are still reasonably affordable to maintain and operate but have a number of systems nearing the end of their lifespan, so modernizations. Activities such as value-scoping studies or other functional planning, development of program priorities, and outlining of initial scope can be completed.

Preplanning funding can be used to mitigate early identified risks such as site fit analysis and ensure the planned site is suitable for the required school capacity. Funding can support community engagement and may also support identifying crossministry opportunities such as child care, community health partnerships, and seniors. We're talking more and more about: can we include more child care spaces right in our schools? Doesn't that make sense, to have child care spaces in elementary schools or other schools so that parents have more options available to them, particularly in areas . . .

**The Chair:** Thank you so much, Minister.

We'll now move over to the government caucus for 20 minutes of questions from the members. Would you like to combine your time with the minister's?

**Mr. Turton:** Sure. Yeah.

**The Chair:** Minister, would you like to combine your time? What would you like? What's your preference?

**Member LaGrange:** Sure. We can combine.

**The Chair:** Please proceed.

**Mr. Turton:** Awesome. Well, thank you very much, Madam Chair, and thank you very much, Minister and the rest of your team, for coming here today. You know, for communities like Spruce Grove and Stony Plain and the young families that live there, I mean, education is just so key. I was talking to my son, who is in grade 4, telling him about the process of budget estimates and kind of what I would be doing here, and I asked him: how do you get into high school? He's in grade 4. He kind of looked at me, and he said: well, with a ladder, Dad, of course.

It's a silly question and it's a silly answer, but it reminded me that, you know, while we get caught up a lot in the estimates and the numbers – they're extremely important, and we're going to talk about a lot of those numbers here today – at the end of the day there are children there that just simply want to be educated, there are teachers that want to have a great learning experience and want to help guide these young kids up, and there are parents that want to have a safe place where their kids can learn and grow and become fantastic, contributing members to our society.

That's why, I guess, when I looked at the budget, there are a number of things that kind of stood out to me. Number one was, obviously, the 5.2 per cent increase compared to last year's budget. I mean, when I looked at that number – I'm always trying to put things in terms of the context of: what is the impact that it's going to have on the teaching experience? A good Education ministry, happy teachers, you know, obviously will make for happy children that are growing up.

I guess one of my first questions I have is: can you further elaborate on how this increased funding will support Alberta students, teachers, and parents? For me, that's what I'm really interested in. What is that human story about the impact that this funding will actually have?

I just want to take this opportunity, first of all, to kind of give a shout-out to Rick Kremp, who's our local ATA representative out in Spruce Grove and Stony Plain. I've known Rick for many years,

and I have to say, both for Rick and for the rest of the local ATA members – I know that they’re listening because they told me they were going to be talking about this – that I appreciate the work that they do and the conversations that we’ve been able to have in my constituency office as they advocate for teachers here in our area.

Another key part that I’m really concerned about or, I guess, interested in as well is, obviously, about the plan for new schools, the capital portion of how these schools are going to be rolled out. You know, I think that due to the advocacy of many of the parents and the work that you have done, Minister, it has really helped kind of change the educational landscape in Spruce Grove-Stony Plain. I know many parents are extremely happy about that. I mean, since this government was elected in 2019, Stony Plain Central school has been started and completed. The Woodhaven modernization, where my kids are going to be going next year, has been completed as well. We have a brand new francophone school that has been started and completed here in our area.

Actually, on that note, I find it quite interesting when I hear members of the opposition talk about this government’s lack of interest in the francophone community. I will say, like, from my own experience, that the track record of this government and yourself, Minister, and the work of your ministry is anything but. I mean, there have been francophone schools being built and started all throughout the area.

**10:20**

I know that in my specific area of Spruce Grove-Stony Plain there are hundreds of parents that are going to be utilizing that fantastic new educational opportunity, where before they had to go all the way to St. Albert for schools. That was a plea for help from the francophone community, one where I was very happy to help facilitate those conversations. Minister, I was very thankful that it was your ministry that helped make that happen. This is the very first year, I know, that that school will be there, and I’m looking forward to further capital expansions for that school to continue to enhance the francophone educational experience out in my neck of the woods.

But I’d also like to kind of zero in a little bit about the design/build towards the new high school project that is going to be in Spruce Grove. I know members of the opposition lament the fact. They say that they want the entire construction costs paid out at once. But I’ll tell you that even from the conversations when I’ve talked to my Parkland school trustees, they have told me that this is a project that they had been begging for for almost seven years. You know, in Spruce Grove and Stony Plain everyone likes to talk about which community is growing faster, and I think I’m probably no different in that regard. Granted, I will say that Airdrie is growing considerably faster even than Spruce Grove and Stony Plain.

When you see the growth rates of students in my area – and I know that when I was first elected to city council in 2010, Spruce Grove had a population of approximately 24,000 people. When I graduated from high school in Spruce Grove, it was at 19,000, and now we’re at 40,000. There is a massive influx of kids that come, obviously, with those families, and everywhere you go in Spruce Grove and Stony Plain, there are kids playing in the streets and playgrounds. A result of that, obviously, is that growth. I know we have this big population bubble coming up to high school, and school trustees and parents have been begging for this project, to have any kind of movement on it, for so many years.

To be able to see the millions of dollars spent towards the design portion of Spruce Grove composite high school to be able to handle that growth, I have to say that when I told one particular trustee, she actually started crying. She said: “We were begging for this for years. Thank you for being able to do this.” I will admit that on the

home front my loving and charming wife, you know, constantly reminds me that this high school, that we’re actually finally going to get working on, is the exact same configuration of high school that she experienced when she graduated from high school in Spruce Grove many, many years ago. So it’s long overdue.

I guess the question I would like to ask is about the impact of all these design projects. Now, I do come from a bit of a construction background, and I realize that it takes work to be able to do this design work initially. I guess I would like a little bit of clarification about the process. You know, you start off with the design work. It will last a minimum of a year. Then the construction will happen after that point. If you can clarify some of the nuts and bolts, perhaps, about the advantages of being able to leverage today’s dollars for doing that design work today so that we just don’t put in a sandbox or a parking lot, tens of millions of dollars, waiting for the design work to be done when we could do that work in advance. I know that is something I am extremely interested to kind of know a little bit about.

I would also ask about some of the other projects that are going to be funded in this capital plan, especially those around the capital region. Obviously, transportation is going to be a massive question as well to many parents in my neck of the woods. You know, in my area, Spruce Grove-Stony Plain, I think we probably have one of the most elaborate and comprehensive transportation networks in the province. We have some fantastic relationships between Parkland school division, Evergreen school division, St. Matthew school in Stony Plain, Living Waters school in Spruce Grove, and we tie in students from as far away as Entwistle, all the way to the borders of Edmonton, into one seamless transportation system.

But I know transportation costs are, obviously, taxing and onerous on many parents, and these costs are only going up. I know that there was a substantial amount on page 35. It talks about the transportation funding increasing by \$414 million over the next few years. Obviously, a question that I would have pertaining to that would be: how many students are being bused every day? I know that in the more metropolitan areas of Edmonton and Calgary maybe it’s a little bit more of a luxury when you talk about busing, but when you’re in a rural area and you’re having to maybe sometimes go 35, 40 minutes to school, it’s a completely different experience, and parents may not have the ability just to drive their kids quickly to school. That bus is the lifeblood for education for many of our kids.

Obviously, coming from much more of a suburban area, some questions I would have would be about average times and what the metrics are that are used to be able to track in terms of how often and how long children can go on the school bus – I know that when I graduated from high school in Spruce Grove, a 45-minute bus ride was common to be able to travel to high school, and I know that kids still continue to do that as well – and also, I guess, you know, some long-term plans about how the department addresses transportation ride times. I know, obviously, we’re trying to make these ride times as efficient as possible.

Then, obviously, you know, the overall vision encapsulated in the budget about how we can ensure that school boards are delivering transportation to every student in a cost-effective manner regardless of whether you go to a public school or if you go to a private school: perhaps you can elaborate a little bit on that. But, for me, educational choice and ensuring parents’ rights across the entire province to have a fair opportunity to send their kids to school – and utilizing family choice is extremely important. We want to make sure that parents have that flexibility. So if you could elaborate on that, that would be great.

