



Legislative Assembly of Alberta

The 31st Legislature
Second Session

Standing Committee
on
Families and Communities

Ministry of Education and Child Care
Consideration of Main Estimates

Wednesday, March 11, 2026
9 a.m.

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**Legislative Assembly of Alberta
The 31st Legislature
Second Session**

Standing Committee on Families and Communities

Lovely, Jacqueline, Camrose (UC), Chair
Goehring, Nicole, Edmonton-Castle Downs (NDP), Deputy Chair
Wright, Peggy K., Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview (NDP), * Acting Deputy Chair

Batten, Diana M.B., Calgary-Acadia (NDP)
Bouchard, Eric, Calgary-Lougheed (UC)**
Getson, Shane C., Lac St. Anne-Parkland (UC)
Haji, Sharif, Edmonton-Decore (NDP)
Johnson, Jennifer, Lacombe-Ponoka (UC)
Lunty, Brandon G., Leduc-Beaumont (UC)
Sawyer, Tara, Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills (UC)
Singh, Peter, Calgary-East (UC)
Tejada, Lizette, Calgary-Klein (NDP)

* substitution for Nicole Goehring
** substitution for Jennifer Johnson

Also in Attendance

Brar, Gurtej Singh, Edmonton-Ellerslie (NDP)
Chapman, Amanda, Calgary-Beddington (NDP)
Eggen, Hon. David, ECA, Edmonton-North West (NDP)

Support Staff

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Standing Committee on Families and Communities

Participants

Ministry of Education and Childcare

Hon. Demetrios Nicolaidis, Minister

Jeff Willan, Assistant Deputy Minister and Senior Financial Officer, Financial Services and Capital Planning

9 a.m.

Wednesday, March 11, 2026

[Ms Lovely in the chair]

**Ministry of Education and Childcare
Consideration of Main Estimates**

The Chair: Well, good morning, everyone. I'd like to call the meeting to order and welcome everyone in attendance. The committee has under consideration the estimates of the Ministry of Education and Childcare for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2027.

I'd ask that we go around the table and have members introduce themselves for the record. Minister, please introduce your team of officials who are joining you at the table when it comes to your turn. My name is Jackie Lovely. I'm the MLA for the Camrose constituency and chair of the committee. We will start to my right.

Mr. Getson: Sure. MLA Shane Getson, Lac Ste. Anne-Parkland, but everybody knows it's called God's Country.

Mrs. Johnson: Yes, we do. Of course. Jennifer Johnson, MLA, Lacombe-Ponoka.

Mr. Lundy: Well, good morning everyone. Brandon Lundy, MLA for Leduc-Beaumont.

Mrs. Sawyer: Good morning. Tara Sawyer, MLA for the outstanding constituency of Oldbury-Didsbury-Three Hills.

Mr. Singh: Good morning, everyone. Peter Singh, MLA, Calgary-East.

Mr. Nicolaides: Good morning, everyone. Demetrios Nicolaides, MLA, Calgary-Bow, Minister of Education and Childcare. To my immediate left is Lora Pillipow, deputy minister. To my far left is Meghann Eagle, assistant deputy minister, system excellence. To my right, Jeff Willan, assistant deputy minister, financial services and capital planning, and far right, Sarah Brennan, executive director of K to 12 fiscal oversight.

Ms Wright: Good morning, everybody. Peggy Wright, MLA, Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview.

Ms Chapman: Amanda Chapman, MLA, Calgary-Beddington.

Mr. Eggen: Good morning. My name is David Eggen. I'm the MLA for Edmonton-North West.

Mr. Gurtej Brar: Good morning, everyone. My name is Gurtej Singh Brar, MLA for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

The Chair: All right. We do not have anyone joining us online, but I'd like to note the following substitutions for the record. Ms Wright will be substituting for Ms Goehring as deputy chair. Mr. Bouchard will be substituting for Mrs. Johnson from 10:15 to 11:15 a.m.

Now we have a few housekeeping items to review. 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. We do not have any members participating remotely. Please note, everyone. Set your cellphones and other devices to silent, if you haven't done that already.

All right. Regarding speaking rotation and time limits. Hon. Members, the main estimates for the Ministry of Education and Childcare shall be considered for six hours; therefore, this is the

first of two three-hour meetings. Standing Order 59.01 sets out the process for consideration of the main estimates in the legislative policies committee. Suborder 59.01(6) sets out the speaking rotation for this meeting. The speaking rotation chart is available on the committee's internal website, and hard copies have been provided to the ministry officials at the table. For each segment of the meeting, blocks of speaking time will be combined only if both the minister and the members agree. If debate is exhausted prior to six hours, the ministry's estimates are deemed to have been considered for the time allotted in the main estimates schedule, and the committee will adjourn. Should members have any questions regarding speaking times or rotation, please e-mail or message 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 meeting clock will continue to run. Now, does anyone oppose having a break today? All right. Seeing none, we will have a break.

Ministry officials who are present may, at the direction of the minister, address the committee. Ministry officials seated in the gallery, if called upon, have access to a microphone in the gallery and are asked to please introduce yourselves for the record prior to commencing. Pages are available to deliver notes or materials between the gallery and the table. Attendees in the gallery may not approach the table. Space permitting, opposition staff may sit at the table to assist their members; however, members have priority to sit at the table at all times. Points of order will be dealt with as they arise, and individual speaking times will be paused. The block of speaking time and the overall meeting clock 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.

Finally, the committee should have the opportunity to hear both the questions and the answers without interruption during estimates debate. Please, members, debate flows through the chair at all times, including instances when speaking time is shared between a member and the minister.

I would now invite the Minister of Education and Childcare to begin with your opening remarks. Sir, you have 10 minutes.

Mr. Nicolaides: Thank you, Chair. Good morning, colleagues. Pleased to be here to speak with you about Education and Childcare's budget and main estimates under Budget '26.

I have already introduced my team at the table. In the gallery I have Carla Johnson, assistant deputy minister of curriculum and career education. I have Boris Contreras, assistant deputy minister of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit education; Zoe Cooper, assistant deputy minister of strategic services; Chris Shandro, chief operating officer of program and system support; Tanis Liebreich, assistant deputy minister of child care strategy and policy; Laura Lowe, assistant deputy minister of child care delivery; and Micha Ben-Zvi, executive director of capital planning.

Before I get into the details of Budget '26 I want to speak about the success that we have achieved in recent years. Over the past three budgets Alberta's government has taken deliberate action to strengthen the education system and be responsive to challenges facing our classrooms. In my time as minister we've delivered three straight years of record funding to education. We've also advanced an ambitious school construction program. Today there are 161 active school projects across the province, including 117 new projects approved under our government, which is more than 140 per cent of the 48 projects approved between 2015 and 2018.

In Budget '25 we updated how enrolment growth is funded by moving to a two-year adjusted enrolment model that better reflects current and projected enrolment, particularly for fast-growing

boards. We also strengthened literacy and numeracy by expanding early screening to identify students that need help and by providing additional funding for early intervention. Additionally, we introduced for the first time a dedicated mental health and well-being grant, which provides stable, predictable funding and expands access to tools, training, and supports.

Budget '26 continues this progress with a strong emphasis on addressing classroom complexity, directly responding to growing complexity and student needs. Budget '26 reflects these priorities and delivers record funding to strengthen education and child care. In '26-27 our budget will reach \$12.9 billion, an increase of \$960 million or 8 per cent over the previous year. Of that total, \$10.8 billion is dedicated to supporting the education system, which represents a \$722 million or 7.2 per cent increase in just one year. This level of increase is historic and unprecedented. This year's investment is nearly 30 per cent higher than the highest level of funding we saw in the years between 2015 and 2018, which was \$8.3 billion.

As our education budget grows. So does the investment behind each student. In '26-27 public school funding works out to approximately \$13,450 per student using projected enrolment figures. This places us above British Columbia. That increase in per student investment will fund more teachers and support staff in classrooms and help boards address class size and complexity issues. Budget '26 provides funding to support hiring more than 1,600 new teachers and over 800 support staff in this school year alone.

Looking ahead, education operating funding will grow by \$1.5 billion over the next three years, reaching more than \$11.5 billion by '28-29. Over three years this increase is expected to hire more than 5,000 teachers, educational assistants, and other support staff across the system. Alberta expects to see continued and steady enrolment growth. To support this continued growth we are providing more than \$560 million over three years so that school jurisdictions can hire staff, plan responsibly, and ensure students receive the classroom supports they need.

Budget '26 also builds on our work to address class sizes and classroom complexity. Next year alone we are investing \$355 million to address class size and complexity to support more students. This includes \$300 million in new funding specifically for class size and complexity in '26-27. This funding builds on the \$143 million that we already announced in February '26 to establish complexity teams and is on top of the \$55 million that is being allocated to the classroom complexity grant for this year.

In fact, we've already begun to see some positive results from our investment in classroom complexity. Some school boards, particularly Edmonton public schools, expect to have their 101 complexity teams ready, in place, and deployed by April. They are moving quickly and hiring hundreds of classroom-based staff and directing supports to the most complex schools.

In addition to our complexity investments Budget '26 also delivers meaningful funding rate increase to school authorities. In the '26-27 year school boards will receive \$252 million in grant rate increases to help cover teacher salary costs, rising operational expenses, and the costs associated with growing students. Base instruction grants will also increase by 3 per cent to support the teacher salary settlement.

9:10

We're also increasing key learning supports. We're also increasing grant rates to program unit funding, English as an additional language, francization, and supports to First Nations, Métis, and Inuit students. Additional increases include student

transportation, operations and maintenance, school technology, and the francophone equivalency grant.

Giving our youngest students the best possible start in our schools is a top priority of this government. We've enshrined our reading and math screeners in legislation to help us identify and support children who need help with the foundations of learning. Budget '26 invests \$20 million in literacy-numeracy screening support, which is an increase of 60 per cent from the previous year.

We're also continuing our commitment to student mental health, with \$25 million to support the well-being of students.

The system administration grant will decrease in this budget by 5 per cent. This reduction aims to improve operational efficiency while redirecting funding to the classroom. The infrastructure maintenance and renewal grant will be discontinued and rolled into the operations and maintenance grant to provide more flexibility. This change, combined with a 5 per cent increase, ensures school boards have greater flexibility to meet facility needs.

Alberta's government continues to invest to ensure students, teachers, and communities have modern, well-maintained schools and classrooms. Our \$8.6 billion schools now program is a generational investment to create more classroom spaces in the fastest-growing communities in our province. Since launching in the fall of 2024, we have fast-tracked approval for 38 school projects, advancing projects by up to 9.5 months, and in one case, by more than a year. Through Budget '26 we are approving 40 new school projects that will create almost 23,000 new student spaces and renovate or replace another 7,300. By 2031-32 schools now will deliver 200,000 new and renovated student spaces across the province.

Budget '26 also allocates \$600 million over three years for the modular classroom program to help school boards respond to immediate enrolment pressures. This program is an effective and responsible approach to meeting the needs of our growing school system and will benefit students and communities for decades to come.

Budget '26 also delivers stability and predictability for families through a \$2.1 billion investment in child care, an increase of \$237 million over last year. This funding allows Alberta to maintain \$15-a-day child care fees for children up to kindergarten age. It allows Alberta to keep funding stable for providers, including a 2 per cent inflationary increase. It allows Alberta to invest more than \$343 million in wage top-ups and professional development for early childhood educators. It allows us to continue to support inclusive child care and will invest \$123 million in high-quality, affordable out-of-school care.

As you know, Alberta secured a one-year extension to the federal child care agreement in December 2025, bringing \$1.17 billion in federal funding for the '26-27 year. Alberta is contributing \$839 million to ensure that families and providers can plan with confidence, while longer-term negotiations for a more sustainable and long-term agreement continue.

In conclusion, Budget '26 is a strong and responsible plan that invests where it matters the most: supporting our students, supporting our teachers, and supporting our families so that we can ensure that we continue to deliver a world-class education for every single Alberta student.

Thank you, Madam Chair. I'm happy to take questions from the committee.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister. We'll now begin the question-and-answer portion of the meeting. For the first 60 minutes 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.

Would you wish to have shared or block time with the minister?

Ms Chapman: I'm fine with either. Minister's choice.

The Chair: Minister, do you have a preference for shared or block time this morning?

Mr. Nicolaides: Shared time is fine.

The Chair: All right. Let's proceed.

Ms Chapman: Well, thank you, Minister, and your team for being here today. I do really appreciate the time that we have to be able to ask some questions about what's going on in the budget.

Through the chair, I'd like to start today by reviewing the changes to the education portion of the property tax. I know that we talked about this last year, that the decision to raise revenue by raising property tax, of course, is deeply unpopular with municipalities. You know, in a perfect world perhaps people would understand exactly what portion of the tax was going to the city and the province. The feeling is that people do lack a little bit of clarity when it comes to that, that it's the provincial government that's increasing their taxes, not their municipal government.

Last year the education portion of property tax cost Albertans \$3.1 billion. That was an additional \$327 million from the year prior. When we were here last year, the projected increase for this year was \$311 million. I see on page 59 of the fiscal plan that the budget now calls for a \$468 million increase to the education property tax this year. It's quite a big jump from what was projected.

We are seeing a government that's raising taxes on Albertans, and this isn't a little increase. It's not a small increase. It's hundreds of millions more paid in taxes by Albertans. To my math it looks like we've increased taxes by about \$800 million a year. All of this, of course, is during an affordability crisis when Albertans are struggling.

Now, this government did cut personal income tax, but I'm wondering if the minister can tell me what percentage of that tax savings has been clawed back through the increase in property tax.

