

[Mr. MacDonald in the chair]

THE CHAIRMAN: Good morning, everyone. I would like to call this meeting to order, please. An agenda has been circulated by the clerk. If there are no questions or concerns, could I have approval of the agenda, please? Mr. Goudreau. Thank you.

This morning we are meeting with the Hon. Dr. Lyle Oberg, Minister of Learning, and several of his staff, as well as with Mr. Valentine. But first off, since this is the start of the session, perhaps it would be appropriate if we could start with Mr. Cao and, briefly, a round of introductions by the members of the committee.

[Ms Blakeman, Mr. Cao, Mr. Cenaiko, Mr. Goudreau, Mrs. Jablonski, Mr. Marz, Mr. Mason, and Mr. Taft introduced themselves]

THE CHAIRMAN: Dr. Oberg, could you introduce your staff?

DR. OBERG: Absolutely. To my right is Jim Dueck, who is the assistant deputy minister, system improvement and reporting division. On my left is Don Ford, the deputy minister. We have Jeff Olson, executive director of corporate services; Steve MacDonald, executive director, adult learning; and Rick Morrow, executive director, basic learning.

THE CHAIRMAN: Thank you.  
Mr. Valentine.

MR. VALENTINE: Good morning, Mr. Chairman. On my left is Nick Shandro, who is the Assistant Auditor General responsible for the Ministry of Learning in our office; on my immediate right is Mary-Jane Dawson, who is a principal and has responsibility for the postsecondary educational institutions within the ministry; and on Mary-Jane's right is Cathy Ludwig, a principal with responsibilities for the junior portion of the Ministry of Learning.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

THE CHAIRMAN: Thank you.

Dr. Oberg, at this time would you like to please give a brief overview of your department to the committee?

DR. OBERG: Certainly. Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. Today I'm here to review the annual report of the Ministry of Learning.

Alberta Learning is committed to the future, Alberta's future. We are committed to providing Albertans with the best possible learning opportunities that will ensure future success. Alberta Learning is not just creating a system of learning; we are creating a culture of learning. By working together with partners and stakeholders from across the learning spectrum, the ministry is creating an environment of lifelong learning supported by a system that is responsive, accessible, and affordable to all Albertans.

Let me share with you the five goals of Alberta Learning: one, "high quality learning opportunities"; two, "excellence in learner achievement"; three, "well prepared learners for lifelong learning, world of work and citizenship"; four, "effective working relationships with partners"; and five, "highly responsive and responsible ministry." I would like to share the progress we have made towards achieving each of these goals.

Goal 1, "high quality learning opportunities." We continue to make learning a top priority. This government invested more than \$4.3 billion in 1999-2000 to support learning in the K to 12 schools, postsecondary institutions, and community settings. We are serving

more Albertans than ever before. Alberta's learning system served about 575,000 students in K to 12 schools and more than 115,000 students in credit programs at Alberta postsecondary institutions. Our efforts are being noticed and well noted. Student and parent satisfaction with the quality of education continues to remain high, with results for students at 95 percent and for parents at 87 percent in '99-2000.

Overall participation in the culture of learning continues to grow. One in three adult Albertans participates in credit or noncredit programs available through the province's extensive system of postsecondary institutions, community adult learning councils, employer-sponsored training, career development centres, and much, much more. Over three-quarters of Albertans are satisfied that adult learners are being prepared for the workforce.

We are continuing to enhance our world-class postsecondary education centre. In '99-2000 the access fund promoted expansion of the postsecondary system in priority areas. The access fund created more than 1,200 new postsecondary student spaces to support expanded enrollment in information and communication technology. An additional 2,133 spaces were provided for apprenticeship training. My ministry does not want cost to be a barrier to learning. That's why Alberta Learning continues to provide sustainable funding to schools and adult learning programs that increase public participation in educational opportunities. For example, caps were eliminated on funding to severe special-needs students and English as a Second Language students in 1999-2000. Also, the total number of Alberta heritage scholarships and the total value of these scholarship awards have been increased.

Goal 2, "excellence in learner achievement." Alberta Learning has set high education standards and has seen positive results. On provincial achievement tests in grades 3, 6, and 9 the percentage of students performing at an acceptable level improved in all 10 tests over the previous year. Overall, more than 84 percent of students met the acceptable standard, which is very close to our target of 85 percent. The percentage of students meeting the standard of excellence was 19.6 percent, well above our target of 15 percent.

We have the best students in Canada, and they are consistently demonstrating how the Alberta Learning system has prepared them for exams. Alberta students continue to perform better than Canadian students at all levels. For example, national science test results for Alberta students at age 13 and age 16 are at or above national expectations. With respect to grade 12 diploma examinations, 10 course areas are subject to examination. The target of 85 percent of students writing achieves the acceptable standard, was met or nearly met in four course areas. The target for standard of excellence was met or exceeded in seven course areas. Results like these indicate Alberta students are receiving the highest quality education.

Statistics also show how many Albertans are participating in the quality education. More than 87 percent of Albertans aged 25 to 34 have completed high school and more than 55 percent have completed postsecondary programs. Completion rates increase each year as young Albertans become more aware of the importance of education to their future success.

But we must not allow ourselves to become too satisfied with successful results. We cannot become indifferent or unresponsive. That's why Alberta Learning continues to explore other innovative means to improve student learning, completion, and performance. Through extensive consultation and collaboration the ministry and its education partners created the Alberta initiative for school improvement, ASE, which will provide funding to schools for projects and improve student learning and performance.

Goal 3, “well prepared learners for lifelong learning, world of work and citizenship.” Obviously learning is not always an end in itself. It is most often a means of achieving career goals. Here, too, Alberta Learning is proud of its success rate. A large majority of postsecondary graduates are employed, 81 percent, with most employed in jobs relating to their education. The proportion of apprenticeship graduates who are employed also continues to be very high at 94 percent. These high employment rates suggest that Alberta postsecondary institutions are responding well to the needs of Alberta’s economy and satisfying the needs of students.

Employers’ satisfaction with the academic or technical skills acquired by employees through postsecondary education also remains high at over 80 percent. In addition, over 97 percent of employers of apprentices were satisfied with the skills of their certified journeyman employees. This satisfaction is a result of education programs that are current and relevant. For example, Alberta Learning continues to provide learning opportunities in information and communication technology essential to the world of work. In ’99-2000 ten applied degree programs and 27 programs in information and computer technology were approved in response to skill and knowledge requirements identified by business and industry.