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

After the minister's response, we'll take our coffee break. Please proceed, Minister.

**Member LaGrange:** Thank you so much, and thanks for the great questions. You know, I'm a mother of seven children, and I'm a grandmother of seven and a half, soon to be eight in July, so I have a very vested interest in education. Also, as a former rehab practitioner working with the developmentally disabled, there was a reason I spent 11 and a half years as a school board trustee. It's because I am passionate about education and ensuring that we do the right things for the right reasons for our children. That's the lens that we have made all our decisions in my department in, and I'm very proud of the decisions that we have made, that really ensure that we have a strong education system.

Through Budget 2023 we are able to further enhance that by funding it at historic levels. When I became minister in 2019, I started with an \$8.223 billion budget, and now, in '23-24, it will be \$8.8 billion. Our increased investment in education ensures students in Alberta will continue to receive a world-class, high-quality education that enriches their lives and prepares them for success beyond school. This is an increase of \$443 million over the '22-23 budget, or more than 5 per cent, as you had indicated. This equals \$44 million every single day there is a student in school, and that's on a 200-day calendar. We know our students are usually in school about 180, 188, 189 days.

Our increased education funding will help combat the affordability and inflation crisis parents and school authorities are facing. We are providing targeted increases to areas where we know it will have the most impact, including enrolment growth, including addressing classroom complexity, including targeted supports for students' well-being, transportation improvements, and rising costs, and, of course, in operations and maintenance grants. This will support hiring about 3,000 education staff, including teachers, educational assistants, bus drivers, and school support staff over the next three years. That's a significant number, and it can't be underestimated, the impact that those individuals will have within our classrooms.

When you talked about the facilities – and I know Spruce Grove-Stony Plain has been waiting a long, long time for this school, and thank you to everyone who has advocated. But, as I said earlier, there is a very robust gated process that all of these schools go through. There are more asks in a year, every year, than there is actual ability to address those asks. So when 377 asks come to the ministry each and every year and they go through that robust gated process, eventually the ones that are needing it the most do rise to the top.

In Budget 2023 \$5.268 million has been committed to the Parkland school division for the replacement of the Spruce Grove high school for the design process. Now, you know, people are always shocked at that, \$5 million for design. Well, there is so much that goes into these new high school builds when you think of all the technology and the work that has to be factored.

**10:30**

We also know that growing communities like yours need infrastructure to support the diversity that is in your community. Oftentimes the reason why the number is so high: there's a lot of engagement that has to go on. The school authorities engage with the local community, get input from the teachers and the students themselves and the parents to see how they want that project to move forward. I'm very happy to see that this school has risen to the surface and that it is getting design funding. And what does that mean? It means, in fact, it will go forward. It will go forward. It will continue down the continuum, down that pipeline, so very

transparently. Typically design funding takes about a year to complete, and then construction funding is allocated the following year. That is the typical process that I can share with you. So I'm really happy for you and for your community.

I can go on here to say that we are securing Alberta's future by investing in new schools and modernized spaces so students and communities can benefit for decades to come. We know that Alberta is a prosperous, growing place that needs the supports and resources available to help each local area succeed, so Alberta's government is investing \$2.3 billion over the next three years to modernize, replace, and plan new and existing spaces so growing communities have the space they need. We're advancing 58 projects; 33 are in design and construction, and of these 33, 10 are new schools, 16 are replacement schools, and seven are modernizations. Those are put forward by school authorities, as I said earlier. This will create 25,000 school student spaces.

The \$4 million that is being allocated to support planning activities such as the site analysis and scope will add an additional 14 projects. Again, very transparent, very open: they know where they are in the pipeline. One million dollars will support 11 conceptual projects that are anticipated to become high-priority projects, again indicating that they are a priority not only for the communities but for government to move forward.

You mentioned the francophone community. I'm glad you mentioned that because I just want to give you some information on that. From 2019, during our government's time these last four years, we've actually allocated nine new schools for the francophone community, four in this budget alone – nine new school projects, four in this budget alone – yet in the last decade there were only 24 allocated. So you can see that the highest proportion of francophone commitment to investment in infrastructure has been under our government.

You've talked about transportation, and transportation is key. It's integral to getting our students to and from school. We know that more than 300,000 students access transportation services every day out of the over 730,000 students enrolled. We have a good transportation system that moves students safely to and from schools each and every day, and we know it can be even better.

When I was a school board trustee, one of the greatest frustrations of school board trustees was transportation. It's always been a challenge, and that's why, as a new minister in 2019, I put together the Student Transportation Task Force to really do an in-depth dive into: how can we fix some of the things that are not working as well as they should in transportation? The recommendations that were put forth by the Student Transportation Task Force as well as the subsequent audit that was done of 12 school authorities just recently were used to formulate the budget and change the transportation model. I believe the recommendations that were put forth and the action we've taken will provide foundational change across Alberta's transportation system for years to come. In fact, I would dare say that this is the most significant change to the transportation model that has happened in decades.

I want to include some facts for your information. School buses in Alberta travel an estimated 450,000 kilometres each and every day. In 2021-22 provincial investment in kindergarten to grade 12 transportation was more than \$1.6 million per school day, and in Budget 2023 we are increasing that by 32 per cent. "What is an average ride time?" you asked. That varies from area to area, depending on how far the homes are located, particularly in rural. That can be quite far in some locations. The additional funding that we're providing will support, we believe, up to 100 additional bus routes, which are expected to reduce rural ride times by about 9 per cent overall.



I think there are many good things that are coming. There's going to be a lot more detail that is coming forward as we put forward the funding manual in the near future, where it really kind of breaks down – you know, some of the things that are changing: we heard very loudly from parents that they didn't feel it was appropriate for a little grade 1 child to have to walk 2.4 kilometres to get to school. And not only 2.4 kilometres: the way we measured it was as the crow flies, so maybe they had to go through a ravine or across a busy street. Now we are actually lowering that to one kilometre so that students – and we're measuring that by actual drive time, not as the crow flies.

I think many of these recommendations that we heard from the Student Transportation Task Force, from parents, from community leaders, from administrators: these are all – and trustees. Everyone . . .

**The Chair:** Thank you so much, Minister.

We'll take our five-minute break now.

[The committee adjourned from 10:36 a.m. to 10:42 a.m.]

**The Chair:** All right. We're going to resume with the Official Opposition, please.

**Ms Hoffman:** Thanks very much. Through you, Madam Chair, are we doing block timing still, or is the minister . . .

**The Chair:** Minister, the member is asking if there's block or back and forth.

**Member LaGrange:** Block, please.

**The Chair:** Proceed, please.

**Ms Hoffman:** Okay. Page 72 of the estimates is where I'm going to start, specifically as it relates to school facilities. In this year, over what we as members of the Assembly agreed to budget and what's actually being forecast to be spent, the government of Alberta underspent on school facilities by 25 per cent. That is a significant lack of follow-through on what was asked for and what we committed as members of the Assembly to actually fund.

I'm going to gather, based on some of the things that we know through the news and through things that have been reported back to us, that the significant reason for underbuilding on the capital plan is because of the government's original announcements around P3s. I understand that the minister softened that in the fall but that schools are still waiting to find out, school divisions are still waiting to find out which projects are going to be forced through a P3 model and which ones are actually going to be a traditional procurement. So of the five actual new funded projects in the 2023 budget, would the minister please go through those five projects and let us know which ones are actually going to be through traditional procurement? Clearly, there's a problem with getting the capital out the door when it comes to P3 construction.

I'm going to continue on with a few of the other school divisions that I haven't had a chance to highlight yet in terms of their needs assessment. I do want to recognize that Spruce Grove and Stony Plain, I think, have every reason to be disappointed by this budget and a lack of follow-through and commitment to actually build much-needed school infrastructure in those communities, and so should Red Deer. Indeed, Red Deer has identified a number of areas of need. They're anticipating a growth of about 4 per cent per year for the next five years. Red Deer Catholic and Red Deer public both are in need of schools, and they didn't provide any funding, any actual funding, to build a single school in Red Deer in the current budget, so incredibly disappointing there as well.