Mr. Nicolaides: I'm sorry. I might have to get you to state that again.

Ms Chapman: Yeah. There has been a reduction in personal income tax but this increase in the property tax. I'm just wondering if you can tell us how much – I don't know how much the savings were to Albertans on the personal income tax. I know that the increase in property tax is \$800 million a year. Have Albertans lost all of the tax savings through the personal income tax cut with this property tax increase, or is it a percentage of it?

Mr. Nicolaides: I don't have the numbers in front of me related to the total savings attributed to the income tax break. I think that would be a question that you'd best secure an answer to from the Minister of Finance through the Finance ministry estimates, as of course they are the primary stewards for income tax rates and the cost implications and savings associated with those tax rate changes.

Ms Chapman: Okay. Thank you, Minister.

The mayor of Calgary estimated that the property tax increase would cost Calgarians an additional \$339 this year. Last year the minister gave an estimate that that tax increase would cost Calgarians an additional \$239 a year. To my math, Calgarians are

now paying \$578 a year more in taxes. Is this new tax burden, though, shared equally across the province, the increase in the property tax rate? Can you clarify for us what per cent of this year's new \$468 million in tax revenue is paid for by Calgarians?

Mr. Nicolaides: I think a more detailed answer would be available through the Ministry of Municipal Affairs because, of course, they oversee all property taxes.

I do know that municipalities, though, determine tax levels. I should clarify. The individual taxes that a homeowner will pay, of course, is dependent on market assessment and market assessment values. That varies, of course, wildly from community to community, home to home, city to city. That is the model that I understand municipalities prefer to use, but I think you can secure a more detailed answer through the Ministry of Municipal Affairs on how property taxes are assessed and market value assessments that are used by municipalities.

Ms Chapman: Okay.

I did hear – and it was kind of in passing; I think it was in a presser that the minister was doing with the Premier – and I felt like the Premier had given a number that suggested that Calgarians are actually paying around a third of that tax burden, of that \$468 million in new taxes this year, but that of course is just, you know, to support education. They do receive only 20 percent of the total operational funding. That's my, you know, just a little bit back of the napkin math based on the Premier's comments.

I think what you're saying, though, is that your ministry is not able to provide a more detailed breakdown of the tax burden and how it's spread across the province by different jurisdictions.

9:20

Mr. Nicolaides: No, that's something that's handled by the Ministry of Municipal Affairs.

Ms Chapman: Municipal Affairs. Okay. I hope they haven't had their estimates yet.

Okay. Yeah. No, this one should be good for you, I think.

The budget documents say that the education property tax was increasing the rate to get to a third of operating expense for the Education budget. It's my understanding that the education property tax can only go to public and separate schools either through the Alberta school foundation fund or through collecting that property tax through municipalities. Is that correct?

Mr. Nicolaides: That's correct. Yeah.

Ms Chapman: So when the minister says that a third of Education's operating budget is covered by the tax, is the minister including funding for independent schools in total operating that the education property tax is covering a third of?

Mr. Nicolaides: It's the total cost of Education.

Ms Chapman: Gotcha. So Albertans are covering a greater portion of the costs for public schools because they're paying that through the tax increase.

Mr. Nicolaides: Currently, with the changes to property taxes, approximately 33 percent of the entirety of Education expenses are covered through property tax requisitions.

Ms Chapman: Okay.

Mr. Nicolaides: Thirty-three point four per cent.

Ms Chapman: Thirty-three point four per cent. Okay. Those are all my tax questions.

Total investment on Budget 2026, \$10.8 billion, an increase of \$722 million. I imagine that the new collective agreement accounts for a significant portion of this increase. The minister referenced, you know, teacher hiring rates, support staff positions, salary increases. Of that \$722 million how much is required to just cover the cost of the new collective agreement?

Mr. Nicolaides: The total cost for the teacher's salary settlement is \$150 million per school year.

Ms Chapman: This goes so fast when there are just answers. Thank you, Minister.

Of the total spend, the \$10.8 billion in funding, how much of that is used for the education of children of refugees and temporary foreign workers? Or how many students in the system do we have who are the children of refugees or temporary foreign workers?

Mr. Nicolaides: I would say, just as I'm looking for the total number of refugee students and students of temporary workers, that it's a little challenging and difficult to be able to get a precise number because, obviously, not every student will receive the exact number. One student may receive some funding for support with English as an additional language. One student may be coded with a severe disability and require additional supports versus another. So it can be a little tricky to get a precise estimate.

With respect to children of temporary residents, we do estimate, though, that approximately \$600 million is our projected cost to support children of temporary residents. In terms of the number of students – I did have that on a slide here. With the refugee students, we're currently projecting for the '26-27 school year approximately 14,661. That represents an 11 per cent increase year over year. More specifically, we've seen approximately an 80 per cent increase in refugee student enrolment in the past five years. We've seen approximately a 58.9 per cent increase in the past five years of students who speak English as an additional language. I think those were the ones that you had asked about.

Ms Chapman: Did you have the number, Minister, of the children of temporary foreign workers, the number of students? I think you gave me – \$600 million was the cost. Do we know for how many students?

Mr. Nicolaides: It might be on this sheet here. Yes, we do estimate approximately 45,554 enrolment as per the '25-26 school year. Again that's specifically children of temporary residents: approximately 28,000 of those in public school, 14,000 in separate, 1,500 in independent, and other amounts with other school authorities.

Ms Chapman: Sorry, what was the per cent again for in the independent?

Mr. Nicolaides: I don't have the percentage.

Ms Chapman: Sorry. The number.

Mr. Nicolaides: Yeah. It's 1,500 out of 45,000.

Ms Chapman: Okay. Thank you.

I was going to switch gears again on complexity teams. The government has announced 476 complexity teams. I'm just wondering, on page 83 of the government estimates under what funding line does that funding fall? I think I understand you that

this money is not flowing through the complexity grant. Is it separate? It sits outside of that?

Mr. Nicolaides: The money that we allocated in February '26, for the 476 complexity teams is – I'll find the specific line item that that's categorized in, and that will be in elements 3.1 and 3.2. I can't recall, though, if we're flowing that out to the school divisions through a specialized grant or if it's just through the – it will be through a specialized, dedicated grant.

Ms Chapman: So another grant outside of the existing complexity grant?

Mr. Nicolaides: Correct. My apologies. It will certainly not be part of the current complexity grant. That is a stand-alone grant for other purposes, and what we've allocated for the complexity teams will be distributed separately, a separate line item.

Ms Chapman: I've got you. If you don't mind if I just stay on complexity teams a bit, it was, I mean, thousands of rows of data. I could offer some feedback that I think a numbers nerd could have maybe presented us with the information in a little bit more of a digestible form, but I think what I pulled out of that, I mean, was pretty shocking to me. We had over 31,000 Alberta classrooms that exceed 27 students. That's the highest recommended level, based on the Alberta's Commission on Learning report. We had just under 6,500 classes that have between 35 to 60 students, and then the complexity, which is 84,173 classes in Alberta reported some level of complexity – low, medium, or high – was around 80 per cent of those classes that were at medium or high complexity. These are really big numbers. I'm trying to understand how just 476 teams are going to be able to chip away at this. It's a mountain of a problem. How did the minister come to the number of 476 for the complexity teams?

9:30

Mr. Nicolaides: Sure. Well, what we did with the complexity data – and I want to just take perhaps a quick moment and thank our school divisions, teachers, and other system leaders who, of course, had to go through the manual process of collecting all of that data. We collected over a hundred thousand pieces of data for over a hundred thousand classrooms. That was quite a Herculean effort.

In addition, though, in the past, going back to many days past, the Alberta government would only collect class size levels. We were interested in collecting a much deeper level of analysis. We wanted to get a much deeper understanding of complexity in our classrooms. So the data that we have collected and the data that we have now reported is something that has never been seen before in the province, which is really insightful and helpful for us to be able to make evidence-based decisions about how to allocate funding.

To answer your question, the 476 complexity teams, again representing \$143 million, what we did. We looked at the three primary variables that we collected: class size, composition, and occurrence. It wasn't just enough on the composition side to get an understanding of, you know: is there a student in that classroom that speaks English as an additional language or that is gifted or that has a disability? That categorization may occur seven different times in the classroom. That's why we also looked at the occurrence rates. We looked at the occurrence rate plus the composition plus the class size and then essentially worked from top to bottom, dispatching the teams to the most complex classrooms identified through that analysis.

There's certainly more to do, and there's more to come. That's why Budget '26 includes \$355 million in new funding outside of the \$143 million to continue to address the challenge of complexity.

Fifty-five million of that is going to the classroom complexity grant, an existing grant established in 2023 that gives school divisions flexibility to hire specialized staff, as needed, in their school division.

The \$300 million. We will be collecting some more data from our school boards. We will be having more conversations with our school boards to have a more robust conversation of how that \$300 million can be allocated and where it should be allocated to help address the complexity issues that we have in our schools. So more to come on the distribution of that.

Ms Chapman: Yeah. Right now the complexity teams are only for K to 6. I do understand the value of early intervention, of course, and also understand the value of collecting that data on class size and complexity. I recall a private member's bill that came about that exact topic. Certainly, very grateful that the government decided to change their mind and move forward with collecting that data.

The situation in some of our junior high and high schools – again, I do understand the value of early intervention, but the junior high school down the street from where I live: 100 per cent of its classrooms are ranked at medium or high complexity; 93 per cent of those are at high complexity. I know that you're working with limited resources. Looks like \$300 million that you're going to have to spread across the province. What is the plan and when do we expect to see some relief for our junior high and high school teachers who are managing, like, really intense levels of complexity in their classroom, I would say?

Mr. Nicolaides: Yeah. There's no question that we have complexity challenges and issues in our junior high schools, in our high schools. Of course, they may manifest differently than they would in an elementary school, so I think it's important that we take a very specific and targeted approach. The decision to dispatch the complexity teams I think works very well in an elementary environment. In a junior high and a high school environment we may be dealing with different challenges. I know in high school having SROs in our schools can be a really beneficial resource to help address maybe issues of violence or other challenges. The solutions may need to be different, and what works for a K to 6 environment may not work for junior high and high school.

We will be asking our school divisions to collect and refine some of the data that they collected in November so that we can get a stronger picture as to what the state of complexity is in Alberta, and using that information, we will then be able to make some final decisions. I'm planning by late spring, early summer that we will be in a position to be able to make some more decisions about how that \$300 million will be allocated.

I want to stress it's not just the \$300 million. I mentioned a moment ago \$55 million that is being provided to the classroom complexity grant. That money is available to school divisions, and they have a lot of flexibility to determine how they're spending that. They can use those funds to hire additional staff and bring in other specialized support staff for maybe just junior high if they want to or just high school environments. They have a lot of discretion and flexibility to allocate that \$355 million. Since we're dispatching the complexity teams to a lot of the elementary schools, I would imagine that the school divisions will start shifting some of that approach and maybe money that they had in the complexity grant going towards elementary schools they can perhaps now repurpose to go to a junior high or to another environment.

On top of that, we are still providing increases to other grants. We are increasing the funding that we give to the English as an additional language grant, to the refugee grant, to PUF, to a number of different areas. That increased funding as well will help school

divisions do more for those very specific and nuanced areas. The quantum is much more than just \$355 million, but as it relates to the \$300 million you mentioned specifically, again, I plan to be able to make some final decisions regarding the distribution of that \$300 million by late spring, early summer.

Ms Chapman: So we'll see additional resources in our schools in the next school year when you say decisions in spring, summer?

Mr. Nicolaides: With that \$300 million we aim to make the decisions, but that money will then be available, as it's allocated in this budget, to flow out immediately to school divisions. Of course, that time means it may not have the strongest impact for the current school year, but it certainly will give school divisions the ability to recruit and hire the staff that they need and have them in place for the upcoming school year.

Ms Chapman: Okay. I do appreciate what the minister says about the funding that is currently provided, but that junior high school down my street is operating under the funding that's currently provided, and without question they do not have the resources available in that school to manage the need they have, which is just the community, you know, that I live in. It's a really lovely diverse community.

Still on these specific teams, on your complexity teams, just wondering what tracking metrics may be in place, like, to measure the efficacy of these teams and whether those tracking metrics will be made available to the public.

Mr. Nicolaides: Yeah. Obviously, we want to be able to evaluate the success of the complexity teams and also evaluate their effectiveness, so there will be both if I can describe it as qualitative and quantitative assessment of the complexity team. On the qualitative side we will be providing some survey questions to teachers and to schools' principals and school authorities that have complexity teams to be able to tell us how they feel the complexity teams are working, if they feel that they're helping to reduce workload, and overall their level of effectiveness. We'll be able to get that kind of qualitative information from a variety of different partners in a particular school.

9:40

On top of that, we also want some objective data, so we will also be collecting, for example, the number of interventions that a complexity team has conducted or completed. The complexity teams can operate in a varied way. They may be able to pull a few students aside who maybe have been identified by our screeners as needing some additional reading support and conduct that reading support with them. They may be able to pull out a student that is struggling with emotional and/or behavioural regulation in a classroom and provide some one-on-one individualized attention and care for that student in that moment. Each time the team is conducting an intervention, we'll be collecting data or at least the number of incidents and number of interventions that they're conducting. That'll give us an understanding if the teams are being used and how effective they are being.

Ms Chapman: When you talk about the interventions, how are you ensuring that the staff that are being brought in are trained to – you referenced the, like, literacy and numeracy screeners. What kind of training is provided for them to interpret the results and to know what it is to do in an intervention with these students who need additional help?