This ministry cannot operate in a vacuum. We believe in consultation, co-operation, and collaboration. Therefore, goal 4, “effective working relationships with partners.” In ’99-2000 Alberta Learning had public meetings with more than 6,000 Albertans on such topics as curriculum development, school board funding and accountability, community adult learning program policy, and much more. In addition to this, the ministry held the Minister’s Forum on Lifelong Learning to gather information from stakeholders on what initiatives are required to further lifelong learning in Alberta. Feedback from this forum was used to provide information for the ministry’s future business plans, policy development, and the consultations conducted by the MLA committee on lifelong learning.

8:40

What are our learning partners saying? In a survey conducted by Alberta Learning, a significant majority of partners and stakeholders agreed that the ministry’s staff are collaborative, responsive, and flexible. Employers agree too. Perceptions of employers of apprentices and apprenticeship graduates support a positive view of the apprenticeship and industry training systems partnership among government, postsecondary institutions, and the industry. Increases in applied degree enrollments, postsecondary enterprise revenue, and industry funding for university research also indicate the effectiveness of the learning system partnerships.

Goal 5, “highly responsive and responsible ministry.” Ultimately, as a government ministry dispensing tax dollars, we are accountable to all Albertans. Over half the public agree that they are receiving good value for their money. Public satisfaction in the learning system for ’99-2000 remains stable at 54 percent, essentially at the target of 55 percent. Parent satisfaction is substantially higher at 71 percent. I believe this satisfaction stems from the realization that Alberta Learning invests money in the most cost-effective and people-effective manner possible.

Department spending represents a very small portion of the total ministry spending at 1.6 percent and has decreased slightly over the past year. Information on administrative spending by public school authorities and postsecondary institutions indicates efficient operations throughout Alberta’s learning system.

It has been a very good year. After the first year in our new mandate, Alberta Learning is proud of its record of accomplishments

and success, proud to be serving so many Albertans and helping to secure our future. In concrete terms, this ministry maintained or progressed on 47 out of 51 measures for which there is historical data. Alberta’s learning system continues to be the best in the country, and we intend to keep it that way.

Thank you very much. I’d be very pleased to hear your comments and questions.

THE CHAIRMAN: Thank you, Dr. Oberg.

We will start with Ms Blakeman this morning.

MS BLAKEMAN: Thank you very much. Welcome to the minister and his staff and to the Auditor General and his staff joining us. I know there are people, fun seekers, joining us in the gallery this morning, and I welcome them as well.

My questions are around key performance indicators. I’m looking at the highlights on page 11 of the Alberta Learning annual report, and as I work my way through the more in-depth analysis, a number of the KPIs are around satisfaction. I’m curious as to how the department learns from a performance indicator of satisfaction. How did that become in this fiscal year a useful management tool? Perhaps the minister could discuss that.

DR. OBERG: Certainly. First of all, we believe that a very important element of either the postsecondary or the K to 12 system is the satisfaction of its clients, as in any system. Our clients in this case are the students, and we feel that their satisfaction is an essential component. We do not want to be running a program that these students, for example, don’t like. It could quite easily be the best program in the world, but if the students don’t want to enroll, if they don’t like the program, if they aren’t learning from the program, then we have severe problems. Therefore satisfaction is quite an essential component of any education system.

The way we arrive at satisfaction is through surveys. We take surveys of the students, and we listen to what they say. The majority of students are very good when it comes to surveys. The majority of students want their system improved and will give you very honest answers, and subsequently that’s what we do.

MS BLAKEMAN: Thank you.

I also notice that in a number of cases for your KPIs, there was no target set for ’99-2000. How is this a useful evaluation tool if you have no target against which to measure? And there’s a number of them. I won’t prolong this by going through all the ones I’m seeing in here where there simply was no target set. Why was there no target set?

DR. OBERG: Could you give me some examples?

MS BLAKEMAN: Sure. On page 11 under goal 2, excellence in learner achievement, “learners achieve high standards.” A core indicator: “quality of teaching.” It’s indicated that there was no change. Results: “A large majority of parents (80%) and students (92%) are satisfied with teaching quality.” On the bottom it notes: “No target was set for 1999/2000.” The next one that appears is under goal 3: “curriculum quality.” I mean, everywhere the single asterisk appears on this page is indicating there’s no target. So how do you do measurements?

DR. OBERG: Certainly. The places where there were no targets. We went through, and in ’99-2000 changed a significant amount of our performance indicators. Where there is no target there was no historical data, and this was the first time we had asked. The

majority of them that are here do have historical data. Indeed, for example, where you have the checkmark, it has "met or exceeded target," the equals sign is "no change," and obviously the downward sign means we declined.

THE CHAIRMAN: Thank you.

Mr. Marz, followed by Mr. Mason.

MR. MARZ: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. On the funds provided to colleges in the form of grants, Mr. Minister, there's quite a discrepancy.

DR. OBERG: What was the page?

MR. MARZ: Page 139. I'm just wondering what criteria the department uses for the distribution of grants to the various colleges. To provide a little background, some colleges are – I guess they would all say they have a lot of initiative in raising funds in different ways, and they all take pride in doing that to a greater degree than they feel maybe their competitive colleges do. I guess the question I'm asking is: are colleges being penalized for their good work in raising funds from the private sector by decreased grants?

DR. OBERG: No. First of all, I can't find the page that you're on.

MR. MARZ: Page 139.

DR. OBERG: I've only got 136.

MR. MARZ: In the annual report, the Alberta Learning annual report.

DR. OBERG: Anyway, the answer is no, they will not be penalized for any support they get from the private sector. We do encourage the universities to go out and seek support from the private sector, whether it's granting institutions, whether it's the public sector such as the federal government.

The other component I will comment on is when you mentioned that the colleges were competitive with each other. I believe this is a very important element in our system, and that element is that I don't necessarily want the colleges to be competitive with each other. One of the issues I hear all the time and I'm sure everyone in this Assembly has heard is that for every one student there are three or four that are turned away. So the subsequent issue is: if they're turning people away, why on earth should you be competitive with each other? That's the philosophy I've tried to instill into the colleges. This is very consistent with the whole Campus Alberta concept, where we work together as a sort of flexible postsecondary system.

Obviously to eliminate completely the competitive nature of some of these institutions would be almost impossible, especially when they are in close proximity to each other. For example, in your constituency, if Olds and Red Deer were providing the same courses, there would be inherent competition. What I try to encourage, though, is that, for example, between Olds and Red Deer they have complementary courses and they work together. That is something we are succeeding at. But in 1999-2000 it was very much a system that was competitive. Since that time, I will share with you, that competitiveness between colleges has decreased significantly, although it is still there.