Specific projects. There's a need for a new K to 5 French immersion school that Red Deer Catholic is seeking to run a program for. Currently it's a K to 9 school that offers that French immersion programming, and it is full, full, full. We want to talk about honouring parental choice. I would say that the ability to make a choice to attend a public, Catholic, or francophone school and be able to offer the kind of programming that's already available and be able to get into it should be a choice that government is committed to. The fact that French immersion programming in Red Deer isn't being funded in this budget I think is an incredible loss for students, staff, and families wanting to be part of French immersion Catholic programming. Not a single school.

There is a need for four new schools and five modernizations in Red Deer, and many of those schools are already at 100 per cent utilization. I just want to articulate a little bit – when the minister says, "Well, 85 per cent utilization," if you picture a school, every single square foot is considered instructional space when it comes to the utilization formula. The hallways, the boot room, the stage: all of that is considered instructional space. Of course, a good school will also have a library, and that library shouldn't be used for instruction 24 hours a day. Hopefully, we aren't offering classes in the library. Hopefully, we have enough classrooms that students can come there for enrichment and other opportunities.

To be at 100 per cent capacity, which many of these schools in Red Deer already are at, means that they are using every single space in that school for instructional space or that they are certainly overcrowded in the classrooms if they're not using the boot room as a classroom space. It means that they're over 100 per cent capacity in terms of the classroom space. It's, I think, a big loss for the folks of Red Deer that they were shut out of any actual capital funding in the current year's budget, that we're considering here today.

I also have to say that not a single school will be built or replaced or modernized in St. Albert thanks to the 2023 budget, not even a plan or a preplan to do so, which, again, is so incredibly short-sighted. This is, of course, despite the imminent need for a new public K to 9 school in the northwest part of their city, that is growing incredibly quickly, to alleviate pressures on overcrowded schools in other parts of the division. We need to be building out on the Riverside site, and the government instead chose to ignore St. Albert fully through their ask.

Legal is another community. The minister talks about: well, some schools aren't at capacity. That is true, just like some government buildings weren't at capacity. For example, the Federal Building wasn't used for many, many years, and then the government of Alberta invested in it and, in turn, decided to demolish the building next door that some of us had offices in.

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

We'll go to the minister now for response.

**Member LaGrange:** Well, thank you again. As I said earlier, happy to chat about capital any day of the week. Our record, I can say, is much better than the previous government's record, when we are in fact announcing and building 106 over the four years to their 47. So happy to continue to have the discussion on this.

I have to say that the first item that was talked about was the infrastructure, page 72, estimate, and I want to explain those numbers. The \$761.2 million is made up of \$542.8 million, which represents school capital expenditures funded by Alberta Infrastructure for in-flight and new school projects; \$114.9 million represents capital and maintenance renewal budget and capital for charters and collegiate schools; \$100 million represents the school

boards' budgets for school capital expenditures for long-term assets; and \$3.5 million for new capital facilities planning. The \$18.5 million increase is attributed to \$46.3 million for charter and collegiate acquisitions and retrofits and collegiate capital; \$17.7 million for school capital expenditures funded by Alberta Infrastructure, in-flight and new school projects; \$3.5 million for school project planning funding, and this is off-set by decreases of \$32.4 million in school capital maintenance and renewal; \$16.5 million for capital funding and planning for charter schools; and \$100 million for projected capital expenditures for long-term assets. All to say that all the dollars that we put out there do go out to the school authorities and to the proper places, and we ensure that school authorities are able to utilize those dollars.

Now, that being said, there have been some delays in school builds and supply chain issues which have impacted the number of schools that are able to move forward in as timely a fashion as we would like to see it.

**10:50**

On P3s the Minister of Infrastructure is probably the better person to have that conversation with because, of course, it's Infrastructure that looks at that.

I'm happy to say that we have prioritized the Red Deer area during my time as Minister of Education. They have put forward their asks. They always do put forward their top asks, and they have been – the St. Lorenzo Ruiz middle school, which is almost complete. I'm happy to announce that it will be opening in September 2023. The Hunting Hills modernization – and that's a major modernization – is adding over 200 spaces to that school and fixing a long-term problem with the roof, that, in fact, has been problematic.

In the new announcements we have a new design build for Blackfalds, because we know that school has grown exponentially. That will actually alleviate space in Red Deer. Those students right now are being bused into Red Deer. Also, for Red Deer public there was an announcement on a new northeast middle school. I look forward to seeing those schools move further along.

We also know that the member opposite was incorrect, as she stated that when you look at capacity, we are actually only looking at instructional area. Classrooms and breakout rooms, libraries and gyms are counted, but we do not count hallways. No, we don't. So it again shows the lack of understanding by the member opposite in terms of what constitutes capital. This was changed in 2014. If the member opposite would like to go back in her records and find out when that was changed, that was in 2014.

When we talk about the French programs, I am happy to share all that we're doing for francophone funding and for the improvement of French programming across this province. We have obviously updated the new curriculum, that the francophone community and the French immersion teachers have been piloting. I can share that in the science and the two French first language and the French immersion programs that have been piloted this year, we've had over 1,000 teachers piloting and over 20,000 students taking part. I'm just hearing great things, and I can't wait to share the time frame as to when they will be coming into the classroom.

**The Chair:** Thank you so much.

Now we'll head over to the government caucus side.

**Mr. Turton:** Yes. Thank you very much, Madam Chair. I just have a couple of other points and questions I would just like to put forth, and then I'll hand it over to one of my colleagues here to kind of finish off this slot.

Minister, you talked quite a bit about your vision in terms of building capital projects. I know you just finished saying how much you enjoy talking about capital. I'll just use an example of a school that was built in my area, Prescott school. I know this morning, especially, it's very prevalent about – you know, you hear stories about when we were in government, when we were not government, and kind of competing visions moving forward. I know this ties in to item 5.1, about the capital portion in terms of the capital projects in your department.

To use Prescott school as an example, when that was built under the previous government, I have to say that I was there in my capacity as deputy mayor at the time. They had the MLA from the opposition from the former government there as well. The thing that actually surprised me the most and surprised parents and school trustees is that there wasn't even a playground attached to that school. You know, at the time, because we're kind of in our own microcosm of the province, you don't realize how prevalent this is. But I know at that time, after getting into this position and having a wider spread view, just in terms of how many schools were built during that era without playgrounds – I know the hon. member across on the other side talks about libraries being used as classrooms and maybe not the full educational experience given to our children, but I was living first-hand in a community where schools were built without playgrounds. Elementary schools. Kids were having to play, like, literally on a rock in the backyard and not for one year, not for two years, and not for three years but for the entire previous term. I am actually quite thankful that playgrounds are now included in the initial construction of new schools.

I guess, Minister, I was hoping – when we talk about how you're approaching the design process, how you're approaching the capital portion, I mean, what is the importance of an actual playground, about providing that holistic educational experience to our kids so we're not having seven-year-olds having to play on just asphalt or the grass and we can kind of give them that wholesome experience of just being able to play on playground equipment? I do know that new schools that are being built now do have playgrounds, which is vitally important.

So that was the one question that I just wanted to finish up, and I'll turn it over to my good colleague MLA Jackie Armstrong-Homeniuk for the rest of this time.

Thank you.

**Ms Armstrong-Homeniuk:** Thank you, MLA Turton, through the chair. When you talk about playgrounds, I would like to thank the minister here for providing funding for the Mennonite school in Two Hills and the playground. They were without a playground for I think it was six or seven years from when the school was built, so I would like to thank the minister.

Also, I'd like to thank you for inviting me out to your announcement when you provided extra funding for CALS, which is the Community Association for Lasting Success, and the snack program locally. They provide snacks to all the schools in my town of Vegreville. They've been around for years, and they are a great part of the community.

As you know, Alberta has welcomed an influx of Ukrainian evacuees over the last year due to the horrific Russian attack – war, actually – on Ukraine, and that was February 24, 2022, when this happened. I remember that day quite well. I couldn't believe it was happening. I was actually physically ill when I saw the first attacks on Ukraine.

I go back to thinking about my relative that I'm descended from, Ivan Pylypow. He was one of the first Ukrainian settlers to Canada. He came over here with Wasyl Eleniuk and wanted to stay and bring Ukrainians here and live here and make it a home. When he came

over here, he stayed with John Krebs, who was a friend of his out in Austria. He was farming near him and worked on his sawmill only to return to Ukraine to bring his wife, Maria, and their children and Ukrainians back with him. In doing so, the government decided that they didn't want to lose their population, so they incarcerated him. They kept him in jail for two years, and he was unable to bring Ukrainians to Canada. I cannot believe 130 years later that I'm doing a similar thing. That's quite amazing to me.