Mr. Nicolaides: Yeah. Speaking on the topic of literacy and numeracy intervention, apart from the screeners, of course, that we employ and that we have, we also have detailed intervention plans that are available to school authorities that provide guidance and guidelines as to what type of exercises should be done. The assessments are able to dig in to those specific areas of deficiency. If a student is struggling with reading, the assessments will identify which components of reading need additional support, and then with that valuable information the teachers can, with their expertise and judgment, develop customized plans. That's where the intervention teams can come in because then they can take and execute those plans, and they can be incredibly effective.

The research behind the screeners demonstrates unequivocally that a student who is behind grade level in reading or in their numeracy abilities can recover in the span of four to six months and be caught up to grade level with adequate intervention. That's one of the things that these intervention teams can do. Of course, complexity is dynamic. There may be hosts of students who require additional support learning English. There may be students with emotional challenges or students who struggle with behavioural regulation. The complexity teams will be able to help and address that.

In terms of training and in terms of hiring, of course, hiring is exclusively within the hands of the school authorities. The government doesn't do the hiring for the school boards. The school divisions know, let's say if there's a complexity team dispatched to a particular school in southeast Calgary, what the predominant nature of complexity is in that school better than anybody else and would be able to exercise their professional judgment to say: well, we are looking for a teacher or some EAs who can help specifically with X, Y, and Z given that it's a larger issue in this school versus this school. I think the school divisions are in the best position to do that targeted recruitment to meet the needs of the individual schools.

Ms Chapman: I think earlier you said that \$20 million was attached to these literacy and numeracy screeners. Is that funding for things, like for resources, for tools, for books? Or is that funding – what I hear from teachers is that it's quite challenging to run, you know, a classroom of 35 screeners and also still teach their classroom. Is there funding specifically available to help teachers with the delivery of those literacy and numeracy screeners?

Mr. Nicolaides: Yeah. The short answer is yes. We talked about the \$143 million and the 476 complexity teams, and we talked a little bit about how they may be used to support literacy and numeracy. That being said, there is a separate budget line item specifically for literacy and numeracy, and that's the one that you referenced. That's \$20 million being allocated this year, which is a 60 per cent increase from last year. That money is specifically for literacy and numeracy support.

So the short answer to your question is yes. School divisions could use those funds to hire EAs or bring in temporary support. At the time of the year when the screening assessments must be conducted, they can use the funding to bring in additional staff to help supplement the learning of students who have been identified as needing additional support. So in addition to the complexity teams, the school divisions will have this \$20 million that they can use to bring in more staff to conduct the assessments and conduct the interventions. If they're doing that, the complexity teams can work on other issues, can work on behavioural issues, emotional regulation, and assist in a variety of different ways. That support is specifically for literacy and numeracy, and, yes, school divisions can use it – they have a lot of discretion – provided that it's used to

support the screening administration and the interventions required thereafter.

Ms Chapman: Thank you, Minister.

I'm going to change tack and ask you some capital plan questions. Page 113 of the capital plan. While I do appreciate the attempt to speed up the process of building schools, the new school announcement system does make it quite a bit more difficult to track what is actually being announced every year. For 2026, if I have interpreted this correctly from the government's information, there is one project that has been announced for construction. This was a charter school. It's just that this new process for approving school construction funding throughout the year means that we don't have a good idea or a good sense of how many schools are going to move to the construction phase this year. Last year was 18 schools, so obviously one feels like a huge decrease. I guess: without asking you to scoop any specific announcements you have coming up, how many projects are going to be approved for construction in the '26-27 budget?

Mr. Nicolaides: It's challenging to provide a direct answer. With our new process once a school project has completed the necessary requirements of the design phase, they can then receive construction funding. There are currently 37 projects in the design phase. When those projects have completed all the requisite architectural drawings, they are then candidates to receive construction funding. I can't say exactly how many. It depends on the state and progress of that particular project. However, over the course of the year, I imagine, several of those 37 projects that are in design will complete the requisite design work and be able to move into the construction phase. I can't give you a precise number as it depends on the status of the project.

Ms Chapman: Would the minister be able to give me the number as the amount of money that's allocated for it? Like, how much is allocated for construction funding?

Mr. Nicolaides: We make individual submissions to Treasury Board and Finance once a project is ready. So out of that 37, if 10 projects, as an example, complete the requisite design work five months from now and are ready to move to construction, then I would seek Treasury Board approval for the required funding to begin the construction of those projects. It's determined on an as-needed basis.

Ms Chapman: Okay. So there is no, like, budget line item that I would be able to refer to that would illuminate for me construction funding for schools.

Mr. Nicolaides: There is. Again, not to that level of specificity. We are putting aside and we have allocated – it's approximately \$2.5 billion over the next three years to support school capital projects. That will support the previously announced 121 projects.

9:50

Ms Chapman: That would include projects moving through to any phase, like from planning to design or design to construction?

Mr. Nicolaides: Correct. Yeah. So in the total quantum there's approximately \$2.5 billion for the next three years to support those previous 121 projects that are already in the pipeline.

Ms Chapman: I'm going to ask you some more numbers questions to try to understand this.

Mr. Nicolaides: Sure. That's why we're here.

Ms Chapman: When I look at page 113 of the fiscal plan, at, obviously, the expanding education infrastructure section, I believe what the government had promised was \$8.6 billion of spending for new school spaces, and that was over seven years. We have kind of four years of that data now with last year's budget forecast amount and this year's current three-year budget cycle. Including last year and the current three-year budget cycle, how I read it is that the government has allocated to spend only \$4.2 billion of the promised \$8.6 billion, so it's, like, a little bit less than half, which means that spending would have to be, really, greatly accelerated in the final three years. You would be averaging \$1.45 billion per year, which is spending levels much higher than we've seen any other year in the budget.

The way I read it now, you are actually showing a decreasing amount to capital over the next three years, so through the chair, has the government changed its mind on their \$8.6 billion promise, or are you just going to be spending way more in the following three years than we have in these four years?

Mr. Nicolaides: The short answer is no. We're still moving ahead with the \$8.6 billion commitment to build and modernize over 200,000 spaces. When we move a project to a different phase, there may also be a requirement to add funds. That's why we proceed to Treasury Board to request the funding. As I mentioned, the 37 projects that are in design: if 10 of those projects in, let's say, four months' time are ready to proceed to construction funding, then I will go to Treasury Board and ask for the funding that's required to move those projects forward.

It's also important to note, of course, that even once a project has reached the construction phase, it takes a couple of years. It can take two to three years from that specific moment, so the entirety of the funding envelope that's required for the full construction of the project does not necessarily flow out in the first year specifically. It can be spread out over the course of three years. The commitment remains. We are continuing to press ahead, and funding will be provided to support the projects as they move from one stage to the next.

Ms Chapman: Am I to understand, then – because the way it looks over the three-year budget cycle is \$1.4 billion this year, \$1.2 billion for '27-28, and then \$715 million for '28-29. But these are not accurate numbers? You would be requesting additional funds over and above that from Treasury Board and Finance?

Mr. Nicolaides: Yeah. You know, as I mentioned, when projects are in the planning or design phase, there's relatively little that needs to be allocated to those projects for that stage. You don't need \$20 million to complete architectural planning and design requirements, and of course you need to complete the design requirements so that you get the full cost profile and picture. We have 99 projects at the moment that do not have construction approval yet, and the dollars required for that will be added on approval.

Ms Chapman: So what's reflected here is not what you're going to spend?

Mr. Nicolaides: That would be correct. That's not the full cost because, again, we need to ensure that the project has moved from either the planning to design to the construction phase, and any additional funding specifically for construction will be requested when the project is ready at that phase.

Ms Chapman: A confusing way to budget, to not budget.

On page 104 of the fiscal plan the government projects that 11,000 student spaces would be created in 2025-26. I believe that the target was to add 90,000, and I do apologize because these numbers don't always, like, reflect year to year and there's not reporting towards a target. The target just seems to shift. There was a promise to add 90,000 student spaces by 2029. How many spaces will be added in the following two years of this budget cycle to meet that target?

Mr. Nicolaides: At the moment our progress to date forecasts approximately 160,000 student spaces. That includes 40,000 for major projects in '25, another 30,000 major projects from '26, and additional spaces from previously approved projects, modulars, and other completed projects as well. We are on track with our progress to date to achieve approximately 160,000. Sorry. That's our progress. That's what we've achieved to date.

Ms Chapman: To date since '23; 160,000.

Mr. Nicolaides: Correct.

Ms Chapman: Thank you.

Mr. Nicolaides: When I say progress to date, that includes projects that have been announced, so that would include projects that I've just recently announced that are now in our capital plan.

Ms Chapman: That includes projects in any stage, like planning, design, construction?

Mr. Nicolaides: Correct. Yes.

Ms Chapman: So 160,000 is the totality of what has been approved?

Mr. Nicolaides: Yeah. That's correct.

Ms Chapman: Thank you, Minister.

Again, still on page 113 of the fiscal plan, the government has a line item for creating new spaces, new and additions. Is this where new school construction projects that are being announced funding will live? I'm still trying to figure out where we're going to see it.

Mr. Nicolaides: Let me defer to my CFO on that. Maybe he can provide a little bit more clarity.

Go ahead.

Mr. Willan: Through the chair, can we just repeat the question? On page . . .

Ms Chapman: Yeah. Page 113 of the fiscal plan, line item creating new spaces, new and addition. We're just wondering if that's where the school construction – where we will see the funding allocated for construction will live.

Mr. Willan: Thank you for that. Through the chair, again, Jeff Willan, ADM of financial services and capital planning. This is in relation to the new spaces that were announced in Budget '26. There are 40 projects that are announced there. Of those, there are 30 that are new schools or additions, and then there are nine that are modernizations, and then there's one charter project. Between those two lines – you'll see there's creating new spaces and there's modernizing existing spaces. Between those two: that represents the initial investment as those 40 projects enter the planning or design phase of the funding stage for a capital project, of which . . .

Ms Chapman: Just for Budget '26?

Mr. Willan: Just for Budget '26 projected over the next three years. And then, as the minister stated, as those projects meet the requirements of each stage or phase, they will then move forward to the next one through a request into Treasury Board and Finance from the Minister of Infrastructure and the Minister of Education and Childcare, and then additional budget will be added to the cost of those projects. Potentially a project that enters at planning will then go back to Treasury Board at design and then at construction, so it may see three different funding allocations that will come as it moves through the cycle of construction.

Ms Chapman: Oh, for each stage, not just for construction?

Mr. Willan: Yes, each one. So then you get the funding for that stage only, and then once complete it goes – so it's for better planning and better fiscal responsibility when it comes to the cost of a project. As you do it by stage, then anything that needs to be worked out is then factored into the next request into Treasury Board and Finance for investment into those projects.

Ms Chapman: It makes it hard to look forward but more accurate when we look back.

Mr. Nicolaides: It does, but I think it's important to note a couple of other considerations. The Auditor General – I believe it was back in 2022, if I'm not mistaken, or maybe previously – had some concerns over how school construction funding was being provided. That was one of the main reasons why the government, I believe it was in 2023, moved to that new phased approach or staged approach of planning, design, and construction so there can be more transparency and clarity about how much money is going to a school division or for a school project and for what purpose.

10:00

Apart from that, moving to that new cycle will also help to speed up project development and ensure that a project can only move ahead once the other stage is completed. I think we all know of situations and examples where a school project has been announced, and then several years later nothing has happened yet because that announcement may have happened and the site may have not been ready, utilities may not have been connected, permits and other things may not have been ready.

Doing it this way gives us much more clarity. In the planning phase you need to outline, of course, the scope of the project, have the site ready and prepared, all of the permits, all of those other pieces in place. Once all that's done, then you can start designing the actual project, finalize the architectural plans, designs, get a final costing profile, and then we can provide costing to actually begin the construction. It's a much better process to provide more certainty and clarity rather than just, of course, announcing a project and then realizing that, well, the site is not ready, and it's going to take two years until the site is ready. This model provides a lot more certainty.

Ms Chapman: Yeah. Makes sense.

Still on page 113 of the fiscal plan, there is a considerable increase towards modular classrooms. I think my understanding is that modulars are included in the total student space numbers that you're using. The dollar amount doesn't really tell me the story. Like, what percentage of new student spaces are being created through modulars or how many of them?

Mr. Nicolaides: Yeah. Well, first of all, indeed, you're correct. There has been a significant increase in what is being spent for the

modular classroom program this year over last year. The total investment is \$600 million over three years, so that's \$200 million this year. It's quite a significant investment over last year. I can't recall exactly what we had spent last year on the modular classroom program. I'll dig that up, but it is a significant increase. With the investment that we're making right now, we expect to deliver approximately 700 modulars that will add just over 17,000 student spaces. That's in total, the total quantum for the \$600 million over the three years.

Ms Chapman: Over three years.

Mr. Nicolaides: Correct.

Ms Chapman: What is the process for deciding which schools get approved for modulars or what criteria is in place to make those decisions?

Mr. Nicolaides: I might defer to the team on more specifics, but we do request and require our school divisions to submit their modular requests by the end of March, so we will be getting those shortly. We evaluate those requests, of course, against criteria to determine where kind of the most need is.

I'd be happy to defer to perhaps Jeff or anyone else to give more details about the precise methodology that's used in ranking the projects and determining how we allocate the \$200 million, for example, this year to the quantum of modular requests that we have.