MR. MARZ: I thank the minister for the thoroughness of his answer.

He's answered my supplemental question as well.

THE CHAIRMAN: Mr. Mason.

8:50

MR. MASON: Thanks, Mr. Chairman. On page 210 of the Auditor General's report it talks about co-ordination between the Department of Infrastructure and the Department of Learning on new schools, and it says in the second paragraph under recommendation 31:

Both ministries' 2000-2003 business plans do not reflect any specific strategies relating to planning for school facilities, other than that the two ministries will work together

I guess my question is: how are we going to be resolving some of the school issues that have emerged around the province when the departments don't have a specific strategy for co-operating relative to new schools and, by implication then, the closing of old schools? What are you going to do about this?

DR. OBERG: Well, that is a bit of an awkward question. The reason it's awkward is that for '99-2000 you are absolutely correct: there was – and this was one of the Auditor General's suggestions as well – not enough co-operation between the two departments. What happened subsequently was that there was a problem when it came to learning opportunities. We became very, very dependent on utilization formulas, and for some reason we forgot about the whole learning opportunity side of things.

I will say a couple of things. First of all, to give you the history on the School Buildings Board, I have two staff that sit on the buildings board, but subsequently and more importantly is that the legislation before the Assembly today has effectively eliminated the School Buildings Board, which has paved the way for the ministries of Infrastructure and Learning to have complementary recommendations for new schools. I believe this will be an extremely effective way.

For example, the Infrastructure department will have things such as utilization. I believe that utilization still has to be a component of any system when it comes to building new schools or renovating old schools. So Infrastructure will have the utilization component. What Alberta Learning will have is a learning opportunity component, because obviously in any learning system that's an incredibly important component. We are working very closely together now, and there will be announcements coming out shortly on this.

Brian, you hit a very good point and the Auditor picked up a very good point, and that is what we are doing to correct it. I feel that we have corrected it and will continue to correct it.

MR. MASON: Thank you. I guess I'd like specific mention of the business plan, since that's identified here by the Auditor General. But the broader question is: how do you ensure that learning and the Learning department and its priorities drive the decisions and not the Infrastructure department, which is just a support department? I mean, we shouldn't be driving educational policy by the bricks and mortar guys.

DR. OBERG: Brian, you will not get any argument from me on that question.

MR. MASON: But I might from Ty?

DR. OBERG: No, you won't.

I think what you will see is that presently we are in that era where there are learning opportunities and the learning opportunity

component of the formula for new schools will be equal to the utilization component and the bricks and mortar component of new schools.

In some cases, the flexibility under the new system, a flexibility that the School Buildings Board did not give us, will allow us – where learning opportunities will be paramount, that will come forward; where utilization will be paramount, that will come forward. We will have the flexibility to do that. I think everyone here will be very pleasantly surprised as to how it goes.

Your previous comment about being included in the business plans. One of the components when we separated out the school buildings component is that it was not in our business plan because we had very little to do with it. We are now bringing it back and, indeed, in this business plan coming up you will see the components of it.

THE CHAIRMAN: Thank you.

Mrs. Jablonski, followed by Dr. Taft.

MRS. JABLONSKI: Good morning. Dr. Oberg, college and university students keep telling me that their tuition fees are going up every year and they're concerned that they will not be able to afford their education soon. What is Alberta Learning doing to keep education affordable for postsecondary students and taxpayers?

DR. OBERG: Well, first of all, there are two components to this. The first component is access. We had to determine if cost indeed was an issue when it came to access. Subsequently what we did was embark upon a study with the university associations, with the students, with ACTISEC and with CAUS, to determine exactly what was stopping students from going to postsecondary education. I think everyone in this Assembly and certainly the majority of people in Alberta believe they want their kids to have a postsecondary education. Indeed, one of the interesting components of this study is that when you asked students whether they planned to take postsecondary studies, 97 percent of them said that they did. These included the people that were not taking it at present. Ninety-seven percent of the people envisioned that at some time in their life they would be taking postsecondary diplomas or certificates or apprenticeship programs or degrees, which I think is great, but it's also very interesting.

The other component of this study was the whole idea of cost, tuition cost. The interesting part of it was that the perceptions were considerably higher than the actual cost. The perception was that the actual tuition fee was around \$5,800, when in actual fact it was around \$3,800. That is something that has just come out, but the reason I'm mentioning it here is that that study was started during this business plan period. So the first thing we did obviously was set out to find exactly what was going on. I think that's imperative. We just can't sit back and listen, surmise, and estimate what students are thinking. So we went out and actually asked the students.

The second component of this is the whole idea of tuition caps. Presently there is a tuition cap in place of 30 percent of the postsecondary expense level. So whatever the postsecondary institution's expense is, they can only charge tuition up to 30 percent. In this business plan, to give you an example, the University of Alberta is sitting at around 22 or 23 percent, which is very similar to Calgary. We do have some institutions in this business plan as well that are pushing the 29 to 30 percent, but the interesting component about that is that they did not achieve that by increasing tuition; they achieved that by decreasing expenses. So that's one component of it.

I will say that probably the most important component, though, is

that of enriching and enhancing the student loan program. Again, I go back to the communication side of the thing, the perception side of the thing, and one of the issues we had in this year and still continue to have is that there was very little known about the student loan program. Believe it or not, there were a lot of people – each and every year we would have somewhere between 5 and 10 percent of people that would not apply for the remission. So quite simply filling out a piece of paper and sending it in would not do. Obviously this added to the increase of student debt that was out there. But we have increased the student loan program during this business plan as well. We increased it. We increased scholarships. I believe it was this year that we brought in the Jason Lang scholarship for the second-year students. So all these elements will work to handle the tuition issue.

I really must stress, though, that the tuition issue – and the access study showed us that – is not just purely an element of dollars. It is also an element of getting communication out there. It is an element of communicating exactly what it is that we do, what it is that is available to students, because a tremendous number of parents, a tremendous number of students do not know what is out there.

I apologize for making a long answer here, but I will say one other thing that we are presently looking at and working towards. One of the recommendations that has come back to us is that the earlier grades in school is actually when students make decisions as to what they're going to do in their postsecondary future. What our reports and studies are showing is that it goes as far back as grade 9 when they actually make the decisions. So where we're going to have to start communicating with these kids about postsecondary institutions is not in grade 12, not in first-year university, but as far back as grade 9. That's what we're presently working on.

9:00

MRS. JABLONSKI: You mentioned "perception" a few times in your answer. You're saying that some kids have the perception that the tuition fees are higher than they actually are. What are we doing about correcting the perceptions that are out there?