My grandmother . . .

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

We'll go to the minister now for five minutes of response.

**Member LaGrange:** Thank you, and thank you to both MLAs for these great questions. It was very important to me when we are looking at new builds, in particular. But also, when I became minister, I had an opportunity to look at all of the schools that had been previously built without playgrounds. MLA Turton, you're absolutely right; it was disturbing to me that we would actually build a K to 6 or a K to 9 school with no playground when, you know, we wouldn't build a school without a gymnasium, yet the playground is the outdoor gymnasium. It was very important that as quickly as possible we included that into the capital infrastructure. No school in Alberta now that is a K to 6 or K to 9 is built without a gymnasium. You are right; there were a number of schools that previously had been bypassed.

I have to, you know, admit – like, most people don't know that a basic good-quality outdoor playground starts at about \$250,000. So for small communities that perhaps have socioeconomic challenges, they cannot fund raise enough to build that school even with – there are grants available on occasion, but even those grants are matchable grants, and it involves the parents fund raising, and some communities, due to their religious beliefs, do not believe in fundraising. Therefore, you know, they were additionally disadvantaged in not having a playground. So I'm really pleased that we don't have to wait all those years.

As MLA Armstrong-Homeniuk had mentioned, there were schools – I was appalled that there were schools that were waiting six, seven years for an outdoor playground. That is just not acceptable. So we've made meaningful changes that will affect generations, and I'm happy to say that the rest of the community is also able to enjoy those playgrounds, because it's not just for the school; it's for the whole community. I know school authorities work closely with municipalities as well to ensure that those playgrounds continue to be maintained and looked after.

**11:00**

I know MLA Armstrong-Homeniuk's heart in regard to the Ukrainian evacuees and displaced people. I've seen it. I know how tirelessly she has been working. This is a passion for her. And it is a travesty that there are so many individuals that are coming from such war-torn areas. We know that in our schools alone, prior to the end of the last school year, we saw approximately 800 students in our schools. By October of this year that number had grown to 2,500 students.

We've already put out funding of \$12.5 million, roughly an additional \$5,000 per student, for those students because we know they're coming with challenges. We know that what they have seen and what they have experienced is very traumatic. Many have to improve on their language skills and have English as an additional language, so we're making sure that school authorities have the dollars that they need to provide that additional support.

I know that when I made the announcement on the original funding – and we also have a second intake, where we'll do an

additional count, and that will happen at the end of March here. Right now we're sitting at close to 3,500 students, so there will be at least an additional \$5 million going to school authorities to make sure that they have the supports that they need. The vast majority of those students are in our metro areas, so it's important that they have those dollars.

But what I was going to say was that when I made the announcement, the principal of the school that I was in came over to me and said that they had a little grade 1 student there whose father had been killed the week before in the war. He talked about the trauma that that family was experiencing and how devastating it was. Even as a school community, to wrap their arms around this little child, you know, I was just so heart warmed. I felt such heart warmth for the community, for the teachers. You could just see the love that was surrounding this child and their whole family, and that's what we have in our schools. We are able to wrap the whole community in love.

**The Chair:** Thank you so much, Minister.

Now back to the Official Opposition.

**Ms Hoffman:** Just to take a short trip down memory lane, the change to actually fund the construction of a playground in an elementary school when it was being built was something that was put in place under Rachel Notley's leadership when I was a trustee and we were advocating for playgrounds to be included. Jeff Johnson and prior Conservative cabinet ministers made it very clear that that wasn't an option.

New schools getting a playground is vitally important. There is nothing in this budget for replacement of existing playgrounds in mature-area schools, and there are many mature-area schools, I imagine, in our ridings, all of our ridings, that either have a playground that's exhausted its life cycle or a school that is – there are schools that I represent that don't have playgrounds at all and that are 50 years old. So that definitely would be an area for the government to put further consideration and focus into.

I'm going to go back to generally the capital plans. Let's look at St. Albert public schools. Again, St. Albert was shut out of the capital plan, not even a promise to make a promise around the preplanning money. Let's talk about what their needs assessment is.

Number one is a new high school. They absolutely need a new high school on the north side of town. Bellerose, one of the two existing public high schools in St. Albert, needs an addition and a modernization. It needs about 16 new classrooms to accommodate the growth that they are seeing, and it is about time that the portables there were removed. So that should be a high priority for any government and for anyone who wants to represent the people of St. Albert. As well, there is a need for new student spaces. A K to 9 school in the northwest: much needed within the next five years.

Nickerson needs a modernization. Wild Rose needs a modernization. Elmer S. Gish needs a modernization and permanent space to replace the – get this – 20 portables that they have on-site. That is completely unacceptable. And Muriel Martin school, an elementary school, needs a modernization and additional permanent space, again, replacing 20 existing modulars. They need a second, new kindergarten to grade 9 additional space, and they've got a site that's ready to go for that. Rundle, which I think is called Hillgrove now, needs a modernization as well. And even though they have all of those old modulars, they are going to need some new modulars available for the city of St. Albert, again a community that is growing very rapidly. I imagine many people who work in Alberta Education commute in from St. Albert and know just how

desperately needed school space is – comfortable, modern, appropriate school space – for students in St. Albert.

St. Albert Catholic: also shut out of the capital plan. Their number one project is just north, actually, in Legal, and this is a community that currently has a school that is beyond its life cycle and is too big for the community. They need a K to 9 school for about 200 students to make sure that that community can stay vibrant and that kids don't need to be bused down the highway to a neighbouring community. It's already currently way underused, and if they had a building that was the right size, it could be a great community asset for years to come. So St. Albert certainly has every reason to be disappointed in what the UCP has brought forward in what is their campaign budget given that they're shut out.

I'm going to touch base on a few others that I haven't yet. Elk Island Catholic schools: their number one project is something that is overdue as well. I think that people had hoped that that would have been funded, and that's, actually, the design for a new Camrose high school. I know, through you, Madam Chair, that you have had an opportunity to tour the existing building. They even reference it in their submission with the Minister of Education and that they were hopeful that they would receive some kind of commitment and funding to address the significant needs that they have there. That's certainly a large division, and that is far from Sherwood Park, but they also have needs in those areas as well.

If we look at Elk Island public, they had one funded project, something that the NDP had already committed to, the Sherwood Heights and l'école Campbelltown consolidation replacement school there, the only funded project in the current government's budget. But they still have a need for a replacement in Fort Saskatchewan. Fort Saskatchewan certainly deserves an appropriate junior high to be able to house the significant number of students who are there and need a quality building as well as a replacement for an elementary on the West Park site and a major modernization that is also needed for Win Ferguson elementary. Salisbury comp also needs a major modernization.

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

We'll go now to the minister for response.

**Member LaGrange:** Thank you. I just have to correct a great deal of misinformation that the member opposite is putting forward. First, while in previous governments there was a \$25 million one-off to provide playgrounds, that was a one-off. It was application based. There were certain criteria to it. But it wasn't embedded into the actual capital infrastructure where every school that is a K to 5 or a K to 9 will absolutely get a playground built with it. This was to address a number of other things. So, in fact, that was one piece of misinformation.

A second piece of misinformation is St. Albert. Actually, the Paul Kane school opened this fall.

**Ms Hoffman:** That was the last budget.

**Member LaGrange:** Well, it opened. It's a school that opened, and the member opposite is trying to allude to the fact that St. Albert did not receive any new schools. Bellerose school was also approved in 2019. It is now going ahead, is moving forward. So, again, misinformation, and I don't think it's valuable to put misinformation out there.

I want to be very clear that under the modular program that I put forward in 2020 or 2021 – I've done five of these budgets, so I'm losing track of time – it was the most significant investment in modulars that has existed in this province. Typically we allocate

roughly about \$25 million to modulars. That year I allocated \$89 million to modulars, and what that was able to do was create 140 new spaces and replace 41 old, tired out modulars. That created many, many new, additional spaces right across this province, 3,500 that year. The previous year it was 425. The year before that it was 1,550. Right now we have allocated over \$42 million for modulars in this upcoming year.