Mr. Willan: Sure. Thanks, Minister, through the chair. Just back to the previous question just around investment, going back to the '23-24 fiscal year the government invested \$25 million in modular classrooms. In '24-25 the government invested \$140 million in modular classrooms that provided 182 new classrooms and over 5,000 spaces. In '25-26, so for last year, it was a hundred million that provided 115 modular classrooms and over 3,000 spaces.

With respect to the process, school divisions each year will submit, not unlike their three-year capital plans, their modular classroom requests. We receive generally between 400 and 500 per year, and we will go through a process where we look at the nature of the request. They are asked to categorize them, whether they be for health and safety reasons. The majority of them are, though, typically for additional space, so some of the metrics that we're looking at are, of course, the utilization of a particular school, the utilization in the community around the school, including where other schools may be in close proximity to get a sense of the regional utilization and the potential for available capacity.

We also, of course, are taking what the school divisions are highlighting as their priority list of which ones are the most important at which schools and for how many. We also are looking at requests for where there may be surplus modular classrooms on site so there are requests for relocations. Sometimes that's within a school division, and sometimes that will transcend from one school division to the other.

So we'll go through a process over a few months working back and forth with school divisions with their own metrics – again, health and safety and then generally expansion and need for space – to determine then the highest priority ones based on the funding that's available. We'll work with Infrastructure on the available costing for the upcoming year, and then we bring that list, of course, for the minister's approval, and then we move forward with the plan.

Ms Chapman: Thank you. Staying on page 113 of the fiscal plan, the first line, collegiates and charter school expansion: I see \$45 million allocated for this budget year and then essentially nothing

for the following. I think your earlier answer may answer this because I know that there are charter projects that are in the pipeline. So is it just the fact that we don't see funding for those to move along because it's this case where you have to go to Treasury Board and Finance and ask for additional money?

Mr. Nicolaides: Yeah, I'll ask Jeff to provide more commentary on that again.

Mr. Willan: Thank you for the question. This reflects the investments for collegiates. We have capital dollars for start-up and expansion. There's \$24 million related to collegiate start-up. This is also related to charter schools. When they start a program, outside of the capital investment there's also a need typically for furniture and equipment, so furniture and equipment are a part of this. Then there are also some expenditures related to specific projects. There is some work that's still being done with respect to the charter hub in Calgary, so there are dollars allocated to that particular building to complete the process of getting that ready for full completion.

There are a number of things that go into that particular line item, but the main thing is that there is money for collegiates to start up their programs. Then there's also money for furniture and equipment. As new charter schools come online, they typically need that in relation to their capital. So the remainder of capital related to the building of a new charter school would be found in the educational choice section that we talked about earlier.

Ms Chapman: Oh, I see. Okay, so projects like Almadina in Calgary or the Alberta Classical Academy are not included in the collegiate and charter school expansion line item.

Mr. Willan: Correct.

Ms Chapman: Thank you. That answers that question.

While we're talking about the charter schools, I know that school boards all submit their capital requests, and charter schools, of course, submit capital requests, but they function a little bit differently than our other public boards. So the process of selecting, I think, which charter school projects will actually receive capital funding remains a little bit of a mystery to me. I'm wondering if the minister can explain the process for deciding which charter projects are actually moving forward.

Mr. Nicolaides: Yeah, the criteria that we have to determine which charter school projects move forward is very similar, if not identical, to the process that we have to determine which other school projects move forward. We do receive requests from our charter school authorities for space expansion and capital dollars. Of course, Jeff Willan mentioned that safety is a primary consideration when we look at our modular classroom program. It's also a primary consideration when we look at school capital requests and charter requests as well. Obviously if there is a capital request that is strongly connected to safety in some capacity, that will receive a higher priority.

10:10

Apart from safety, utilization is also a key variable that we look to determine. Obviously it would be difficult to justify an expansion of a charter school that has incredibly low utilization and is not fully utilizing the space that they already have, so we would look for and evaluate their overall utilization and ensure that additional expansion is warranted and necessary.

Ms Chapman: I think utilization is probably the trickiest part for me just from talking to some charter schools. The high school in my community, Diefenbaker, has class sizes that range up to 40,

and the charter high schools will often say their class size is 28 and that's it; that's all the kids they can fit. But Diefenbaker doesn't have that choice. They fit the number of kids who walk through the door. Of course, the minister will know that CBE high school utilization is well over 100 per cent. It's at 108 per cent, so when you are talking about utilization, how do you balance that? A charter school can say, "We are 100 per cent utilized with 28 kids per class," and Diefenbaker just has to keep packing them in.

Mr. Nicolaides: Yeah. We balance that by adding significantly more spaces to the public system versus the charter system. I mentioned earlier that 40 projects are being announced and have been announced as part of Budget '26. Out of those 40 projects 39 are allocated to francophone, Catholic, and public schools. One project is allocated to a charter school authority, so the vast and overwhelming majority of the 200,000 spaces that we'll be creating through the schools now program will be going to public, francophone, and separate school divisions.

I believe the quantum of spaces that we've allocated currently for charter schools is under 10,000. Versus the 160,000 that we have to date there's approximately under 10,000 that are allocated for charter schools.

Ms Chapman: Okay. I'm going to try this one quick, but I realize we are running low on time in this section. I'm still on page 113. Independent school capital: that's a new line item this year. Of course, private schools have never before received public money to build schools in Alberta, and indeed, we can find no other province in the country that provides public money for private schools, schools that are allowed to control their enrolment. What is the criteria or what does the program look like that you are using to determine which private schools receive capital funding?

Mr. Nicolaides: Sure. Well, many other provinces do provide funding to support operational expenses of independent schools, and they play a unique role. Of course, Alberta is experiencing a really challenging and unique circumstance with the addition of 80,000 students in three years, in a very short period of time, so we have to take every possible step that we can to help expand spaces. That's part of the reason why we're including charters in the schools now program.

I should clarify. Of the 200,000 student spaces that we're seeking to create through the schools now program, we aim for approximately 6 per cent of those 200,000 student spaces to be charter schools. The overwhelming majority, 94 per cent of all the spaces that we intend to create through the schools now program, will be to public, separate, and francophone, the lion's share going to public school authority. The target that we have for 200,000 student spaces does not include the independent school capital program, which will be in addition to that. We are still finalizing precisely what the program will look like. I hope to be in a position very shortly to announce more details and roll out what that program will look like.

That being said, my bias, if you will, as an individual is to support independent schools that are providing programming for students with complex learning needs. A significant component of our independent school operators exist solely to provide programming for students with disabilities, be they physical disabilities, learning disabilities, or others. Given the complexity challenges that we have, if we can add more spaces and help more individuals with a severe physical disability receive a high-quality education, then that's something that I think we should explore.

The Chair: Well, thank you so much.

We'll move over to the government side. Blocked or shared time?

Mr. Lundy: I would go with shared time if it's amenable with the minister.

The Chair: Minister, what's your preference?

Mr. Nicolaidis: Yeah, that's fine. We can share time.

The Chair: Please proceed.

Mr. Lundy: Well, thank you, Minister, for that, through the chair. Thank you, Madam Chair. First, I want to begin, of course, by thanking the minister and his staff for joining us and all their hard work. I will note, however briefly, that a couple of former colleagues of mine have joined you at the table and in the back, and I just wanted to acknowledge their hard work. I know how much effort and time is put in by all of the support staff and the government staff to all our ministers, and I want to make sure that we get a chance to acknowledge them and thank them for their hard and diligent work.

Through the chair, I would also like to take a little bit of time to thank the teachers and support staff and school board in my riding. I do get a chance to meet with them quite frequently. I must confess that one of my favourite activities is to go and visit the grade 6 classes in my riding as they learn about our system and they learn about the job of the MLA, and, of course, some of them are lucky enough to tour our Legislature. One of my greatest surprises, I think, is just the quality and breadth of questions that I get when I talk to the grade 6s and how smart they are and how engaged they are in our process. They do ask me about my dog a lot, which is fair, and I always tell them that Duke from Leduc is doing quite well. They're always very engaged, and I think that is a tribute to our education system, that those are the questions I get.

Through the chair, Minister, I'd like to ask a little bit more about some of the capital information that you have been providing for questions from the members opposite. I think that's a very important piece to this budget, so I'm happy to ask a couple more questions on that. I'm perhaps a little biased; I'm very keen on the new high school in Beaumont, that was announced in last year's budget and much needed in that community, and I'm certainly grateful for that capacity that's going to be added. I'd note that that is a joint school board project between the public system and our separate school system. Very much looking forward to that in our community.

I think I'll dig in here, through the chair. I will be making references to page numbers in the business plan, of course, Madam Chair. I'm going to start with key objective 4.1 on page 49 of the business plan. This instructs the ministry to "implement school capital strategies to . . . [modernize] and increase the number of student spaces in the communities of greatest need." I think the minister has done a good job describing and talking about the 80,000 additional students that we've seen, a lot of them, of course, children of some temporary residents or as a result of some recent immigration policies. Through the chair, would the minister explain what the government's strategy is for creating more classroom spaces to continue to provide world-class education for Alberta's students?

Mr. Nicolaidis: Yeah. Thank you very much, and thank you for the important question. It's a very unique time in Alberta and with our student enrolment pressure. I recall back in 2022, for example, the Calgary board of education had announced that they were looking to wind down approximately 14,000 student spaces, which would be equivalent to 22 schools, and I know other school divisions had closed down some other schools.

10:20

We were in an environment, especially coming out of COVID, where there didn't appear to be any strong enrolment projections, and our school divisions, of course, were seeing that and making their own decisions about space allocation. You fast-forward to 2023, just a short year later, and 2023 was a record year. We saw the largest population increase in our province's history. In the entirety of the existence of the province 2023 was the year of the most significant population increase ever. Of course, that cascaded into our schools. You know, I've mentioned the number before: 80,000 new students in three years. It's been fast and furious.

We recognized this quite early on, and it's the main reason why the Premier announced the development of the schools now program in September 2024. As you know, that program seeks to add 200,000 student spaces to our education system. As I mentioned earlier, our progress to date is approximately 160,000 student spaces, so we're well under way. That includes 161 current active school projects: 62 are currently in the planning phase, 37 are in the design phase, and 62 are in the construction phase. Looking geographically, 37 of the 161 school projects are in Edmonton, 45 are in Calgary, 22 in northern Alberta, 27 in central Alberta, and 30 in southern Alberta.

It's a very ambitious and comprehensive program that will help to add spaces to not just our fast-growing communities but also recognizing that in some of our smaller communities there need to be modernizations, there need to be replacements of aging infrastructure, and this plan also accounts for that. When I mentioned 200,000 student spaces, it's not all achieved by new spaces, although new construction will be the majority of those spaces; it also includes spaces that will be created from replacements and/or modernizations.

I'm really happy as well to see the project in Beaumont there move ahead. I know there's a lot of need and demand for that. I'm looking forward to seeing that one come to completion.

Those are some of the steps that the government is taking to ensure that we have adequate student spaces to accommodate the growth that we're seeing.

Mr. Lundy: Great. Thank you, Minister. I appreciate you providing some framing comments and some additional information on that.

I think you mentioned modernizations and modulars, and I think that is pretty much in line here, through the chair, on page 45. This is going to help to keep pace with Alberta's growing student population. They're investing in new and modernized student spaces across the province for students to learn, grow, and reach their full potential. Apologies, Minister, if you might have mentioned this earlier. Of these 200,000 spaces, do you have a breakdown of how much of that is going to be addressed through the modernization? Again through the chair, if you could maybe provide: how many modular classrooms is the government providing for school divisions to create spaces?

Mr. Nicolaidis: Sure. I'll get you the breakdown of exactly how many spaces we anticipate to create through new schools and then how many we anticipate to create through modernizations and replacement. I'll get you that precise breakdown in a moment.

As it relates to the modular program, however, as you heard earlier, we are investing \$200 million this year. It's about a \$100 million increase from last year, so quite a significant increase; \$600 million over three years. We anticipate that'll deliver 690 modulars, which is equivalent to 17,100 student spaces, so that's what we aim to see for the next three years from the modular program.

In terms of how many spaces will be created through modernizations and replacements, I'm just getting that exact number for you now. We're still getting the number, but approximately 24 projects out of the 161 that we have under way are modernization and replacement. I'd be happy to follow up on the exact number of spaces.

Mr. Lundy: I appreciate that. Thank you. Again, as part of my tour of schools in the riding I've seen some of the modular environments and also toured some facilities that I think are maybe looking at some modernizations in the future. So I appreciate that you're able to chat a little bit about that, and it looks like there could be some good options moving forward for those schools in my riding.

Sticking with the capital theme, I know we've been asking on both sides quite a bit about it, but I think that emphasizes just how important these investments are to our system. Through the chair, I'd like to reference page 49, outcome four, which states that "Alberta's K-12 education system and workforce are well-managed." As indicated in the following paragraph, this includes planning suitable learning facilities. Through the chair, I believe the minister has talked a little bit about the schools now program, and I just would like to ask the minister if he could confirm how many school projects are going to open faster because of the schools now program. Maybe just to help shed some light on this, you know, can you provide an estimate of how many months this program has shaved off the time it can take to build a new school? Just so people watching can get a sense of the impact that the schools now program is having in their communities.

Mr. Nicolaides: Yeah. Sorry; I'm just looking at a note here. I'm not sure if this is the total of modernization. Okay. I'm being told that the total number of active projects that we have under way in terms of spaces for modernizations is 6,600 spaces, so that's what we are currently working towards achieving with the modernization projects that we have under way. Again, there are 24 modernization projects under way, so those will yield us about 6,600 spaces.