DR. OBERG: Well, a couple of things. First of all, obviously one of the main communication tools that students have – you have kids, and a lot of people in this room have kids – is the Internet. On our web site we post routinely all the scholarships that are available, the student loan programs, things like that. So we attempt to communicate the tuition. As well, we attempt to communicate to the students with that.

Again, as I say, we have to get to them earlier. We have to find better ways. One of the other issues that we have to look at is giving the guidance counselors more information. We have to put out information that people will read. We have done the whole gambit of putting out lots of information, and obviously that hasn't worked. So we have to put out information that the students will actually read, that they'll actually take to heart and find out exactly what the tuition fees are.

THE CHAIRMAN: Thank you.

At this time I would like to remind all members of the committee if they could direct their questions specifically to the report of the Auditor General, the annual report of the government of Alberta, or the Learning annual report for 1999-2000, please.

Dr. Taft.

DR. TAFT: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. In the Alberta Learning annual report '99-2000, pages 188 and 189, the disclosure of salaries and benefits for superintendent positions – as I look over them,

always interesting reading. One of the interesting things when I look at the totals and I consider the geography of the province is that the total salaries and benefits actually don't vary as much as I thought they might, given, I assume, huge differences in enrollments and so on. Does the department have any involvement in the hiring and setting of salaries? Is there a policy the department has on this?

DR. OBERG: No, there isn't. The hiring of the superintendent is up to each individual school board.

The one point that I will say, though, is that my deputy minister has to approve the hiring of every superintendent. So what the process is is the school board will hire, will set the salary, and then they will send the name of the superintendent that they have chosen to my deputy minister for the final approval.

DR. TAFT: Okay. My supplemental would be: what's the basis of that approval?

DR. OBERG: The basis of that approval is purely if we feel they are qualified. If we feel there is some information that the school board may have overlooked – and I'll give you an example. If there were charges pending, for example, in another province, which sometimes a school board would not have seen but we may have had access to the information – if there's anything such as that, that's what we will flag for the school board and suggest that potentially this candidate is not a successful candidate, is not a good candidate.

The one comment I will also add to that is that in my tenure as Learning minister we have never turned down a superintendent that the school board has given to us for recommendation.

THE CHAIRMAN: Thank you.

Mr. Lukaszuk.

MR. LUKASZUK: Oh, thank you very much. I was too immersed in the minister's response. Mr. Minister, I find in the report that the level of satisfaction among Albertans . . .

DR. OBERG: Can you give me a page?

MR. LUKASZUK: Bear with me. Now you've put me on the spot. I thought it was supposed to be the other way around.

Under the performance highlights we find that the level of satisfaction among Albertans tends to vary from year to year. What does that tell us about the level of satisfaction measurements?

A second part to the same question. There's also a significant level of variance in level of satisfaction between learners, parents, and public. What does that indicate to us relative to the purpose of measuring the level of satisfaction?

DR. OBERG: Well, first of all, Thomas, as I mentioned in a previous question, it's imperative that we measure the level of satisfaction. One of the issues that we have to look at is exactly what kind of job we're doing. The bottom line on this is that there is going to be a variance. You have a different cohort of parents, you have a different cohort of students, and there is going to be a difference.

What we like to see in general is an increase, obviously. We also like to see that our satisfaction levels are at a higher rate than they were the year before. If that doesn't occur, then what we have to ask ourselves is: what are we doing wrong? This, in essence, is how we use the satisfaction surveys. If the satisfaction of our clients, as I mentioned previously, is not improving, is not getting better and indeed has taken a drastic drop, what we have to do is go out and

find exactly what the reason is and, obviously, correct it. So that's how we use the satisfaction survey.

I must stress this to all members. What you have before you as performance indicators is not something that we just put out and say: this is wonderful; look at how well we are doing. These are situations and indicators that we actually use, follow, and follow up on. So if there is something here where we are decreasing in satisfaction, if we are not improving, we look at each and every one of these and determine what we can do about it. If it is a minor deviation, then indeed it may just be the variance of a particular cohort of students or cohort of parents or employers. But it is something that we take very seriously, and we act upon it.

MR. LUKASZUK: Thank you.

No supplement.

MS BLAKEMAN: I'm searching for a specific line item reference to give you, and I'm struggling for it. I have questions about the access fund. Can I just go ahead and ask that? It's not popping up, unless it's what shows under revenue grants, but I'm not finding it actually specifically spelled out. My colleague from Edmonton-Mill Woods has asked me to bring forward a couple of questions. Specifically, has the minister any information on the cost of administering the access fund separate from the funds themselves?

DR. OBERG: Certainly. In all fairness it's minimal, as the access fund is within our department and is not an extra administration cost. Where you will see the administration costs for the access fund would be included in our 1.6 percent administration costs for the overall department. In essence, what we do on the access fund is we have the universities and postsecondary institutions put forward their programs, and then we either agree with them or disagree with them in allotting the spaces. So the administration cost to the department is minimal. There would be some administrative costs at the postsecondary levels as they prepare their submissions for the access fund.

MS BLAKEMAN: Okay. Is there an audit available of the access fund used by institutions or an accounting?

DR. OBERG: Yes.

MS BLAKEMAN: And that can be sent through the secretary of the committee?

DR. OBERG: Yes.

MS BLAKEMAN: Great. Thank you.

MR. HUTTON: Mr. Minister, you mentioned a little earlier on about schools and that there's going to be some announcement shortly. What's shortly?

MS BLAKEMAN: Five foot three.

DR. OBERG: Exactly. Thanks, Laurie.

Hopefully, we'll see them in the near future.

MR. HUTTON: Thank you, Mr. Minister.

I haven't dug deeply into the Auditor's report, but one line starts off that there was "an adverse . . . opinion," that the Auditor General has given an adverse opinion with regards to the report, and it talks about consolidation. It's right at the beginning of the Auditor's

report. It's italicized.

An adverse . . . opinion was issued on the Ministry financial statements because of the lack of consolidation of school jurisdictions and . . . post-secondary institutions.

The page is 207.

9:10

DR. OBERG: Just give us a second. So on 207 which particular . . .

MR. HUTTON: Just the italicized there, Mr. Minister. It says:

An adverse audit opinion was issued on the Ministry financial statements because of the lack of consolidation of . . . jurisdictions and public post-secondary institutions.

What does that exactly mean?

DR. OBERG: The bottom line is because we don't consolidate all the school board budgets into our ministry. Okay? That's where I believe the Auditor General is coming from on that one.