**11:10**

Just to give you an example of what that can do within a school authority, the Calgary Catholic school authority, actually, during our time as government received 203 new modulars. So that's 203 new classrooms. Edmonton Catholic received 69 new modulars, and Edmonton public received over a hundred new modulars during our time, over the last four years. CBE does not really look at a modular program. They're more invested in new infrastructure, so they did only receive four modulars, but those were the four they asked for.

We've been very responsive to the school authorities right across this province as they ask for new infrastructure, particularly modulars. Modulars are used when you've got a growing community but you don't need a whole new school. Maybe you just need one or two classrooms to keep to keep things growing and moving.

The budget allocation for this year's modular program is \$42.7 million, \$25 million to accommodate 120 modular requests from jurisdictions. Again, school authorities themselves are the ones that are asking for these modulars, and they will also be the ones that are indicating what are the highest needs for their jurisdiction; \$17.7 million will be funding to complete work on modular classroom projects announced in 2021 that were impacted by supply chain and manufacturing delays. So this year's program of 120 units will fund the construction of all of these new areas, that also include two washroom units. When you look at the washroom units, you think: well, why is that different from a regular modular? The piping and all of the extra infrastructure that goes into that creates an additional cost and complexity to that modular, so it's important that those are added, particularly in schools where you're adding on space. You know, with perhaps a high school, you need an extra washroom to make sure that the students have the facilities they need.

We're also allocating dollars to demolish old units, because we have a number of old units out there. What that will do is actually improve on the operations and maintenance of a school authority in that they are not having to keep warm and heat and keep electricity going to some of these older units. So, again, the importance of having a good . . .

**The Chair:** Thank you so much, Minister.

We're going to head back over to the UCP side. Please proceed.

**Ms Armstrong-Homeniuk:** Thank you, Chair. Through you to the minister, again, Minister, I want to thank you for the playground – I'm going to go back to playgrounds – that you saw the need for at the Two Hills Mennonite school, which the previous government didn't see the need for. Also, I want to thank you for fixing the moat around the school. Under the previous government they didn't see the need for it, and I know the school board had lobbied the previous government for four years and gotten nowhere.

I want to go back to Ukraine here, actually. I want to just give a quick shout-out to some teachers that have been critical in helping the Ukrainian students who have come to the A.L. Horton school in Vegreville and all the schools in Vegreville. That would be Larissa Bombak and Svetlana Fedoruk. Without them, it would almost be

impossible for these children to succeed. They have been amazing, amazing mentors and amazing teachers for these students.

The other thing I wanted to put out there for you, Minister, is that I know that supporting Alberta's most vulnerable students is a priority for our government and that funding was allocated to school authorities to help support the evacuees and families integrating into Alberta schools. As you know, Minister, I'm the parliamentary secretary for Ukrainian refugee settlement here in Alberta, and I'm very passionate and, obviously, very proud to be that parliamentary secretary.

Minister, on page 67 of the fiscal plan – I was wondering if you could expand a little bit more on this – it states that \$1.5 billion will be provided in 2023-24 to support our most vulnerable students and children with specialized learning needs and groups of students who may require extra assistance. Will this funding help support Ukrainian students who are choosing to call Alberta home? What other funding is available to give school authorities the resources they need to support Ukrainian students? I can't say good enough words about the bilingual program that is in my community. My children took it, and it is excellent, and it will help the integration of the Ukrainian students into the community.

I just wanted to also mention, Minister, that when my relatives came to Canada here, particularly to work with John Krebs, I would not know until – it was about 1994. I was sitting in a doctor's office, and I started talking to the woman next to me, and it happened to be John Krebs' granddaughter or great-granddaughter, actually. She and I have been friends since 1994, so it's funny how the history continues on the way down.

Another question I have for you, Minister, is that over the past few days I have heard the members across the table say that our government plans to spend more money on private and charter school construction than public, Catholic, and francophone combined. I have also read various comments regarding charter schools and private schools, and there seems to be a lot of confusion around what these schools offer for programs of choice, who attends them, and their funding allocation. The members across the table clearly do not understand funding allocations for schools, including public, separate, Catholic, francophone, independent, and charter schools.

Minister, on page 106 of the capital plan it discusses charter and collegiate schools and the government's financial commitment. Minister, can you please explain what types of programs of choice are available, how many independent schools, charter, and collegiate there are in Alberta, and what the difference is between them? Why does our government support charter schools and independent schools? What is the percentage of our overall operational budget that goes to each?

In my particular riding – I just wanted to also put out there that just recently a memorial has been set up for the students that were killed in the Chipman school bus accident. I believe it was in the early '60s. There are two memorials set up, and if anyone ever is in Chipman or in Lamont . . .

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

We'll go to the minister for a response.

**Member LaGrange:** Thank you for those great questions. Yes, I remember very vividly when I became the Minister of Education and you advocated for those safety hazards that were at that particular school, not only the moat, which was just basically left over from construction – it was kind of a ravine that kept filling in with water. There was also a wheelchair ramp that had no rails on it and such a huge drop-off – I believe it was over six feet – and we had to look at that. I was glad that I was able to get Alberta

Infrastructure to look at that and make sure that that was repaired and fixed in a community that was very deserving.

When we talk about the Ukrainian students, the displaced students, and their families, I also have been working – in my local community we have an organization, as you well know, that has been very active, has brought over hundreds of families already and just continues to do amazing work and just so many people that are passionate and wanting to do what they can do to help, whether it's, you know, food or household items or, actually, like my brother-in-law who's providing a place for a family to stay in his home. Everyone is willing to step up and do what they can, so I'm really, really pleased about that.

**11:20**

As I've already indicated, the numbers that we have in our school authorities – and we are funding them on a per-student basis to school authorities. I know that 75 per cent of the Ukrainian students are enrolled in our four metro schools: Edmonton Catholic, Edmonton public, Calgary board of education, and Calgary Catholic school district. As I said, they are wrapping around those students and their families with lots of love and supports, helping wherever they can and continuing – and they've had so many fundraisers, too. I keep hearing of new and innovative fundraisers that are put out there. Ukrainian students are eligible for funding under all of the funding framework grants, including the learning support funding.

With the unexpected increase in class sizes, we're providing \$820 million over three years to welcome more and more students, and I know we will be getting more and more students. We also are providing \$126 million over three years, \$42 million each year, in targeted funding to help school authorities support the diverse needs of students and address classroom complexity with more support staff and with better prepared support staff managing the individual classroom. Again, that is the one area that I'm hearing more and more, that classroom complexity is something that we need to address. This is initial targeting of these dollars, but we'll have to do more as we move further along.

Learning support funding grants support specialized learning needs of groups of students who may require additional supports for school authorities. This includes the specialized learning support grant, that's going up by 10 per cent; the program unit funding, 10 per cent additional increase; moderate language delay grant, 10 per cent increase; English as an additional language and francization is an additional 10 per cent grant increase; 10 per cent grant increase to the refugee student grant; First Nations, Métis, and Inuit student grant increase of 10 per cent; socioeconomic status grant increase of 10 per cent; geographic grant and nutrition grant all increasing by 10 per cent. The Ukrainian students are also supported by the new classroom complexity grant.

You've touched on choice, and I was really proud to be and am still very proud to be the Minister of Education who brought forward the choice in education act, because, again, it's parents who have the right to choose the type of education they want for their children. Historically, you know, we're leading the nation in choice in education. We have public, we have Catholic, we have francophone, we have charter schools, public charter schools, we have independent schools, and we have home education. It has been a long and successful path that has led us there.

You've asked about the number of schools that we have. Well, we have roughly about – I think it is nearing 2,600 schools in the province. Only 19 schools are public charter schools. Only 164 are independent schools. I want to remind everyone that independent schools get zero dollars for infrastructure.

The collegiate schools are new. That is something new that we're bringing forward. I can share that they have been RFPed, and there will be the first collegiate opening in Edmonton, we anticipate, here in September.

**The Chair:** Thank you so much, Minister.

We'll go back to the NDP for their questions.