In terms of answering your specific question about the timelines and the schools now program, I think you've highlighted an important point. The schools now program is not just a program to build and modernize schools; it's also a new approach to building schools. We have introduced an accelerated decision-making process so that, again, once a project has completed the requirements of either the planning phase or the design phase, it can then move to the next phase mid-year when it's ready. Previously a project could only move from the planning to design or to construction phase during the budget cycle, so of course that meant that there was only that one opportunity per year for a project to move forward. The schools now program dramatically changes that and creates an environment where a project can move forward at any time of the year.

We are typically returning to Treasury Board every 3 to 4 months with requests to move a project forward given their successful completion of the requirements of the current phase that they're in. What we're seeing is that the accelerated approval process under the schools now program has reduced timelines by up to 9 and a half months on average. There was one project in particular where we were able to accelerate it forward an entire year from what would have been previously possible. So we are seeing real, tangible time savings through the accelerated approval process. In total, as well, 38 projects have been accelerated through this process from one stage to the next. Of course, that process will continue as we work to build these new spaces.

When the Premier announced the schools now program in September of '24, she knew and we knew that it's simply not

enough to just announce that we're going to build more schools, but that we need to build them quickly and we need to build them as fast as possible. This new accelerated approval process will help to make sure that these schools are built as quickly as possible and these new spaces are added.

10:30

Mr. Lundy: I appreciate that, Minister. You answered my next question. It sounds like it was 38 projects that have been opened or accelerated through the schools now program. That's good to hear. I might have one more capital question for you here in my block. I think we've gone over, you know, the \$8.6 billion commitment, and you did have a chance to unpack some of the steps for my colleagues.

Through the chair, I'd like to return to key objective 4.1 on page 49. This is all in relation to "implement school capital strategies to renovate and increase the number of student spaces in the communities of greatest need." Through the chair, Minister, are you able to provide some commentary on how the government determines where schools are needed the most, and then maybe expand a little on the project management side? How does the government ensure that school projects are constructed in a way that prevents cost overruns, just to kind of give us a little light on that?

Mr. Nicolaides: Yeah. Absolutely. As I mentioned earlier, we prioritize the school projects that we are selecting to add into the capital plan using very transparent and consistent criteria. I mentioned earlier that health and safety consideration is a primary consideration because, obviously, we can imagine, if there's a school in the province that has acquired some kind of extremely significant structural issue that has become a health and safety risk, that will move that project right to the top of the list, because we cannot have students in spaces that are posing health and safety risks. So that is a significant factor that we use. We look at building condition, of course. We look at other criteria, and another primary criteria, of course, is enrolment and utilization. If we know that a specific school is at extreme overcapacity and there is significant enrolment pressure in a particular community or in a particular quadrant of the city, then that will strengthen that project's candidacy.

[Ms Wright in the chair]

It doesn't mean that the projects are not important. They're all important, but I remember that last year we had received, I think, over 420 requests for school projects, be they modernizations, additions, replacements, or brand new schools, so we have to put on a level of prioritization. That's the approach that we take in determining which projects will move ahead. You are correct. There, of course, are risks, and there can be cost overruns. That has happened in the past with particular projects. Moving to the phased approach, beginning with planning, then design, then full construction, helps to mitigate a lot of potential time overruns, project delays, and cost overruns as well. I think it's very logical and intuitive as to how that can happen.

If a project is in the planning phase and we've ensured that project has met all of the appropriate requirements – the site is ready, it's graded, it's completely prepared, the utilities are connected and in place, the proper permits are in place, all of those elements – then the project can proceed to the design phase without any interruption or hiccup. Once the design work is completed, the architectural renderings and drawings are all completed, we have a final cost analysis based on the updated design work, then we can confidently move forward to the construction phase, knowing we can proceed immediately, that we can put shovels in the ground

very quickly because all of that preliminary and preparatory work has already been completed. We know we're not going to announce construction and then find out that the site is not ready for whatever reason. We do all of that work ahead of time, and that will eliminate any potential project delays and cost overruns.

Mr. Lundy: Thank you, Minister. I appreciate the breakdown of some of the work that goes into these decisions.

I know that the communities themselves are appreciative of being part of that process and working, of course, with their school boards, all coming together to look at some of your considerations.

It looks like our time in this block is closing. I might open the door for a response later on another important topic. I grew up in rural Alberta, so transportation was always a big issue. I noticed in this budget on page 83, line item 3.4, that there is a commitment for supporting student transportation. This is funding that is going directly to the school divisions. I won't ask you to jump into that in six seconds, but I did want to highlight this investment perhaps for later on in our time.

Thank you very much, Minister.

The Acting Deputy Chair: That concludes the government members' first block of questions.

Now we will move on to the second round of questions and responses. The caucus rotation going forward will be the same as in the first round, starting with the Official Opposition, followed by members of any other party or independent members, and then the members of the government caucus. However, the speaking times are now reduced to five minutes for the duration of the meeting. We will begin this rotation with a member of the Official Opposition, who will have up to five minutes for questions and comments, followed by a response from the minister, who may speak for up to five minutes. After both individuals have had an opportunity to speak once, we will then move on to the next caucus in the rotation. If the member and the minister agree to share time, we will proceed with the 10-minute segment, during which neither the member nor the minister may speak for more than five minutes at a time. Members are reminded that they may not share any unused portion of their five minutes with another member.

Member and Minister, do you wish to share your time?

Mr. Eggen: If that's okay. Sure.

Mr. Nicolaides: Sure. Yeah.

The Acting Deputy Chair: Thank you. Please remember that discussion should flow through the chair at all times regardless of whether or not the speaking time is combined.

Member Eggen, please proceed.

[Ms. Lovely in the chair]

Mr. Eggen: Thank you, Chair and, through you, to the minister. I appreciate the opportunity to ask a few questions. We try to move fast here because time knows no – is the master. Just looking on page 83 of the main estimates. I'm looking at your operating budget expense for the minister's office, 1.1., and I notice that it goes up quite dramatically. I'm seeing an increase here of \$249,000, like, a 25 per cent increase from 2025. I was just wondering if the minister could explain why the minister's office budget has gone up so much.

Mr. Nicolaides: Yeah. Of course. In May of last year we, the ministry of education, also absorbed child care, so there was additional staffing required to help supplement the additional workload.

Mr. Eggen: Okay. So how many more staff did you hire?

Mr. Nicolaides: I can't recall. One to two.

Mr. Eggen: Okay.

Mr. Nicolaides: I can't recall specifically, but . . .

Mr. Eggen: When you go back, you can check and see in the office how many people are there.

Mr. Nicolaides: I mean, I know how many staff I have in my office, but I can't recall specifically how many additional staff were added as of May to help augment and supplement the work of child care.

Mr. Eggen: Okay. And did you, as part of your HR, have salary increases to the staff and your executive staff, your deputy ministers, and directors, and so forth as well?

Mr. Nicolaides: I don't believe there were any salary increases in my office. There may have been salary increases for deputy minister and other levels due to collective bargaining increases.

Mr. Eggen: Okay. Do you know offhand what percentage increase they received?

Mr. Nicolaides: For the entirety of ministry support services there was \$794,000 specifically associated with collective bargaining agreement related increases.

Mr. Eggen: Okay. Like, you don't have a breakdown of the percentage? You can give that to me at some other time. Time is moving along here.

I'm curious about the dual credit program. I was with Advanced Education estimates last night, and they were talking about it a lot. I haven't been keeping track on the K to 12 side. Like, just the scope, if you continue to invest in dual credit, you know, by how much, and what sort of programs are you maintaining, and where is it happening, if it is still happening like it did before?

10:40

Mr. Nicolaides: Yeah. Let me pull up those details for you. We are, of course, continuing to invest in dual credit programs and trying to create and expand those opportunities for students, including continued investments in both operating and capital for collegiate programs to help expand those spaces. It's still a priority.

Regarding dual credit grants specifically, there's \$4.5 million that is available for dual credit grants in the '26-27 school year, and that can support the start-up of a new dual credit opportunity or the continued operation of an existing one.

Mr. Eggen: What kind of programs? I got the who, what, when, where. I know the why – because it's a good idea – but we need to have investment that is commensurate with population growth and interest and interaction with postsecondary, too, which you're super familiar with, that file.

Mr. Nicolaides: I'm sorry; I missed your question.

Mr. Eggen: What kind of programs do you have, right? I mean, you saw how much. What sort of programs are being supported and some example of where they're located. I can recall, for example, that here in Edmonton there was the St. Joseph high school that had a nursing dual credit program that allowed students to enter into the nursing program at NorQuest. I mean, that was some years ago, but if you can just give me some sense of what's happening today.

Mr. Nicolaides: Yeah. It might take me a few minutes just to pull some examples of specific dual credit programs that school divisions are running because, of course, we do provide them with the funding, and primarily for estimates we're looking at the financial implications and consequences. I don't have a detailed list in front of me regarding some of the specific dual credit programs that are operating and that are under way by our school divisions, but I can pull some examples for you, for sure.

Mr. Eggen: Okay. Sure. Yeah. I can see your deputies maybe even will find something. We can go back to that. That's fine.

As I was mentioning to you just this morning before the meeting started, I did hear on the radio that Wild Rose school division was starting to charge fees for transportation. They said that the funding for their buses and so forth was inadequate for them to maintain services, so they were planning to charge fees for students to ride the bus. I mean, this has always been deemed an essential service for students to be able to get to school regardless of where they live here in the province, and, you know, I find this a little bit disturbing because, of course, if this is allowed to take place, then we might see other school divisions charging. In fact, some already have been. You know, it puts parents and then students in a compromised situation. So I was just wondering if the minister did hear that story or if it has crossed his desk, and what's he planning to do about it?

Mr. Nicolaides: I didn't hear that particular story. However, when it comes to transportation, generally we do provide targeted funding to school divisions to support the transportation requirements that they have. We do have specific regulations that outline, of course, what the requirements are for school divisions to transport students, and then we provide them with funding to be able to address that.

Apart from funding to school divisions to support transportation, there's also a fuel contingency program, which is used to help offset costs of fuel prices. In addition, we also have separate funding that's provided to school divisions to assist with school bus driver training and retention. There have been some concerns about school divisions unable to hire qualified bus drivers, so we have provided them, for the past few years, with targeted funding to help support the costs associated with training bus drivers as well.

School divisions have the authority and the flexibility to charge school bus fees if they deem it necessary. We have very strict requirements associated with that, and they can only charge fees that are cost neutral. They cannot charge fees that would put them into a surplus position in their transportation budget line item. It can only be to cover the actual cost of delivering the service.

Mr. Eggen: So, like, as you said, there is targeted funding for student transportation into each school board. Do you compel them to prove that they're spending that money for student transportation? Is that part of an auditing process that takes place, and so forth? Clearly, Wild Rose school division and many others are saying that they have inadequate funding to bus their students, you know, and they are having to charge extra fees.

Now, charging extra fees can be a slippery slope, Madam Chair, because, of course, there's a myriad of other places that you could charge extra fees, and once the door gets opened, it's very difficult to close. So I'm just wondering what the ministry's plan is to deal with this. I can expect if Wild Rose is talking about it, we will have dozens of other rural school boards that will be doing exactly the same thing. There were parents on the radio this morning that said that they just can't deal with this. The affordability crisis is just as real in the rural areas as anywhere else. And, you know, at this point in time, we need to support our families and not just charge them extra fees all the time. What are you going to do?

Mr. Nicolaides: Well, one of the things that we're going to do is provide school divisions with more funding to help address transportation costs. Budget '26 includes a 3 per cent increase to the transportation funding envelope to help address some of the increased costs associated with transportation. It is important to note that, at the end of the day, school divisions have the complete autonomy and authority to determine service levels for their school division. We do have a legislated minimum requirement, but school divisions can provide a higher degree of service if they so desire and may then . . .

The Chair: Thank you so much, members. We're going to move over to the government side. Oh, it's break time. Five minutes, everyone. I drank too much tea.

[The committee adjourned from 10:47 a.m. to 10:52 a.m.]

The Chair: All right, everyone. That's the end of our break. We are going to resume with questions from the government side. Please proceed.

Mr. Singh: Thank you, Madam Chair.
Shared time, Minister?

The Chair: Minister, will it be shared or block time?

Mr. Nicolaides: I'm comfortable with shared time.

The Chair: All right. Let's proceed.

Mr. Singh: Thank you, Madam Chair, again, and thank you, Minister and the entire team, on addressing strategies to support our education system here. My questions are on capital investment. It's already been touched on earlier by members there, but I would like to circle back a little bit more since a lot of questions have been unpacked already. But, through you, Madam Chair, my question is: Minister, you had mentioned modular classrooms as a strategy to increase the number of student spaces as fast as possible. As enrolment drastically jumped at a pace faster than schools can be built, I know our government has looked at every option it can to keep Alberta's education system world class. I see that key objective 4.1 on page 49 of the business plan requires that the department "implement school capital strategies to renovate and increase the number of student spaces in the communities of [great] need." How much does Budget 2026 provide for Alberta's modular classroom program, and how many student spaces will be created from this investment? How does the ministry determine where modular classrooms should be allocated?

Mr. Nicolaides: Well, thank you so much for the for the question. You know, modular classrooms play a really important role in space creation and can be very effective solutions. I actually am not a big fan, though, of calling them modulars. Having been able to see first-hand in the construction facilities what some of our Alberta-based construction companies are able to produce, I wouldn't classify them as modulars. When you think of modular, you probably have an image in your mind of like an ATCO trailer type of thing, which is not the case. I mean, I would categorize these more as prefabricated classrooms that are of incredible quality. Anyway, that's a perhaps a discussion for another time. I'll continue to use the term modulars, though, for now. I think, just in terms of public awareness and understanding, if we describe them as prefab classrooms, it's a little bit more accurate to what they're able to do.