MR. VALENTINE: The lack of consolidation of school boards and public postsecondary educational institutions results in a financial disclosure that is not one presented on a fair basis. The dollar impact of that failure to consolidate appears in a table on page 208 of my report. You'll see there, for example, that the assets, if there were to be consolidation, would increase from a nominal amount to \$6.7 billion. We believe in my office that it's appropriate to consolidate school boards and public postsecondary educational institutions in order to present fairly the fiscal activities of the Ministry of Learning.

DR. OBERG: If I may comment as well, I believe that this is one area where not just the Department of Learning but the government in general has some minor disagreements. I'll give you the example that the postsecondary institutions receive roughly 50 to 55 percent of their funding from the provincial government. They have another 40 or 45 percent that is received from outside sources. As you may have gathered, there is a minor disagreement. We feel that we should not be accountable for those particular dollars that are out there. That's something that has been noted before, I believe, in the Auditor General's statements. It is something that we will work with the Auditor General to rectify, but there is a disagreement between us.

MR. VALENTINE: To be equitable, the other significant group of entities that are not consolidated are regional health authorities. The difficulty is that one doesn't know the full cost of health delivery in this province unless you have that consolidation. Likewise, one doesn't know the full cost of educational delivery unless the consolidation occurs. The definition of the government entity is an issue that is being dealt with by the Public Sector Accounting Standards Board, of which I am a member. I'm hopeful that some resolution will occur before I disappear into the land of retirement.

To go back for a moment, Mr. Chairman, to Ms Blakeman's question about the audit of the access fund – and I'm afraid I didn't catch on to it quite quickly enough. The access fund reporting is included in the ministry's financial statements. That column appears in schedule 5 on page 93, which is encompassed by my audit report. So the fund is audited.

MS BLAKEMAN: Thank you.

THE CHAIRMAN: Mr. Mason is next, followed by the Member for Calgary-Buffalo.

MR. HUTTON: Am I allowed a supplemental here?

THE CHAIRMAN: You've already had two questions.

MR. HUTTON: Oh, I have? Then I'm stepping away.

MR. MASON: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Page 216 of the Auditor General's report deals with school-generated funds and indicates that the "reports for the year ended August 31, 1998" – and that's getting to be a while ago now – "were qualified because controls over the completeness of school generated funds were not adequate." Then it says that in '99, "28% of school jurisdictions auditor's reports were qualified because of inadequate controls over school generated funds." He goes on to say that "the Department is making progress." Now, to the Auditor General: do we have enough information on school-generated funds to track them as a percentage of expenditures on schools to see where the trends are going with respect to that?

MR. VALENTINE: Mr. Mason, the Department of Learning is the record keeper. I'm just the auditor. So, with respect, I think the information should be resident in the department, and I believe it is.

MR. MASON: I asked if we had an adequate reporting to be able to track it.

MR. VALENTINE: Well, it's reported in the financial statements of the 160-odd school boards that exist.

The issue that we have been concerned about is the lack of controls around that activity in individual school boards such that it results in the qualification of the auditor's opinion on the board financial statements. Examples of things where controls probably don't exist – and you've likely seen them in your own community activities over the course of time – are the women's bake sales or some sort of benefit thing where people come as a community and support the local community district or school board or school or whatever.

Of course, it would be irresponsible to suggest that we should have controls where the cost of the control is greater than the revenue raised. Nonetheless, I believe that controls can be designed and effectively implemented over things like raffle tickets and those sorts of things if they're properly done and done with people who have experience. Then you can come to grips with this issue of the control over what is public money, because in my view those funds are public money in that they're raised under the authority of a school board or school entity.

DR. OBERG: If I could just comment as well, Brian, I agree completely with what the Auditor General has just said. We have to be careful with all the very little enterprises and very little raffles and such that we don't make it so onerous that nothing will occur again.

There is one other very critical issue in what you see in the school-generated funds. What the school-generated funds include are things such as money raised, whether or not there are stores in the particular schools, like in bookstores for example. More importantly, in things such as cafeteria revenue what is included is only the gross revenue. It is not a net revenue that you see in the school-generated funds. So what this does is very falsely put the level of school-generated funds at such a high rate, when in reality if you and I had a business, we would be putting forward the net income from the cafeteria. Unfortunately, that isn't occurring.

MR. MASON: I may be under a misapprehension. I had assumed

that school-generated funds included fees, and that's where I was going with the question.

DR. OBERG: They do, but in all fairness, by far the majority of the school-generated funds are more along the lines of cafeterias, and that's one of the problems as well. For example, when I get asked the question about fees and fund-raising and when people are saying that it's \$135 million or \$140 million, included in that are cafeterias, included in that are fees, included in that is fund-raising such as raffles, et cetera. The key component is that it is the gross revenue, not the net revenue, which causes us the problem, and that's a record-keeping issue that we are working with the school boards to address.

MR. MASON: I wanted to ask the Auditor General . . .

THE CHAIRMAN: Mr. Mason, please. You've asked two questions.

9:20

MR. MASON: I didn't think that should count as a supplementary. That's all right. That wasn't where I was going to go.

THE CHAIRMAN: Thank you.

Mr. Cenaiko, followed again by Dr. Taft.

MR. CENAIKO: My question is for the minister. Dr. Oberg, what has been done to further lifelong learning among Albertans? Of course just going through, it's goal 3, pages 42 and 43. But in more specifics, what is being done to encourage lifelong learning?

DR. OBERG: First of all, again I go back to a similar type of issue that I talked about with tuition fees. I don't think there's anyone who will argue that lifelong learning is a goal we want to put forward, that it's a very important goal, that it's something that is going to sustain this economy and sustain this province for the future.

With lifelong learning and with adult learning in particular, one of the concepts that we have to decide and we have to find out is what is keeping, what is prohibiting people from becoming lifelong learners. What is stopping you from taking a course at the university? What is stopping someone else from taking a course at SAIT or NAIT? These are the questions that we have to ask. Subsequently we have what is called the lifelong learning committee, that will be putting in a report sometime within the next six or eight months, addressing these issues as to exactly what is prohibiting, what is stopping the adults, the lifelong learners from continuing to participate in lifelong learning. Is it distance? Is it cost? Is it time? Is it all of the above? So that is very important.

I think the other thing that is also important when it comes to lifelong learning is putting out the courses that people actually want. If, for example, you put on a course on basket weaving in Brooks, Alberta, chances are there is not going to be a huge uptake by the ranchers north of Brooks. On the flip side, if it were animal husbandry, there may well be a huge uptake. So I think there are just some commonsense issues such as this that we have to look at as well.