**Ms Hoffman:** Thanks. This leads itself really well into the fiscal plan, specifically the capital plan, page 114. I know that there have been some questions asked questioning my credibility. Let's just go through the numbers. Last year the Assembly, all of us, passed a budget that included collegiates and charters getting \$27 million. However, the government overspent that by four times. They spent \$103 million as the forecast for what's going to happen in the current fiscal year's budget, so we're considering this this year. This year they're asking us for permission to give them \$85 million to spend on what they're calling collegiate and charter school expansion.

I can say that when I – again, previously when collegiates were part of the public, Catholic, or francophone systems, they were included under school capital projects. They weren't carved out as their own specific items. That clearly isn't a Catholic, public, or francophone school since it's been given its own line item. So \$85 million they're asking for permission for this year, and for school capital projects in the budget – that would be public, Catholic, and francophone – they're only asking for \$68 million. Again, if you have any questions, it's on page 114 of the government's fiscal plan, the capital plan as it relates to renewing educational infrastructure. This is specifically the minister's own budget document that shows that the minister or department or whichever department she wants to blame overspent by four times, giving money . . .

**The Chair:** Hon. member, please direct your conversation through the chair.

**Ms Hoffman:** Yes, Madam Chair.

It's page 114 of the fiscal plan, demonstrating that the minister overspent in those line items by fourfold what we approved as members of the Assembly to spend on collegiates and charters and is asking to spend more, \$85 million, this year in the budget that we're being asked to consider and approve and only \$68 million for school capital projects under the government's own capital plan. I just want to be very clear. When people call into question other people's credibility, I think it is important to say, "Where did you get that information?" rather than casting aspersions. That's specifically the page, and it would be great to have some responses, through you, Madam Chair, from the minister on exactly what attributed to that significant overspend from what we approved and why it is that the minister is asking for more money for what she's calling collegiate and charter school expansion than she is for school capital projects under renewing educational infrastructure in the budget that we are being asked to consider.

The other thing I just wanted to rearticulate is that we are being asked to consider this year's budget and plans, promises for out-years. So when I am asking questions about, "Why was St. Albert shut out of this budget?" and I get answers of, "That's not true; three years ago we actually funded something that the NDP started us on the path to funding," it doesn't help us understand what the government is actually asking for today. Today they are not asking for any capital for St. Albert. They're not asking for actual construction dollars for Spruce Grove-Stony Plain or Fort Saskatchewan or Vegreville. They are not asking for the high school that's very much needed in Camrose.

Talking about the budget that we are being asked to consider – you know, the current government has a mandate for two more months. This is what they are asking for approval for, the current fiscal year, the upcoming fiscal year, which begins in a month, and for us to give them approval to move forward on their plans, which again shut out many needed communities, including capital space in Edmonton and Calgary in particular, Edmonton getting only one new construction project funded. That's a public school. Nothing for Edmonton Catholic, and only one new Catholic school being funded for construction in Calgary, and no new schools being funded for Calgary public. This is what we are being asked to approve.

If the minister wants to respond throughout the campaign, through you, Madam Chair, by saying, "Well, we did things in the other years," so be it. But we're here to consider this budget and to debate it and to make an informed decision about whether or not we support this budget, whether we want to be moving forward on implementing it or not. So talking about what's funded this year and what the plans are for the out-years is what my questions have all been related to. Again, it's page 114 of the capital plan, that I think we all deserve some answers for on what specifically happened with the line items between what we actually budgeted and what the minister spends on spending in the year that we are about to complete and then why it is that she's asking us to give permission to spend more money on collegiate and charter schools. It's safe to interpret that collegiate – she's not implying public, Catholic, or francophone because that would be under school capital projects, like it has been in every other year, including when there were partnerships that were funded through those divisions.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

**The Chair:** Thank you, hon. member.

To the minister now for response.

**Member LaGrange:** Sure. Again the member opposite is factually incorrect when, in fact, what she is referring to is allocations towards a charter hub. Now, a charter hub is something that, because of the fact that we have 22,000 students on a wait-list, because of the fact that we have made no significant investment in charter schools whatsoever – they tend to get the public school hand-me-downs, and oftentimes those are old, tired buildings. In fact, charter schools have only received one project in the last 15 years.

So when you look at the fact that charter schools, with a wait-list of over 20,000 students, currently have approximately 10,000 students and no significant investment over a number of years, the charter hub model was put forward as a – also, the fact that there are not enough spaces in Calgary and Edmonton that would accommodate a school. What was put forward was an idea to create a charter hub. A charter hub would be an area, much like public schools where we have shared facilities, where there are a number of schools that would come together and share the facilities, share the gymnasiums, share the library, share the lab space.

**11:30**

This is actually much more efficient than what we currently do with our charter schools, where we give them dollars to lease facilities, often from other school authorities, often, as I said, old, tired buildings that require a lot of operation and maintenance costs. So, again, the ability for charters to get into a space – let's see. The average age of school buildings occupied by charter schools is 61 years of age, with no charter schools being located in buildings constructed after 1975 in Edmonton and after 1972 in Calgary alone. This gives us the opportunity to put students into proper spaces.

When I look at charter students, they comprise 1.5 per cent of the student population, and they only get 1.5 per cent of the funding. The public system has 91.86 per cent of the student population, and they get 94.2 per cent of all the funding. Independent schools have 6.5 per cent of the student population, and they get 4.2 per cent of the funding. So the narrative that we are funding charter schools or independent schools more than any other public, francophone, or Catholic school is factually inaccurate, and I will say that any day of the week.

What, in fact, we are funding in this capital plan is \$2.2 billion over three years in capital infrastructure. This is a \$1.1 billion investment to continue on previously announced projects, \$372 million for 33 projects; \$300 million over three years to school authorities for self-directed capital projects; \$279 million to support the maintenance and renewal of existing school buildings, because we want to make sure that we look after the buildings we do have; \$45 million to support charter infrastructure included in requisition and retrofit; \$43 million to fund facility upgrades for successful collegiate school applicants; \$93 million for the modular program to address urgent space needs across the province; \$4 million to support planning activities such as the analysis and scope development for 14 projects; \$2 million to invest in information technology system development; and \$1 million for 11 projects for preplanning.

What I'm hearing from the member opposite is that she really wants to limit choice in this province.

**Ms Gray:** Point of order.

**The Chair:** Please, Minister, one moment. We've had a point of order.

**Ms Gray:** Thank you. Under 23(h), (i), and (j) the minister is making comments directly to the member as to her motivations and how she is thinking. Through these estimates the minister has continually tried to make attacks on the member of the opposition, and I think it is inappropriate and a point of order. And for the decorum of this meeting I'd request that she withdraw and cease.

**The Chair:** To be honest, Member, I didn't hear the comment myself, so I'm sorry; I won't be able to call a point of order on that.

**Ms Gray:** If you wouldn't mind providing a caution, that would be sufficient.

**The Chair:** I didn't hear the comment at all.  
Minister, if you could please proceed.

**Mr. Smith:** Madam Chair, if I could speak to the point of order.

**The Chair:** Sure. Go ahead.

**Mr. Smith:** What I did hear the minister saying was: what I am hearing from the hon. member; what I'm hearing from the individual. I don't believe that it was an attack on the individual themselves; she's trying to paraphrase what she is hearing from the individual. So I would not speak to this as a point of order.

**The Chair:** Okay. I don't find it to be a point of order, so if we could please proceed.

**Member LaGrange:** Sure. Really, what I was trying to say – and I'll clarify it – is that under our government we have supported choice and we continue to support choice. I know under the previous government that choice was something that they were not as strong on. I would say that when I became the Minister of

Education, I know that there were over 26 independent schools that felt threatened that their choice would be eliminated for their families. They were faith-based schools that felt under threat by the previous government. Choice is something we will always support. We look to fund it equitably across the province. Every child deserves to learn in a good, safe environment, and we want to make sure that in all these environments we're able to provide . . .

**The Chair:** Thank you so much, Minister.  
We'll go to the government side, please.

**Mr. Yaseen:** Thank you, Madam Chair. Can I ask for back and forth?

**The Chair:** Yes. That's what the minister agreed to. Please proceed, Member.

**Mr. Yaseen:** Minister, can I go back and forth with you?

**Member LaGrange:** Yes. We can go back and forth.

**Mr. Yaseen:** I can? Okay. Thank you.

Thank you very much, Minister. Thank you for the work that you do and the team that you brought in beside and behind you to support you in what you do. I will go back to a couple of comments that were made earlier here as well. Thank you also for the north Calgary high school and investment in a middle school in my riding. And thank you also for including on a go-forward basis the playgrounds, that are such an essential part of schools, in the new schools coming forward. I know that Kenneth D. Taylor school in my riding didn't have a playground, and we are able to work with the Ministry of Culture to make that happen.