That being said, they do serve an important purpose and they can be and are very effective interim solutions to address significant space pressures. Obviously, as we know, it takes four to five years

to build a new school, and that obviously takes a significant period of time. Dispatching modulars can be a very immediate solution to address those pressure needs. That's part of the reason why in Budget '26 we made a significant increase to the allocation for the modular classroom program and increased it to \$200 million. It's very significant.

I think, as Jeff had commented earlier, we haven't seen that level of investment in the modular classroom program in the last several years, so it's definitely something of note. We aim to sustain that \$200 million a year investment over the next three years for a total of \$600 million. We expect that each year we'll be able to deliver approximately 230 modulars every year for the next three years. That will create about 6,000 student spaces every year. It can go a long way and help address some real serious and significant pressure points where they exist in our communities.

I think you also asked about allocation or determining how we prioritize which modular classrooms we're going to approve, and I think we had touched on this a little bit. Some of the primary considerations are things like enrolment trends and growth pressures. We will look very specifically at where a school division is requesting the modulars and look at the utilization rates of those particular schools and look at the enrolment pressures in those communities. That is an important variable that we'll use to determine where the modular classrooms are dispatched to.

We did also talk about safety and urgency. There have been situations where schools have had to close very quickly due to health and safety reasons or requirements, and dispatching modulars there is needed on an urgent basis given health and safety considerations. If mould is identified or if there's some remediation work happening and you have to close part of the school for some remediation or for modernization, you need temporary spaces. The urgency factor is an important one that we evaluate as well in determining where the modulars should go.

Mr. Singh: Thank you, Minister, for the answer.

My next question is on the funding framework here, through you, Madam Chair. Alberta is the biggest – it has also been the sole net receiver of interprovincial migration in past years. I think this speaks to Alberta's government making the right decisions when it comes to economic opportunities and protecting the Alberta advantage. Historic student enrolment will require historic investments as our province meets the challenges of the future.

I note that on page 49 outcome 4 requires that Alberta's K to 12 education system and workforce are well managed. This involves the department directing the provision of funds in the system. Would the minister please outline how Budget 2026 addresses this historic enrolment? How does this compare to Budget 2025 and previous overall funding? How will Albertan teachers and families see this historic investment impact their school system?

11:00

Mr. Nicolaidis: Yeah. Thank you for the important question. I think we've talked a little bit already this morning about the magnitude of enrolment increase that we've seen. It is truly unprecedented. We've never seen enrolment pressure like this before. I think it's important to highlight that the government is stepping up in really serious and meaningful ways to address this unprecedented challenge.

We've been talking a lot about the schools now program, the \$8.6 billion investment to build in modernized schools. We've just talked, of course, about modulars, a record \$600 million budget for modular classrooms over three years. These are significant and tangible steps that the government is taking to address a lot of the pressure.

Apart from capital we are also investing significantly in operating, including a \$722 million increase, which is equivalent to a 7.2 per cent increase in our operating budget this year alone. That's a very significant increase. In fact, I was looking back to see when there might be a comparable year that had such a significant increase, and we weren't able to find one. There has not been an increase of this magnitude to education investment since probably the 1980s. It is truly an unprecedented level of investment that we are providing and is, of course, significantly needed as we contend with a significant increase to our population.

We are estimating that with the funding that we have provided this year, we'll be able to hire more than 1,600 teachers and over 800 other support staff. I mentioned earlier some of the aggressive work that's under way with Edmonton public schools to have their 101 complexity teams in place by the end of April. Our school divisions are working aggressively to hire the requisite staff. We are making sure that they have the funding and support that they need to conduct that aggressive hiring, and I'm confident that working in collaboration with our school divisions we will deliver in hiring that staff and providing more supports to students in their classrooms so that we can make sure that every student continues to receive a world-class education.

I don't share the view that the NDP does. I think we have an excellent system. I think it's incredibly strong, and we're going to make sure that it stays that way.

The Chair: Thank you so much.

We're going back over to the government side. Please proceed. Shared or blocked?

Ms Wright: Although I'm pretty sure we're the opposition side, but thank you, Chair.

The Chair: What did I say? Did I say government?

Ms Wright: You said government. You did.

The Chair: I'm sorry. After so many hours of estimates, it just blends together.

Please proceed. Shared or blocked?

Ms Wright: Shared would be fine with me if the minister is all right with shared still?

Mr. Nicolaidis: Yes, I am.

Ms Wright: Okay. Thank you.

Chair, we'll start right away with page 79 of the fiscal plan where it's sort of that overall view. You've been talking about it just in the last series of questions that we're going to be hiring 1,500 more educational assistants and 3,000 more teachers over the next three years; however, there are known issues with teacher retention. For instance, there's an estimate that something like 35 per cent of teachers won't be teaching in the next five years. We know that teachers retire; somewhere around 1,000 annually retire. We know that there's a lack of teacher supply, in other words, a lack of substitute teachers.

I'm wondering, too, if we've been missing our own hiring targets over the last number of years when one sort of compares the different fiscal plans and the different targets for hiring and FTEs. We seem to have not been reaching those targets the last number of years. I'm wondering what actions the ministry has taken to ensure that the government will actually meet those hiring targets in this next fiscal year. That would be my first question.

Mr. Nicolaides: Sure. There are a number of things that we're doing to help ensure that our school divisions meet the hiring targets that we've outlined. One, we are ensuring that the school divisions have the requisite funding that they need to recruit those positions. I was talking a moment ago about a 7 per cent increase to our operating budget this year. That funding will ensure that the school divisions can hire the staff. In addition, of course, with Bill 2 we're providing significant increase to teacher compensation. Teachers in Alberta will have the highest take-home pay in western Canada, which, of course, is very competitive and very attractive.

In addition, we are taking other steps to create additional pathways to teacher certification as well, recognizing that there can be individuals that have expertise in industry or through an advanced degree in a particular field. We're looking to create new pathways to allow those individuals to be certified as a teacher and teach their particular area of expertise in our schools. Those new pathways will help to broaden the pool of available talent.

In addition, though, our BEd programs graduate on average approximately 2,000 students every single year collectively, and we certify approximately 800 individuals from other provinces who come to Alberta and we transfer their teaching credential to Alberta. Based on those numbers we have adequate supply, and we'll make sure that the school divisions have the funding that they need to recruit those individuals. If there's more that we can do, we'll continue to work with our school divisions to see how we can help.

Ms Wright: Thank you, Minister.

A related question but more specifically with support workers, particularly in terms of EAs: I was speaking to a number of folks, and they are noticing now that there is an uptick in the number of EAs who are requesting leave. That sort of speaks to work conditions and what's going on particularly with complexity. This will certainly have an impact on the overall numbers that are employed over the next number of years.

When you look at that number of 476 complexity teams, two EAs joining each of those teams, that says to me 952 new EAs will be hired in a very, very small period of time. Again, I'm also concerned that the targets for hiring support workers weren't met over the next number of years, so these two kind of roll in together for me.

If we know that the target wasn't met, if we know that we have to hire these 952 EAs, and you've spoken about aggressive hiring happening particularly with Edmonton public, for instance, the first question I have is really one of clarity just to make sure that the complexity team item is completely separate from the other class complexity grants. These people who are being hired now are just . . .

Mr. Nicolaides: Right.

Ms Wright: Okay. That's fine.

The question I would have, then, would be: you've got these 952 new hires. You've committed to the hiring of the extra EAs as well. What assurances can you give those school divisions that, first of all, those numbers will actually be met when we know we've got a terrific issue of no supply of EAs available already? I'm just wondering if the pool is really as great as your optimism would have it be.

Mr. Nicolaides: Well, again, the school divisions are primarily responsible for hiring, and we operate in a support capacity in that particular environment. Our primary responsibility in a support capacity is, first and foremost, to make sure that the school divisions actually have the funding that's required to be able to hire those positions.

Through our commitments in Bill 2 the increase in operating funding for this budget, the dispatch of the complexity team, is \$143 million allocated for that. We have ensured that the school divisions have the adequate funding that is necessary to hire that additional staff. I know our school divisions are working aggressively, as we mentioned, to hire those individuals. I'm confident they'll be able to meet those requirements.

And, yes, there is no question that there are some challenging dynamics today, and EAs and teachers are certainly experiencing the brunt of dramatic and sudden population increase. That's not just an increase to population by itself, but it also comes with added complexity. We talked at the very beginning about some of the increases of children of temporary residents, of students who speak English as an additional language, or refugee students. Those numbers have also dramatically increased.

There's no question that classrooms are becoming more challenging as there's more complexity, more requirements. That's why we're taking this action, so that we can get the necessary support staff into the classrooms and help alleviate that pressure.

11:10

Ms Wright: Thank you, Minister. Speaking of that issue of funding, then, is there any sort of a guarantee that the funding for the class complexity teams, those 952 EAs, will then eventually be rolled into the greater class complexity budget line? In other words, that funding that's now being guaranteed for those class complexity teams will simply become guaranteed funding, not just for this year but for subsequent years as well.

Mr. Nicolaides: Obviously, I can't speculate what will happen in future years. I know that as minister the steps that I have taken have been to create separate line items specifically for the classroom complexity teams. We do have funding allotted, though, to ensure the continuance of those complexity teams over the next few years. Obviously, what decisions future governments, future ministers, future budgets make: I, you know, can't attest to that. But from my position the decisions that I've made would have provided funding to support the continuance of those complexity teams over the next few years.

Ms Wright: Thank you. So continuing with the issue of retention of workers, again, specifically educational assistants related to outcome 4, performance metric 4(c): alongside programs that are offered at various postsecondary institutions, back in 2023 school divisions, including Edmonton public, received funds for a pilot project, that educational assistants mentoring program. In the '24-25 annual report it talked about the class complexity grant, and it said that \$480,000 from that funding was going to be used to increase the number of educational assistant graduates in the province through the educational assistant internship program, and that to date 281 participants have completed the program overall.

I'm wondering a couple of things. Out of that 281 number of participants, how many were actual new hires versus people who are already hired and just wanting to gain that additional knowledge and experience? As well, how much of this year's budget is earmarked to the program, and has it been rolled out province wide? In other words, available to all school divisions within the province.

Sorry; I'm just going to get this extra one in here. Depending upon those numbers, has there been – and I realize this would need to be done in consultation with Advanced Ed – a commensurate increase in the number of seats available in postsecondaries? You talked about the number of folks who were graduated as teachers. I'm wondering if the same sort of thing has been happening with those EA assistant certificate and diploma programs as well.

Mr. Nicolaides: Sure. The EA program with Edmonton public has seen some promising results, which is why we have decided to support it and decided to provide continued funding to it. I know that some of the numbers reported from Edmonton public indicate that 400 people have participated in the spring of 2025 in that program. To date 863 people have completed the program. So it's showing some very strong and positive signs, and it's part of the reason why we have provided funding. In terms of rolling it out to the rest of the province, that's something that we'll be looking at carefully, recognizing that the pilot seems to be showing some strong results.

Ms Wright: Okay. Thank you.

The Chair: Now we're going back to the government side. Please proceed, Member.

Mr. Singh: Thank you, Madam Chair. I will continue where I left. My next question is on funding framework. Through you, Madam Chair, Alberta's student population has grown over 80,000 students since the 2021-2022 school year, and it is encouraging to see that our government is making record investments to address that growth. I would like to understand how the government is ensuring that such a historic investment is allocated in the best way possible.

I see key objective 4.2 on page 49 of the business plan requires the government to establish a data-driven approach to monitor and allocate resources towards mitigating the impact of classroom complexity on students and teachers. What specific funding allocations are increasing as a result of the \$722 million increased education investment in Budget 2026? How will these grant funding increases address the challenges our schools are facing? What can Albertans see more of in these schools due to these grant increases?

Mr. Nicolaides: Thank you very much. Before I answer your question, I'm going to steal a little bit of your time. My apologies.

I promised the Member for Edmonton-North West that I would get back to him. He asked about some of the specific dual credit programs. As an example, some of those dual credit opportunities include apprenticeship for our carpentry and carpenters, welding, auto service technician, hairstyling, and health care aide. These are some examples of some of the dual credit opportunities that are available in our schools.

Also – I'll steal another 20 seconds – just to come back to Wild Rose school division and their bus fees. I was able to dig up some more information, so I thought I would provide it here. In 2019 Wild Rose school division made the operational decision as a local school authority to contract out their student transportation services. What we've been able to see is that in the short term they were able to realize some savings. Rather than administering the service themselves, they have subcontracted it out.

However, over the past two years they have seen significant increases in the cost of delivering that transportation. If this note is accurate, they've seen a 50 per cent increase as a consequence of contracting out their busing to that specific contractor. There have been increases from other contracting authorities across the province, but those have seen about a 35 per cent increase. The contractor that Wild Rose school division is using appears to be reflective of some significant increases that appear to be outside of the provincial norm. That's part of the reason why they're seeing some of that. We will continue to work with them and see what we can do to help and assist them given that unique kind of circumstance that they're operating in.

To come back to your question, MLA Singh – thank you for letting me steal a couple of minutes to answer those outstanding

questions – Budget '26 delivers some very specific and targeted increases to grant rates. The way the education funding works, in short, is that we provide grant streams for very specific purposes. For example, there's an English as an additional language grant stream. This is money that goes specifically to school divisions based on the number of students they have identified as speaking English as an additional language. There's a specific dollar amount that is attached to each student, and those dollars flow to the school division for them to use to provide support. There are a variety of different grants.