Lifelong learning is a goal. It is one of our main goals in our department, and it is something that we will continue to work on and continue to attempt to find the answers to. Again, I believe that the most important task that we have is going out and actually talking to

the people who are involved and listening to what they have to say and changing our courses in accordance with that. The one thing that I will say is that we have probably the best distance-learning university in all of North America at Athabasca University, and there is a huge number of people in Alberta and indeed around the world that take advantage of this.

MR. CENAIKO: Thank you. That's it.

THE CHAIRMAN: That's it? Okay.

Dr. Taft, followed by Mr. Ouellette.

DR. TAFT: Thank you. I'm on pages 238, 239 of the Auditor General's report where he discusses the Council of Academic Health Centres of Alberta. Of course this is an area of real interest because of the need for more health professionals. The Auditor General is basically expressing some concerns. I'm wondering if you can tell us what measures your department has taken to improve the governance structure for these academic health programs.

DR. OBERG: Well, a couple of things. First of all I must explain the governance that we have in the Department of Learning as it applies to health in general. Basically where the line is drawn is at graduation from medical school. At graduation from medical school those students who go into residencies or internships then become the responsibility of Health. So where we and the Council of Academic Health Centres work together with Health is through the universities. There are also a lot of other partners that are involved. We are involved through medical students, which, in all fairness, is sort of the lower end of the scale when it comes to being involved in these academic health centres.

So I would suggest, if I may, that you may have hit upon what the Auditor General is actually saying here: there does need to be more co-ordination between the departments of Health and Learning and the RHAs when it comes to the Council of Academic Health Centres of Alberta. That is something that we are working on, but it is something that continues to be a bit of an issue for us.

DR. TAFT: The issue, then, or this may open up opportunities for you – I notice the Auditor General's comments on this.

The Council of Academic Health Centres of Alberta . . . consists of the two deans of medicine at the universities . . . and the CEOs of the Capital and Calgary Regional Health Authorities and the Alberta Cancer Board.

But it also deals with the education of health professionals more generally, which would include physiotherapists and nurses and so on. Well, I guess this is getting away from the public accounts, but I've put in a request, then, for consideration perhaps to broaden the membership in that council. I'll stop there, unless you want to comment.

DR. OBERG: Sure. The only comment that I would add is that the deans of medicine are supposedly representing the universities and representing Learning. They are the ones who would be representing the various health faculties in the universities and sitting here. But I think your point is well taken.

MR. VALENTINE: The positions on the academic health council are really those positions of CEOs of operating units. There are essentially five operating units that comprise academic health: the faculties, two; the RHAs, two; and the Cancer Board. So that creates a council of CEOs, if you like, which is not unlike the council of CEOs for regional health authorities or the persons with

developmental disabilities boards or child and family services authorities. That's the structure of it.

I think it is an excellent vehicle. Its difficulty is that it is not an authoritative vehicle. Inasmuch as there's a huge amount of democracy existent in academic institutions, it sometimes gets befuddled by its process.

DR. OBERG: If I may just add another issue on that, and that is the whole idea of what is an academic health centre, as there is a lot of academia that is practised outside of Edmonton and Calgary.

THE CHAIRMAN: Mr. Ouellette.

MR. OUELLETTE: Yeah. Dr. Oberg, your goal 2, excellence in learning. I'm sure the answer to this is there somewhere, but I might need a little learning to get it. What are the performance measures saying about Alberta's learning system? Is it improving, or is it staying the same?

DR. OBERG: That's a loaded question. Obviously the learning system in Alberta is improving. When you look at the trends of the achievement tests, when you look at the trends of the diploma examinations, what you consistently see is that we are meeting our targets but, more importantly, that things are improving.

The one comment that I will make about diploma exams – and I think it's important that we separate out achievement tests and diploma exams from this. Achievement tests are very easily standardized. They're very easily looked at from year to year, and they're very accurate in determining whether we are improving significantly, whether we are decreasing. All these types of things are very good. They're very good at that.

The diploma exams, however, are not as good as that. I think you saw this last year when some of our results in the diploma exams were not as good. Quite simply, you may or may not have heard me, but I put it down to: well, it was a hard test year. Indeed, that is actually the fact as to what happens. Our diploma examinations are not as easily standardized as the achievement tests. So it is not as easy to say: well, because in the year 2000 we had 85 percent and in the year 1999 we had 84 percent, therefore we are increasing, or vice versa. So that is one thing that we do have to do a little bit better job at, although it is hard, in all fairness, on the diploma examinations. As a matter of fact, the person to my right has said that they will be standardized next year, so we will be able to make better analyses of what exactly is happening on the diploma exams.

**9:30**

MR. OUELLETTE: How does the performance of our students in Alberta compare with the students in the other provinces?

DR. OBERG: Well, again, when you take a look at the school achievement indicators program, which is called the SAIP – it's something that has been introduced by the Council of Ministers of Education of Canada – you consistently find that Alberta students are at the top of all the different provinces. Obviously there are some times when we go down slightly, but as a general rule we're at the top. That's certainly something that we want to continue, not just from a bragging rights point of view. We want to ensure that our curriculum is relevant. We want to ensure that we are teaching our students what they need to know as they go out into the world. This is one way we can ensure that we're keeping up to the rest of the country.

I think it's extremely important when you get into an international and a globalized community that we're able to say that our school

system is getting these results, because I feel – and this may be a bit of a biased statement – that a lot of people, a lot of businesses move here because of the education system, or conversely they do not stop from moving here because of the education system.

MR. OUELLETTE: Keep our Alberta advantage going.

DR. OBERG: Yes.

THE CHAIRMAN: Thank you, Dr. Oberg.  
Ms Blakeman, followed by Mr. Marz.

MS BLAKEMAN: Thanks. We've had some discussion here already around tuition fees. I can reference page 31 of the annual report, which is just showing an analysis of the institutional cost per postsecondary learner, and somewhere else in here I had my finger on the page that showed the fees going into the universities. Anyway, the question is: what is going to happen when the institutions reach the 30 percent tuition cap? Will it be raised?

DR. OBERG: Well, we don't know that yet. We are presently looking at a different system of handling the tuition fee increases. In all fairness we did not expect tuition fees to hit the 30 percent when this was put in. To give you a little bit of the background and history, the 30 percent tuition cap came about from the University of Calgary Students' Union, who suggested that the 30 percent cap was a figure we should work towards. We subsequently put that into the legislation.

One of the problems that we did not anticipate was that the expenses of universities would actually go down. Two institutions in particular in Alberta have hit the 30 percent cap already, and we are currently analyzing what different ways we can do it to ensure that we have some control, because I do believe that that's important. We can't turn the universities completely loose. We need to have some control, but we need to have a control that is acceptable to everyone, and that's presently what we are looking at.