Minister, as you are aware, there has been significant enrolment growth across the province and also in my own riding called Calgary-North. And as you know, Minister, Calgary-North is the most beautiful riding, after yours, in this province. I hear from parents who are concerned about the size of their child's class and from teachers about the growing complexities within the classrooms. It is my understanding that when teachers and parents refer to classroom complexities, it means either the number of children in a class has increased, or there are a number of children that require special support, or there are no educational assistants available.

I am so excited about this year's Education budget because it clearly addresses these concerns in a targeted, sustainable way. Securing children's future is essential.

Minister, on page 87 of the fiscal plan it states:

In Budget 2023, funding will be provided to address enrolment growth and strengthen choice in education so parents are able to select the path they feel will best help their children reach their full potential.

I see also on page 87 of the fiscal plan it shows that the funding for education will increase by nearly \$2 billion over the next three years. Will these dollars be used directly to support hiring teachers and staff? And how much discretion will school boards have in the allocation of this funding?

**The Chair:** We are going back and forth, so go ahead, Minister, if you're ready.

**Member LaGrange:** Sure. Happy to answer that, so thank you for that. So, yes, our increased investment in education ensures students in Alberta will continue to receive a world-class, high-quality education that enriches their lives and prepares them for success beyond school. Our investment addresses rising enrolment growth in schools, meets students' increasing diverse needs, and combats the affordability and inflation crises parents and school

authorities are facing. The foundations for a rewarding career begin early in life, and Alberta's education system is a critical starting point.

With this support, these additional dollars that we are giving, we anticipate that approximately 3,000 more staff will be able to be hired, whether that is teachers, educational assistants, bus drivers, or school support staff, over the next three years, and that is allowed through the flexibility to school authorities. They will have the flexibility. As I said earlier, 98 per cent of all the funding in education goes directly to the school authorities, and they make the decisions on who to hire, where to place those key supports within the classrooms.

In Budget 2023 it also includes additional targeted funding of \$126 million over the next three years to address classroom complexity by providing support for increased staffing such as more educational assistants in classrooms, increasing educational assistant hours, or more training opportunities – because sometimes you have good staff, but they need just that additional professional development to develop their capacity – or hiring more specialists such as counsellors, psychologists, interpreters, and more teachers.

Through Budget 2023 Alberta's government continues to show strong support of the education system we are funding. Again, I share with you that, you know, when I started as minister, it was \$8.223 billion. Now it is \$8.8 billion, and next year it will be over \$9 billion. Our goal is to drive as many dollars as possible to the classroom and away from administrative costs. Over 98 per cent of my operating budget, as I said, goes directly to school boards to deliver the services to students. We give school boards maximum flexibility in how they manage the resources as they know what is best for their own students in their communities.

**11:40**

Our commitment is to stable and predictable education funding, which is why we introduced the new K to 12 funding model in 2020. School boards have asked for predictability in funding systems, and we have delivered. As I said, I was a school board trustee, and I remember every single year saying: when are we going to have that sustainable, predictable funding? Now they know. Very shortly every single school division across this province, every single school authority, will get their funding profile, and with that funding profile they will be able to see what the dollars are for the whole year. They'll be able to do that preplanning. They'll be able to hire now for September 2023.

We know that school boards are in need. Whenever the school boards have been in need, we've been able to help them, and I've got a long list that I can go through that shows that we've been able to help them over the years.

I also want to highlight the fact that, you know, the school board reserves are healthy. They've grown to over \$400 million just in operating reserves. If we add capital reserves, we're closer to three-quarters of a billion dollars in school board reserves.

Some of the things that we've been able to step up when there was a need over this past year have been: the fuel price contingency fund, which allocates about \$20 million a year; displaced Ukrainian student funding, as I said initially with \$12.5 million, and I anticipate an additional \$5 million going towards that; learning loss disruption funding of \$45 million in the last year – oh, and I should mention that there's \$20 million occurring this year again in the learning loss disruption – the mental health and well-being funds of over \$110 million over three years; mental health pilots, \$50 million over two years to implement 80 projects; low-incidence funding, that additional funding for the visually and hearing impaired; the teachers' settlement funding where we fully are funding that teachers' settlement contract; increase to nutrition; adding the code 48s for the

mild-moderate. We've actually backstopped on some insurance where there are a few school authorities that are unable to get insurance, so we've been able to provide that backstop. We've increased the francophone equivalency funding; we've had the curriculum implementation funding, that's an additional \$211 million over three years, \$47 million of which are in the upcoming year. I could go on and on and on.

I'll turn it back to you, MLA Yaseen, to ask further questions.

**Mr. Yaseen:** Thank you, Minister, for that detailed answer.

Alberta is a diverse province with multilingual, multicultural citizens. I myself am from Pakistan, and currently I am the parliamentary secretary for community outreach. Alberta is a beautifully diverse province. It is a province where people from around the world can come to build a prosperous life with our booming economy and welcoming reputation.

As parliamentary secretary for community outreach I am asked often about language programs in schools. In the business plan on page 35 it states that the Ministry of Education "collaborates with education partners to improve education outcomes." I like collaboration, Minister. I'm wondering, in addition to the partners listed, if the Ministry of Education works with other cultural groups. Newcomers to Canada who are settling in Alberta are an essential part of our growing communities. How does your ministry and Budget 2023-24 support newcomer students, especially regarding access to language mentorship for those students learning English as an additional or a second language?

**Member LaGrange:** Thank you for the great question. I know we're really tight on time, but I'll just say that we're growing from \$1.4 billion to \$1.5 billion, \$84 million additional, in the area of student supports and services grants, which includes English as an additional language. We are blessed to have so many great newcomers that come to Alberta and want to really further their . . .

**The Chair:** Thank you so much, Minister.

Back over to the NDP side.

**Ms Hoffman:** Thank you very much, Madam Chair. Given that this appears to be the final block before we break for lunch and the daily Routine and then return this afternoon, I'll take this opportunity to rearticulate some of the questions that weren't able to be responded to this morning in hopes that when we kick off this afternoon, we can have that information available or at least a commitment to table it before we're asked to vote on the budget.

The response that was given around 2023 actuals for the current year and projections for the upcoming year was that that information would eventually be posted on the website. The website's most recent data is from 2021. That is definitely not sufficient for us to be able to make an informed decision on this before we're expected to vote on the budget. Again, the actuals for 2023. We're more than halfway through the school year. I think it's a very fair thing for us to have and what the projections are for the number of students for the next school year, the year that we're being asked to approve a budget for. I hope that the minister will return with that information this afternoon.

Which divisions are growing according to the projections that have informed this budget? Again, we're being asked to approve a budget that doesn't build enough schools, for example, in Spruce Grove-Stony Plain or Fort Saskatchewan-Vegreville or Edmonton or Calgary or Rocky View. I think it's important that we know which divisions – they all submitted their numbers in January, so which divisions are we expecting to see the most growth for according to the decisions that have informed this budget? That is



something that I think is important for all of us to be able to make an informed decision.

Also, there was a question around dual credit. Have there been any changes that have informed this budget that we're being asked to approve around how dual credit is provided and administered? How many credits will a typical graduate, according to the projections for this budget, take? How many courses will they complete when they're in high school? There are lots of stories coming back around it declining. I think it's important for us to know if that is accurate or not. So how many credits will a typical graduate funded under this budget be expected to take? Just for everyone who's drafting a response: I know you only need a hundred credits to graduate. I know that. But I know that when I was in high school and many others, lots of us did 130 credits or 140 credits. Part of the goal was to make sure that lots of people had opportunities to engage in career pathways and a variety of options. I know that Mr. Smith was a teacher as well and probably offered many additional courses.

Given the way that high school is being funded now, we are hearing over and over again that options are being limited because divisions aren't being provided funding when kids complete additional courses. I think it's important for us to know if we're going to actually achieve outcome 3.1 in the business plan, what we're doing to actually ensure that students have that opportunity to be on that career path. I think I just said the wrong one; it's actually key objective 1.2, strengthening career education programming. What are the projections that have informed this budget around high school credits, dual credits, and how is that informed, and how are we going to actually achieve those outcomes through this budget?