Those grants have seen increases in this budget, which is an important consideration to make. When we talk about \$355 million to address complexity, that is separate from grant rate increases as well. For example, the base instruction grant is receiving a 3 per cent increase. Other specialized grants, including program unit funding, or PUF, the moderate language delay grant, the English as an additional language grant, and the francization grant, are all seeing a 6 per cent increase to those specific line items. Of course, a 6 per cent increase to the English as an additional language grant item or to the moderate language delay grant item also helps to alleviate complexity issues in our classroom. The specialized learner support grant; the refugee student grant; the First Nations, Métis, and Inuit grant; the francophone equivalency grant; the transportation grant; and the school technology grant are also being increased by 3 per cent in this budget. The operations and maintenance grant is increasing by 5 per cent as well.

Again, apart from the \$355 million and the \$143 million for the complexity teams that we talk about, these grant rates will also increase the capacity of school divisions to deliver customized and tailored services and programming to students that fit these specific categories that I've just mentioned.

Mr. Singh: Thank you, Minister.

My next question is on the classroom complexity. I think you have touched a little bit on it, but we'll just expound a little bit more. I've been hearing from my constituents of Calgary-East about the increased complexity in our school system, especially occurring after kids could not participate in in-person learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. This complexity puts pressure on classrooms and can prevent schools from being conducive to learning if not properly addressed. I note that on page 49 of the education business plan key objective 4.2 indicates that the department should establish a data-driven approach to monitor and allocate resources towards mitigating the impact of class size and classroom complexity on students and teachers. How does Budget 2026 mitigate the impact of classroom complexity on students and teachers? How will school divisions spend the classroom complexity grant on complex classrooms? How does this government's effort to mitigate the impact of classroom complexity change to respond to teachers' concerns?

Thank you, Minister.

11:20

Mr. Nicolaides: Yeah. Thank you for raising that. Certainly, the issue of classroom complexity has now perhaps become the single greatest question and issue for us to address in our education system, compounded by, as we've mentioned before, a significant population increase over the past few years that's also come with a significant complexity increase as well. We have recognized this challenge. Apart from just recognizing it, though, we're taking really active and concrete steps to be able to address it.

Of course, we're all familiar with the announcement last month to provide \$143 million in funding to dispatch 476 complexity teams. The dispatching of these complexity teams is a new

endeavour and something that hasn't occurred before within the province. I'm very optimistic of the opportunity for success that these complexity teams will be able to deliver. I know our school divisions who are sitting at the table with us at the Class Size and Complexity Cabinet Committee, that is making these decisions, are looking very favourably towards the dispatching of these complexity teams. We've talked already about Edmonton public schools and how they're working very aggressively to get their complexity teams in place by the end of April. There's a lot of support for this approach, and I'm confident it will help move the needle in a significant way.

There's so much more that's happening outside of just complexity teams. We talked earlier about the increased funding to English as an additional language grant to refugee grant to all of these other specific grants. That's going to add capacity to our school divisions to hire more staff and provide more services and supports to those students that fit those particular grants.

On top of that, Budget '26 will provide \$355 million in additional funding. Fifty-five million of that is going to the classroom complexity grant. Again, that is a new grant. That grant was created back in 2023 specifically to address emerging issues around classroom complexity. There's a lot of flexibility associated with that grant. School divisions can use that funding to, you know, hire occupational therapists or speech-language pathologists, conduct assessments, or any other type of activity that they believe is warranted based on the complexity needs of their school division.

The \$300 million: as I mentioned, we will be making final decisions in the late spring, early summer as to how we will allocate those dollars. I'll be talking with our school divisions first and collecting more data from our school divisions to get a refreshed view of complexity before we make final decisions. That'll be coming very soon.

The Chair: Thank you so much.

We'll move back over to the Official Opposition. Please proceed.

Ms Wright: Thank you very much, Chair, and through you to the minister. There was just a mention, I think, of services provided to First Nations, Métis, and Inuit students in Alberta. As folks around the table know, I'm sure, Jordan's principle changed its funding over the last few months. As a result of that, I think about 450 or so EAs across the province lost their jobs, which, of course, means that those particular students who were being assisted by those EAs lost that support in terms of their classrooms. I'm wondering if the increase that you just talked about to Indigenous students accounts for that loss of that Jordan's principle funding and accounts for that loss of those 450 EAs.

Mr. Nicolaides: I'll have to refresh myself on the total funding that was lost as a result of the federal government decision. It was significant. The First Nations, Métis, and Inuit grant, as I mentioned, is receiving a 3 per cent increase. I don't believe that increase would cover the loss of the Jordan's principle. I'll get you the more specific numbers, but I don't believe it would cover that loss. I was very disappointed to see the federal government make that decision and pull that funding. It has resulted, as you mentioned, in the loss of hundreds of EAs. However, the steps that we're taking through the complexity teams and other funding in Budget '26 to help hire more EAs will help to correct that federal government decision.

If I may steal 30 seconds of your time to answer one of your previous questions, I was able to get a little bit more information on the EA program with Edmonton public.

Ms Wright: Sure.

Mr. Nicolaides: We've invested \$2 million over the last several years to help support that EA program with Edmonton public. Currently, actually – I was mistaken – many school jurisdictions actually do participate. Approximately 40 school divisions currently participate in that program, and it helps to provide, of course, professional learning and training opportunities to EAs.

In terms of hiring, we were able to pull very quickly some of the numbers from Edmonton public schools reporting on their hiring. In the fall of '24 they were able to hire 84 individuals; 58 were new hires and 26 were existing. In the spring of '25, 479, representing 139 new hires and 304 existing.

Ms Wright: Thank you.

I'm going to switch gears again back to the more generalized outcome 4 of the business plan, that idea that schools are able to attract and retain teachers specifically. In 2024-25 only 70 per cent of principals agreed that they were able to attract and retain principals. That means 30 per cent, of course, don't agree. The target for this year I know is 71 per cent. We also understand that working conditions, of course, have a direct impact upon retention and teachers deciding to leave. Certainly, in my view, while I think the class complexity teams will help, they are not the only answer.

I note that in the '24-25 annual report Alberta continued to explore ways to support the recruitment and retention of teachers, and you touched on them a moment ago as well: bridge to teacher certification, teacher certificate and bursary programs, improving supports for francophone and French language teachers as well. I just wanted to touch on those particular items for a moment, if I could. For the teachers' certificate and bursary programs, the northern student teacher bursary was provided to 37 participants last year, the rural practicum bursary to 83, the bridge to teacher certification, which is where tradespeople receive funding; I believe 25 folks actually were involved in that. I'm wondering, first of all: where in the budget are those numbers allocated? There doesn't seem to be a specific line item. My assumption is that it's included in something else. Are the dollar figures that are allocated to those programs similar or increased from last year as well? That'd be my first question there.

Mr. Nicolaides: Sure. I'll have to double-check with Jeff here and the team about increases to those particular bursaries from last year to this year. Let me get back to you on that.

Those specific elements, though, are captured in 3.2 of the estimates, so that's where you'll see them. It might be 3.3. Apologies. We'll get exact clarity as to which line item encapsulates those specific bursaries.

However, regarding the specific bursaries and the funding that's allocated for them, it has maintained the same from last year. There hasn't been a change from last year's levels.

Ms Wright: Okay. I'm also looking for a confirmation. I must have read something somewhere that talked about jobs, economy, and trade skills offering some money towards that. I'm wondering if that's still happening this year. Again, is the funding maintained? Is it increased? Is it decreased?

Mr. Nicolaides: Let me have a closer look at that specific one for you. I think that program has lapsed. I don't believe that that's captured in Budget '26.

Ms Wright: Okay. Thank you.

There was a survey a number of months ago, the Telus survey, that talked about second-career teachers specifically. What they talk about is that there is a real concerning trend that in the end there

appears to be some low job satisfaction of second-career teachers, and those trades teachers would have been encapsulated in that.

In Alberta specifically 11 per cent of teachers who come from previous careers, including trades: those teachers report 20 per cent lower job satisfaction than their peers, which, of course, suggests that those who transitioned into teaching later in life are finding it especially challenging to thrive under the current conditions. Since we know we've got amongst the highest youth unemployment in the country, we know there's a shortage of trade workers, we know that many folks in the trades professions are nearing or at retirement age, and this is essentially a straight line from being a student to having a good job, we do in fact require these folks to be teaching in schools and to be teachers in both junior highs and high schools.

11:30

Additionally, there's a lack of resources, a lack of space itself in some of our schools as well. When I talk about resources, I'm really talking about supplies and equipment, particularly in terms of safety supplies so that things are current and up to current codes. Like, I think about a construction classroom I was in just a couple of years ago, and they talked very, very clearly about how they didn't have enough money in their own budget to be able to get new supplies for kids to ensure that everyone in the classroom was safe. I'm wondering, again, if there's somewhere in the budget where these additional resources are encapsulated or if that's simply part of the per-student grant.

Mr. Nicolaidis: It can vary.

Just to answer your previous question, though, on the bursaries – my apologies – it is not encapsulated in line 3.2; it's in 2. That's where the bursaries and other programs related to teacher recruitment, retention, and other incentives for rural and northern teacher bursaries and incentives would live.

Regarding funding for some of these CTS programs and other programs the school divisions, of course, receive their base operating funding, which they can use to support their general operations. They have a lot of flexibility with that funding envelope to determine how it's allocated and where it's allocated. School divisions take very different approaches. Some use incredibly sophisticated tools to determine how they allocate their funding to schools across their division. Others take different approaches. There can be a lot of variance there.

That aside, we do provide funding to support collegiate programming. There's targeted funding specifically for equipment, for start-up costs associated with developing a new collegiate program, infrastructure that's required there, and other funding that's provided to support ongoing program operations. So we do have targeted funding that goes specifically to those areas, but it can be supplemented and augmented by general funding that the school division receives, depending on the final budget decisions that the school division makes.

Ms Wright: Okay. Very quickly – I'll get this last one in – as a result of those Telus survey results has there been any thought to doing a more directive survey to those teachers in those professions to see how they're doing right now and what might be beneficial to them to get them to stay in those particular positions?

Mr. Nicolaidis: Yeah. That's definitely something that we want to take a closer look at. It's part of the reason why I'm putting together a teacher advisory council as well, to be able to have some more direct line of sight, direct the amounts.

Ms Wright: Thank you.

The Chair: Over to the government side. Please proceed. You're live.

Mrs. Johnson: Here we go. Thank you, Madam Chair, and thank you to the minister and your staff for joining us here today and for these really thoughtful questions and answers and participating in this. I'm going to circle around to the conversation my colleague from Calgary-East started, and it's on class size and complexity because, gosh, we just haven't talked enough about that today. My question is about what the minister referred to with the class size and classroom complexity cabinet committee, and this does come back to the budget. We'll get to that in a second.

Many of us are aware of the class size and complexity committee that the Premier and minister co-chair to present solutions to the workload and classroom conditions that teachers face due to the increased complexity we have seen since the COVID-19 pandemic. To go to key objective 4.2 of the business plan on page 49, it instructs the department to establish a data-driven approach to monitor and allocate resources towards mitigating the impact of class size and classroom complexity on students and teachers. Through you, Madam Chair, to the minister: what has the committee accomplished since this committee was established? What decisions will the committee make involving funding allocated in Budget '26? What work can Albertans expect to see come out of this committee to address classroom complexity? I think you've touched on this a little bit already, but maybe you can expand upon that.

Mr. Nicolaidis: Sure. The establishment of the Class Size and Complexity Cabinet Committee, of course, is a new creature co-chaired by myself and the Premier and including the involvement of teachers, school divisions, superintendents, and other partners so that we have really robust conversations regarding the issues affecting class complexity and we have the relevant partners at the table so that we can make informed decisions. The committee has achieved two key significant milestones to date. The first related to the acquisition of data for over I believe it was 108,000 or 109,000 classrooms in Alberta and to a level of detail that is quite unprecedented. We did not just look at class size level, as we've discussed, but we looked at composition of the classrooms and we've looked at occurrence rates of different complexity matters and a whole host of other data and pieces of information.

This supports the key objective that we have in our business plan to make evidence-based decisions. This is the most robust data set that any government has ever had when it comes to the state of our classrooms. We have used that data to make informed decisions, which relates to the second key accomplishment of the committee to date, which is the dispatch of the 476 complexity teams and the allocation of the \$143 million that's required to support those complexity teams. That was done with an evidence-based approach as we looked specifically at class size, composition, and occurrence rates, as I mentioned before, to determine which classrooms had the highest levels of complexities and then allocate the complexity teams to those schools.

The committee has more work to do. They will help support and provide additional advice, guidance, and direction on the allocation of the \$300 million that I mentioned earlier. We'll be talking about that in the next few months. In addition, the committee is also working now to develop and finalize a new inclusive education policy framework that will help support the development of new standards for special education. The current standards that we have in place that our school divisions use to determine how to meet the needs of students with specialized needs are 20-some years out of date and clearly not reflective of the realities and dynamics that we

have in our classrooms to date. The committee will help to inform the development of those new standards as well, and we aim to have the new framework and the new standards in place for the upcoming school year.

Mrs. Johnson: Excellent. Thank you, Madam Chair, through you to the minister for that answer.