Just as another statement, the University of Alberta I believe is at 23 percent, and the University of Calgary is slightly higher than that, at around 23 and a half percent of expenses.

MS BLAKEMAN: Okay. The minister and the previous minister are on the record quite a bit, including in this fiscal year I think, talking about this 30 percent being a moving target, which has just been referred to. I think, in fact, that the colleges are more likely to hit that 30 percent before the universities. I'm getting a no. Okay. But I'm wondering: in this fiscal year, given the key performance indicators that you were working with, what other measurements were considered to pitch that percentage to? A set dollar fee?

DR. OBERG: No.

MS BLAKEMAN: What else was being considered in this year?

DR. OBERG: The bottom line on it is that we have to look at revamping the whole tuition in the tuition cap agreement, because 30 percent is not working out at the moment, as I said, because we do have two institutions, a university and a college incidentally, that have reached the 30 percent cap. What we do not want for example is the universities increasing their expenses so that they can increase their tuition, so we have to find a better system to do it. We did not look at and it never was anticipated moving it from 30 to 35 percent. I believe that's taking the easy way out, and I think we have to find a better system and a better way to do it, which we are currently

looking at.

THE CHAIRMAN: Thank you.

Mr. Marz, followed again by Mr. Mason.

MR. MARZ: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. My question is from the annual report of the Department of Learning, and it's directed to the hon. minister. You just pointed out a couple of questions ago that our students are performing amongst the highest in Canada, but on the charts on page 65 our completion rate for high school is third amongst the provinces and the percentage of population with postsecondary completion is sixth amongst the provinces in a province that has one of the lowest, if not consistently the lowest, unemployment rates and is in need of high-tech workers in the health sciences and education itself as well as high-tech industries and businesses. How would you explain that low a rating in the completion rates in those circumstances, especially the postsecondary?

DR. OBERG: First of all, I don't have that page in front of me for some reason. I'll make two comments, and the first comment is about the postsecondary completion rates. In Alberta we have the highest number of people of any province that have postsecondary degrees or diplomas, and we're sitting at around 55 percent. That is over the whole general population.

The other comment that I will make about the high school completion rate is that that is something we're looking at very closely. I don't feel that our high school completion rate, which again I believe is around 68 or 69 percent, bordering on 70 percent, is acceptable. I think we've got to take a look and find out what is keeping those kids from finishing high school. We have to look at the reasons. We have to find them out, and we have to address them. We have some schools, for example in northern Alberta, where the high school completion rate is zero. Down the road, quite literally down the road in what one would call a very similar demographic population, we have a high school completion rate of a hundred percent.

So the issue comes down to: what are they doing in the school with a hundred percent that they're not doing in the school with zero percent, in the community with a hundred percent, in the community with zero percent? That is what we are looking at when it comes to high school completion.

One of the other comments I will make is that since this time you have seen an expansion of things such as storefront schools, which is a flexibility that is allowed to students to come back to finish their education. The success that we have seen in the storefront schools – and you may or may not have them in your constituency – is nothing short of phenomenal. I think we have to take it to the next step and continue on and try and find new and better ways to improve that system.

The other comment that I would make is that I accept nothing less than a hundred percent of students graduating from high school. It's something that this department believes strongly in, and it's something that we will be working towards.

MR. MARZ: Thank you, Mr. Minister. My supplemental question. You're quite correct in saying that the completion rate was 69 to 70 percent. I'm concerned that it's been that way for the last seven years with no significant changes, thankfully not for the worst but I'm concerned that it's also not for the better. Do you have any specific strategies for the upcoming year or two that you feel will significantly change those numbers for the better?

9:40

DR. OBERG: Well, the basic strategy that we are going with is that of flexibility. We're attempting to find various schooling patterns, various schools, various different ways to allow these kids to come back to school. Seventy percent is not a number that I'm proud of, but I will say that 70 percent is still probably one of the highest in the country when it comes to this. What we need to find out is exactly what is stopping these kids from finishing their high school, and this goes back to the postsecondary access study that we just did, where 97 percent of students say that they want not just to finish high school, but they want a postsecondary education. So what is stopping these kids from finishing school? What is causing it? That's one of the very serious things that this ministry is looking at.

We're looking at how we expand schools, and I think in Edmonton, for example, you've seen alternative schools in an attempt to grab the interest of these children so that they will stay in school longer. If a kid is a hockey player, for example, they can go to hockey school in Edmonton and stay longer in school. But our absolute goal in this department is to ensure that a hundred percent of students finish high school.

We don't have all the answers. When we look around the country, around North America, we are certainly comparable, but each and every jurisdiction is having this same issue. We are attempting to come up with as many answers as we can. One of the very important projects that we put in in this fiscal year is the Alberta initiative for school improvement, and indeed many of the projects will be looking at how to improve high school completion. It's a very important issue.

THE CHAIRMAN: Thank you.

Mr. Mason, followed by Ms DeLong.

MR. MASON: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'm looking at page 11 of the annual report of the department, at "Highlights: Performance at a Glance." One of the goals under number 1 is accessibility of programs, and I don't see much in the core indicators of results for '99-2000 that indicate that we're really measuring accessibility in any real way.

DR. OBERG: Give me just two seconds here, Brian.

I think what we have here before us are a couple of things. One of the issues is basically the apprenticeship, but we also have the credit enrollment. When you take a look at page 26, if I may direct you to page 26, what we have seen is a consistent increase in the number of students that are enrolled in postsecondary institutions. Obviously if accessibility were a huge problem, then we would see the actual increase being about the same. When you factor in the enrollment increases in the K to 12 grades, which I believe in 1998-99 would have been about 1 and three-quarters percent, we're very consistent with that and actually have achieved more students going into postsecondary institutions than the amount that are graduating.

MR. MASON: But in terms of measuring it as a core indicator, can't we strengthen this and make it a little more rigorous so that we have some objective measurements for accessibility of programs across the board?

DR. OBERG: First of all, with accessibility obviously what you have to look at is what is keeping people out of the schools. We do not have any core measures, for example, so that we can say to people, "Well, what is keeping you out of school?" because they are not in our population to measure. What it would entail is talking to people who did not go to the public institutions, and that is a very, very difficult measure to achieve with what it would entail.