Those were the outstanding questions that I really hope that we can have some concrete discussion on as we move forward in consideration of this budget. I think all of us would like to feel well informed and like we have all the information and to be able to defend to communities and voters in our own ridings if things aren't in the budget, why that is and if things are, why that is.

Again, I've asked many questions. Why has St. Albert been kept out completely from this year's budget and the projected out-years? Why are there no new projects for St. Albert? Why has the project in Legal been ignored, a St. Albert Catholic project? Why have the Edmonton public and Catholic combined only received one new school in this year's budget that's actually funded? Why is it that Calgary is only getting one new school actually funded? These are the questions that I think need to be answered for all of us to be able to have thoughtful consideration as we are asked to vote yes or no on this budget. Also, as Albertans are asked to vote yes or no on a second term under the current government, it's important for them to know what the vision is, actually, for the government when it comes to building and maintaining critical infrastructure, school infrastructure being a big part of that.

In the last 45 seconds I just want to rearticulate that there were 240 capital projects committed to by the former government. I know that other numbers have been thrown out there. But that is a fact. That is well documented. Casting aspersions about prior governments' records I don't think is helpful when we're considering this budget and budgets moving forward. I've done a careful job of trying to stay focused on this budget and the targets that are outlined in the budget moving forward, and I hope this afternoon we can take some of the personal attacks down and stay focused on what we're being asked to approve as Members of the Legislative Assembly.

Those were the outstanding questions I had from this morning. Thank you.

11:50

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

**Member LaGrange:** Thank you. I would reiterate the fact that there are no personal attacks. It's all about what's on the record and what's actually factual, and what's factual is that we have announced and are in the works of completing 106 projects whereas the previous government actually announced 47. Now, I could add all the projects that they had previously announced; I didn't do that, which is what they're doing with that 200 number.

So let's be factual, and let's not, you know, when it comes to infrastructure and in operational funding, capital infrastructure, and capital funding and operational funding, use our children as political footballs. That's the one thing I hear from parents and from school authorities across this province. Let's really do what's necessary to make sure that our schools have the supports that they need.

The website contains the 2021 numbers because we have not finalized the 2022 numbers. There are a number of factors, as I have already indicated, as to why they haven't been finalized. They will be finalized; they will be posted.

You know, what is posted and what they were referring to in terms of projections in January of '20 – yes, we have the projections, but we also know that school boards are not necessarily always great at their projection numbers. I draw your attention back to those numbers that I had indicated earlier, that while school boards projected 730,000 students would be entering schools in 2020, only 705,000 students actually entered into the schools. In 2021 again a projection of close to 730,000 by school boards. I believe it was 728,000 they projected at that time when, in fact, only 716,000 school students entered into the school. So we want to make sure that we give accurate numbers, and they will be posted as soon as they're ready.

When we talk about high school, I want to, again, correct misinformation that is being put out there. Government has focused on targeted investments in funding the system rather than focusing on overall per-student allocations. The level of spending by a school board is not the key factor that drives better outcomes. The high school completion rate of students within five years of entering grade 10 shows an upward trend, and we are seeing that upward trend go from 83.8 per cent in the 2016-2017 school year to 87.1 per cent in the '20-21 school year. We anticipate and are targeting for 87.3 per cent, and we know that any time there's even a small percentage increase in those statistical numbers, that is a huge number overall.

Again, thanks to the tremendous work of the teachers that are out there, and this is all occurring – I want to remind people that this has all occurred even while the pandemic was going on, that we're seeing increased performance in our high school students as a result of the incredible work and the dedication of our teachers, that are committed to ensuring success for all students.

The other point that I would like to draw to your attention is the Career Education Task Force. I really didn't get a chance to talk about it much earlier, but I'm happy to do it now. The Career Education Task Force was led by MLA Shane Getson, and it comprised a number of business leaders as well as postsecondary leaders as well as teachers, administrators, trustees. We had everyone on that panel looking at: what have we done?

We've done some things extremely well, but they've been ad hoc over the last number of decades. When we look at dual credit, the apprenticeship programs, the RAP programs, high school credentialing, have we done it right? Is there an opportunity to do it better, and if we can do it better, how can we also have the integration and the connectivity between postsecondary? We know our students go on to postsecondary. As I said earlier, we anticipate that we're going to be short 30,000 tradespeople over the next decade. How will our students and the knowledge and the understanding that they get through their high school journey, and perhaps even through their junior high journey, through the CTS and through the CFS – how does that all factor into what will be further career choices for them? And how do we prepare them for careers that haven't even been created or invented yet?

**The Chair:** Thank you so much, Minister.

For the time remaining, we will go to the UCP side, but our time will run out before we get to the minister, and then we'll start off there this afternoon. Please proceed.

**Mr. Yaseen:** Thank you, Madam Chair. Minister, you were answering a question regarding access to language mentorship for those students learning English as an additional or second language. I'm not sure if your answer was complete or if you still want to go on that.

**Member LaGrange:** We have many programs that are embedded into the funding framework, but it's not just about funding; it's making sure that their culture stays alive, that they're able to feel included within the school system. Many of these celebrations that school authorities have – I even look at the advancements that we're making in the curriculum, in the curriculum design, particularly in social studies, where they'll be able to see themselves in the new curriculum, where they can celebrate their culture, their faith, their community, and really highlight who they are as people.

I know my parents emigrated in the '50s from Italy, and I know that they were always self-conscious about how they spoke English. They understood and spoke extremely well, yet at times they felt inadequate. I know our school authorities, our schools, work really, really hard to make sure that all the children are included, that they are valued, that they see value. It breaks my heart when I hear a parent talk to me – and I had a Hindu parent recently say that their daughter does not want to dress in typical dress, in their cultural dress, or eat cultural food because they get teased. The only way we can break that is by ensuring that in the curriculum we're able to teach students and children about other cultures, about other faiths so that they build that understanding and that care for others and work really hard to break down those barriers.

I would add that into my previous answer.

**Mr. Yaseen:** Thank you very much, Minister.

Another question is on inflation. As we all know, this inflation has taken a toll on a lot of families here in Alberta, and we are trying to do a number of things to help people in this regard. Families in Alberta have been facing significant inflationary cost pressures on food as well as other items. Balanced nutrition is essential to the growth and development of children. This is why I was very pleased to see on page 87 of the fiscal plan that the school nutrition grant will increase by 20 per cent. Thank you for that this year. Would you be able to share more information about the school nutrition grant and who is eligible for this initiative, Minister?

**Member LaGrange:** All right. Thank you. Great question. You're right. The rising costs are affecting food prices, so we are increasing the funding for school nutrition programs to school authorities by \$3 million, which is 20 per cent, to a total of \$20 million in the '23-24 school year. That's an increase of \$3.2 million. I would also say that that will provide meals for over 58,000 students in our province, and I remind everybody that there are roughly about 730,000 students in the province.

We are funding these nutrition programs based on demographics of the area. We do have that demographic information, that we share with school authorities, and then fund them appropriately according to that. We've heard really positive feedback on the nutrition program and what that does. Obviously, a student who is hungry does not perform well.

We also have this past year – we started it previous to the pandemic, continued it through the pandemic in a modified version, and we've brought it back this year, which is an additional \$3 million for piloting of working with nonprofits. So school authorities have been working with nonprofits. We're looking at leveraging even more dollars and supports for students and staff members and the whole program by utilizing these pilots.

This particular pilot I plan to continue on into the next school year because it has been very, very effective. As Minister Armstrong-Homeniuk was saying, these partnerships provide much-needed meals to young people that are struggling. Sometimes the family struggles to send a lunch. And they don't discriminate. If there's a child who happens to have forgotten a lunch, those children get a meal as well.

**The Chair:** I apologize for the interruption, but I must advise the committee that the time allotted for this portion of consideration of the ministry's estimates has concluded.

I'd like to remind committee members that we are scheduled to meet again today at 3:30 p.m. to consider our estimates of the Ministry of Education.

Thank you, everyone. This meeting is adjourned.

[The committee adjourned at 12 p.m.]