I'm going to shift a little bit here. We'll go away from class size and complexity and go into what I know is a great passion of yours, and I share that. It's literacy and numeracy. Those are some of the most important factors in academic and life success. Falling behind in literacy and numeracy early on makes future learning that much more difficult; it leaves those students further behind. On page 47 of the business plan key objective 1.3 instructs the ministry to develop and maintain comprehensive provincial assessments, including expanding early years foundational literacy and numeracy screenings that assess progress, identify learning gaps, and monitor student success. Could the minister speak to the early years assessments and what they're meant to identify? Does Budget '26 increase funding to ensure kids aren't just getting assessed but also supported? Have other Canadian provinces been following Alberta's lead in implementing early years assessments? What about internationally?

11:40

Mr. Nicolaides: Yeah. Thank you. An important question and an area, as you rightly pointed out, that I'm quite passionate about. Students need the strongest possible start, and that comes with literacy and numeracy. We have to do everything possible to make sure that every student is able to develop the strongest foundations. It's not just because it feels good or it sounds good. There's objective research that points to long-term deficiencies and challenges that students will face, of course, if they don't realize these foundations, not just academically but even from a well-being perspective. Research demonstrates and indicates that students who struggle to read are more at risk for mental health related challenges as they cannot read to the level of their peers, and that can affect them socially, emotionally, and it can affect their psychological well-being, not to mention the obvious academic impacts that can be realized if a student does not get the foundations right.

At that critical grade 3, grade 4 level students shift from learning to read to reading to learn, and if those foundations are not in place, they will struggle academically, and it needs to be addressed. That's one of the main reasons why we have mandated literacy and numeracy screening assessments for every child in K to 3 and have enshrined that in legislation, which was passed in the last session of the Legislative Assembly, requiring every school division to conduct literacy and numeracy screening assessments for every child in K to 3. Identifying the students, of course, is particularly important, but then having the right support in place to support intervention that is necessary and identified through the screening assessments is even more important.

We have increased, to your question, funding in this budget to support literacy and numeracy intervention work. The funding that we're providing this year alone is \$20 million, and that is specifically to the literacy and numeracy support grant, again, another very specific and targeted grant for a specific purpose. That's a 60 per cent increase from last year. School divisions will be able to use those dollars to keep EAs on for longer hours or even hire more EAs or any other kind of specialized staff to conduct assessments and, more importantly, conduct the intervention that's required. This can involve pulling multiple students out from multiple different grades and conducting more one-on-one targeted reading intervention with them or helping them with decoding

sounds and words and with any other type of skill set that has been identified to be lacking.

Other provinces are looking to Alberta with significant interest. Many provinces are knocking at the department doors asking department officials about the approach that we're taking, how we're doing it, and what steps we have taken. I've had conversations with some of my counterparts in other provinces as well at a political level who are quite interested. I know that even other countries are looking very carefully at what's being described now as the Alberta model of literacy and numeracy. I know there's research under way in British Columbia, in Saskatchewan. Ministry officials have also agreed to meet very recently with officials from the government of Uganda. I know there's other research work happening in Belize and in other countries around the world. I think that this will be a point of long-term recognition and success of Alberta's dedication to academic excellence.

Mrs. Johnson: Thank you, Minister.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.
Over to the Official Opposition.

Ms Wright: Thank you, Chair, and through you to the minister. I'm going to move a little bit – I'll be sticking with the retention of educational support workers primarily but more through an occupational health and safety lens if I may. This really speaks to still on outcome 4 but performance metric 4(b) and performance metric 4(c), having to do with satisfaction that school provides a safe, caring, and healthy learning environment as well that agreement that students can access supports and services in a timely manner, speaking primarily to the role of educational assistants here and that a safe and caring school environment for students also means the same for those people who are offering supports and resources to those students, of course.

The complexity in schools action team noted in their report that there was a need for the government to begin exploration of health and safety protections targeted to education staff through existing provincial injury prevention and safety programs offered through occupational health and safety and, in addition, for the government of Alberta to examine legislation to meet the needs and protections of the classroom environment for workplace safety protection.

I certainly understand that for the most part OHS is indeed the purview of Jobs, Economy, Trade and Immigration. However, because this is specific to the on-the-job experiences of educational support workers, I thought I would bring that to these estimates. Again, we know there are difficulties in filling supply positions for teachers as well as for EAs. We know that one of the reasons for that is likely because these are positions that can often come with challenges. It's incredibly difficult – and I can attest to personal experience – to walk into a classroom as that supply teacher when you have no idea who the children are. It's exactly the same for educational assistants, walking into a supply EA position when you do not know and you don't have a relationship with the kids involved, and it's even more difficult to walk into those positions when necessary supports and resources simply don't exist.

We know that, indeed, regardless of funding increases that we might see this year there are still fallouts from that original 2019-2020 cutting of much of the program unit funding that's had a commensurate effect every single year. It is indeed this minister's responsibility to plan for and create overall conditions to retain those educational support workers and educational assistants specifically in a long-term way.

Over the last year, as I mentioned earlier, we know that the incidence of educational assistants and support workers requesting

leave has increased. The provincial summary of workplace injury, illness, and fatality stats from 2024 tells us that claim rates from the government education and health services sector continue to be higher than the provincial average. That sector had the highest claim rate of all industry sectors at 3.3 per 100 person years. This has been a trend since 2020. Even accounting for COVID, this is still a trend.

That does mean then that there continues to be a higher than average percentage of educational workers reporting injuries on the job, and they could be anything: musculoskeletal injuries, sore backs, that sort of thing. It could be a slip or trip or fall. It could also be psychological hazards, just that kind of moral injury that can sometimes occur in these sorts of jobs.

In addition to all of that – again, I have personal experience with this – there is a real tendency to under report workplace injuries and incidents in schools, so I would imagine that the actual percentage attributed to work in schools is probably higher than that that's currently being reported to WCB.

I'm wondering, really, in a general sense to begin with, what work is the ministry undertaking to answer these challenges, if there's consultation planned, if you're looking at different employer-employee groups, what might be beyond the planning stage? Which school divisions are postsecondaries? It seems to me that some of this could be mitigated, sort of backstopped, by that educational component in the beginning for people going into these professions? Are there any other organizations that the ministry is presently working with or planning on working with?

Mr. Nicolaides: Sure. Of course, primary responsibility or considerations, as you've correctly noted, regarding occupational health and safety rest with a different ministry and rest primarily with the employer, who of course in these in these examples are the school divisions, school authorities themselves. However, we do have a role to play, and we are working with our school divisions to see how we can support and assist them.

One of the ways, as I've mentioned before, that we're working with them to help alleviate some of the challenges and the pressures in these areas that you've identified is to decrease workload by hiring more staff. We've talked significantly about many of the plans that are under way, from complexity teams to targeted literacy and numeracy interventionists and others, to help. Hiring these additional educational assistants in these different capacities will of course help to reduce the workload.

In addition, we are also providing an increase in funding to a variety of different areas. We talked about PUF, which has seen approximately a 25 per cent increase since 2022-23, which is a significant increase to help support those students and educational services that are available to those students and to other grant areas as well, as we've mentioned in the past.

11:50

In addition, we are implementing the recommendations from the aggression in schools task force. As I mentioned earlier, the Class Size and Complexity Cabinet Committee is working on developing new frameworks to support inclusive education and new standards for special education. So these things will have, of course, a cascading impact and effect. But as it relates specifically to occupational health and safety considerations, I think you can get a more precise answer with the appropriate ministry at those estimates.

Ms Wright: Okay. I guess a bit of a follow-up, then: are you working directly with Jobs, Economy, Trade and Immigration on these sorts of issues as well to perhaps ensure that there might be

some additional funding or additional changes and regulations; for instance, having any kind of specific results for schools and people who work in schools?

Mr. Nicolaides: Yeah. Well, of course, the ministry will take the lead on managing and making updates to occupational health and safety as needed, but through the Class Size and Complexity Cabinet Committee we do have several other ministers at the table, and we do have more broad conversations as well that do touch into this area. Of course, recognizing that it's cabinet committee, I can't go into too many details, unfortunately, regarding the nature of the conversations. But through the Class Size and Complexity Cabinet Committee we do have other individuals on other ministries that are there and that allow us to have more comprehensive conversations around some of these issues.

Ms Wright: Thank you. On a related note, then, I'm wondering about the incidence of paraprofessionals, not just in schools but – and this, again, I know is not directly in your purview. Years and years ago, when we had regional collaborative service delivery, schools would often have access to paraprofessionals like occupational therapists and physical therapists but in particular speech-language pathologists, who would come in. They would be, in those days particularly, employees of AHS, and they would come into a particular school to assess and that sort of thing. We no longer have regional collaborative service delivery. I do believe, as long as I have the stats right in my head, that there's also sort of, generally speaking, a bit of a shortage of those professionals out there. We know, for instance, that Advanced Ed has been cutting some of those programs over the last number of years.

I'm wondering again, because the presence of those paraprofessionals, particularly in early learning programs, is incredibly important to the education of children, so my question really is: is there, I guess for lack of a better term, a workforce planning strategy that would include something like regional collaborative service delivery, Advanced Education, Education and Childcare to make sure that, across the span of those ministries, these professionals, first of all, exist but also are working directly with kids to assist those children in their learning over the long term?

Mr. Nicolaides: Yeah, I think some of those pieces that you've touched on were recommended by the action team. As I mentioned, we are working to implement those recommendations from the action team and help to take those additional steps. As I mentioned a moment ago, the Class Size and Complexity Cabinet Committee does have other ministers at the table and brings other ministers as needed so we can talk about more comprehensive solutions that involve more ministerial collaboration. I think one of the significant areas of strength of the committee is that we're able to bring all those different ministries together and find services or programs that one ministry is offering or delivering that we can probably connect in a little bit better with the education system to provide students with targeted supports.

In addition, we do continue to provide funding through the specialized learner support grant and the classroom complexity grant for school divisions to hire those specialized staff.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister. We'll go back over to the government side. Please proceed, Member.

Mrs. Johnson: Thank you, Madam Chair. I'm going to go to a subject that's very close to my heart, other than literacy and numeracy, and that is rural education. As I represent Lacombe-

Ponoka, it is a largely rural area. Most of the schools are rural, some of them actually in the country. So we'll go into that a little bit.

All students in Alberta deserve an education that prepares them for success no matter where they live, and rural schools face some unique challenges like greater transportation requirements and declining enrolment. I note that under the ministry fact sheet on page 45 of the business plan, it states:

The Ministry of Education and Childcare provides leadership, direction and oversight for an accessible, affordable and high-quality childcare system and to enable the delivery of a student-centred education system that prepares students for lifelong success.

To the minister in these final moments: what supports for rural schools does Budget '26 provide? How many rural school capital projects does Budget 2026 fund? I do know of at least one in Blackfalds that maybe we can touch on. How many are ongoing, and how does the government work to protect rural education?

Mr. Nicolaides: Okay. I'll start with your first question. Ensuring that we have adequate supports for our rural school divisions and our rural schools is particularly important. I know first-hand as well that, as many of our trustees or superintendents or others from our rural school divisions can always tell me, you know, these are more than just schools, and I agree with them. These are often the heartbeat of a small community and can be co-located with public libraries and other types of municipal infrastructure. They're really important gathering spaces and community spaces, so it's much more than just a school in several of our small communities. I would say, first and foremost, that in Budget '26 we continue to provide supports to smaller schools in a variety of different ways.

First and foremost, we provide funding through the rural small schools grant. It's very straightforward to be able to outline what this grant does, of course; it works to support rural small schools. Criteria for that grant are very simple. It must be a school in a rural community and have a threshold of a particular number of students in the school. If they fall below that threshold, then they receive additional funding, recognizing that their cost-effectiveness is decreased and they require some additional support.

In addition, we also provide what's called the geographic grant to school divisions. The way that this works is it helps to account for lower enrolment in a school division's catchment area, greater

travel distances, and higher operating costs. The grant goes specifically to those rural school divisions to help support those unique pressures that they'll see from longer travel distances, lower enrolment, and higher operating costs as they don't have the operating efficiency that maybe, you know, an Edmonton public school division might have.

You asked specifically about projects. In terms of capital projects, as you know, there are 161 projects under way currently; 22 of those are in the north, northern Alberta. I'll break down the 22: two are additions; two are new schools; six are modernizations; and 12 are replacements. The 22 projects will create approximately 4,000 new and 9,300 renovated and updated spaces. In central 27 projects are under way, which include one addition, nine new schools, seven modernizations, and 10 replacements. This will add 6,600 new spaces and 12,000 renovated spaces. In southern Alberta, 30 projects are under way that include two additions, 18 new schools, five modernizations, and five replacements. Together they will create 15,000 new spaces and 8,000 renovated spaces.

Just to break that down a little further, over the course of the past two weeks I announced 40 new projects. That's captured in the 161, but I announced 40 new projects that we're adding into the capital plan as part of Budget '26. Sixteen of those 40 projects are in communities outside of our major urban centres. So, we continue to make significant investments to replacing aging infrastructure and updating aging infrastructure, recognizing the need for updated and modern infrastructure in our rural communities and our smaller communities.

We talked a little bit earlier about the schools now program. I mentioned that while a key focus of the schools now program is to build spaces to meet . . .

The Chair: Thank you, Minister. Pardon the interruption. I must advise the committee that the time allotted for this portion of consideration of the ministry's estimates has concluded. I would like to remind committee members that we're scheduled to meet this afternoon at 3:30 p.m. to consider the estimates of the Ministry of Education and Childcare.

The meeting is adjourned. Thanks, everyone.

[The committee adjourned at 12 p.m.]