The other thing is that the accuracy of it I believe is very subjective, because there's no way that we can poll or ask every person in Alberta who did not go into a postsecondary institution why they didn't. It's very, very difficult to do. On the other hand, if we were to do a thousand people around Alberta, that would also be: is that an accurate assessment as to why they didn't go into postsecondary? So what we have chosen to do is measure what we can, which is enrollment. It's the satisfaction; it's the number of people that are continuing on in postsecondary education. That's the direction we have decided to go in.

I will though take a look at whether or not there's any way we can accurately reflect the reason why people are not going. It's a very, very tough measure to objectively quantify, and I do not want to put anything in here that is just a pie-in-the-sky type of statistic, because we do act on all these performance measures. If there is something we can do, if there is something we can measure that can actually quantify why people don't enroll, then we will certainly look at it. But, again, it has to be accurate and has to be something we can utilize. But I will look at it.

MS DeLONG: In the Alberta Learning book, page 13, under operational overview for basic learning, one of the responsibilities is "develop curriculum and set standards" and "evaluate curriculum and assess outcomes." Now, I've heard – I could be totally wrong on this – that there are teachers working for some of the school boards who are not in front of students at all, that they spend, you know, one hundred percent of their time on curriculum. I also understand that teachers spend quite a bit of their day not in front of students but working on their curriculum, and I know that when it comes to curriculum, you do have goals in place in terms of how effective it is in terms of teaching the children. Is it possible that we could look at also adding goals in terms of how much extra is being spent on this other level of government on curriculum also? In other words, if we're doing a really good job on curriculum, then this other level of government shouldn't have to be spending money there. It seems to me that generally in society where we get the real waste is where you've got different levels of government sort of competing with each other. This looks to me like one of those situations.

DR. OBERG: First of all, I'll qualify one of your statements: if we are doing a very good job on curriculum. I will say that we are doing a very good job on curriculum. But your point is well taken. What we have in our curriculum, though, is flexibility for school boards. We have core learning objectives that they must do, and they must put the general curriculum forward. They have no choice on that, and we ensure that each and every school board around the province puts that forward.

What you will notice – and I'm sure other people will notice this as well – is that each individual classroom does not teach exactly the same subject in exactly the same way, and this is where the variations come in on the curriculum individual school boards put across. They put it across to their individual population. A student in Gem, Alberta, in my constituency, which is an extremely rural part of Alberta where there are triple grades and things like that, is going to have to have a different way of having the curriculum put across. We do not specify exactly what word the teacher must say on what day when it comes to curriculum, and that's what a lot of the curriculum advisors do on the school boards.

I believe it is significantly better than it was five to 10 years ago, in which case school boards had very large curriculum departments within them. I feel that there is not a lot of duplication occurring right now.

Also, in response to the second part of your question, it is extremely difficult to quantify the amount of time a teacher spends on curriculum or on not preparing curriculum because involved in their contracts they have preparatory time. So it's very difficult for us to do, and I'm not entirely sure how advantageous it would be considering the difference in contracts around the province.

MS DeLONG: But we could at least look to see how many people are, you know, specifically just working on curriculum within the school boards. Could we at least track that?

9:50

DR. OBERG: Certainly we could. I think the numbers are a lot fewer than what you believe.

THE CHAIRMAN: Thank you.

Ms Blakeman, followed by Mrs. Jablonski.

MS BLAKEMAN: Thanks. I'm following up on an issue I've already raised with the minister, but I'm realizing that in fact it would have started in this fiscal year. I'm on page 74, where I'm looking at support for adult learners. I think that's the line item I'm supposed to reference when I ask this question. It won't help you to look it up. What I'm curious about is some fairly detailed information, so you may have to provide it in writing. On the grants program that is available, for example, for people applying for grants that then take ESL upgrading or something like that, I'm curious as to how many overpayments from the department to the individual were registered in this fiscal year and what percentage of the total that is. Perhaps the minister does know that off the top of his head.

DR. OBERG: In all fairness, I don't have that number right off the top of my head, but I certainly will look at it. Again, as we had communicated before, that is one of the things I will look at with specifics with your client, but also in general we'll pass that on to you.

MS BLAKEMAN: Then as a supplementary I'll add a couple of other things in there.

DR. OBERG: Sure.

MS BLAKEMAN: If we could look at the number of these overpayments – overgrants is what I should be saying – successfully collected, how many of those were sent to collection? I think that might help us.

Thank you.

DR. OBERG: Sure. I don't have those figures right off the top of my head.

MS BLAKEMAN: Okay. We'll get it in writing.

DR. OBERG: I certainly can get them for you.

MRS. JABLONSKI: Dr. Oberg, on page 65 of the annual report – we've already referred to these charts – we see the charts concerning high school completion. It's the one you don't have. You've stated that high school completion is a big concern, and in some of our high schools in northern Alberta the completion rate is zero percent. It's been revealed that fetal alcohol syndrome is a very serious disability that prevents children affected by FAS from learning in the

same way other children learn. FAS causes these children to think differently and therefore to learn differently. In some schools, especially in northern Alberta, there may be a very large percentage of these children, a significant percentage for sure. Are we in Alberta Learning projecting the costs of incorporating special learning programs for these children?

DR. OBERG: We aren't projecting the costs, and I'll tell you why. First of all, when it comes to fetal alcohol syndrome and fetal alcohol effect, it's very difficult to ascertain the actual number of students that have that affliction. Fetal alcohol effect, as you may well know, is something that is not readily apparent by physical characteristics. It is something that is more a diagnosis of exclusion than anything. It's a diagnosis of family history. So we do not have any specific way of tracking the actual number of students that have fetal alcohol effect or fetal alcohol syndrome. What we do is fund based on their characteristics. For example, if they have behavioral characteristics, abnormal behaviour, then they are funded accordingly. It's very difficult, and I would challenge anyone to be able to readily identify an actual number of fetal alcohol effect children that are out there.

I think we're getting better at diagnosing it, but again this very much has to do with the same thing as ADD. How much of that is due to ADD? How much of it is due to fetal alcohol effect? How much of it is due to various other things? It is a very difficult number, and in all fairness, when it comes to actually treating the kids, the treatment does not change dramatically from one affliction to the other. So we don't tend to concentrate on the number of children that are afflicted with fetal alcohol effect or fetal alcohol syndrome. They are funded according to their behaviour.

Again I would remind the hon. member that there is a huge variation in behaviour between fetal alcohol syndrome and fetal alcohol effect, and there's a wide spectrum in between. So I don't feel it's right to purely fund on the basis of fetal alcohol effect, to fund X number of dollars. It should be based on their symptoms, based on their behaviour, and that's consequently how you do it.

With regard to fetal alcohol effect, I'll give you my personal viewpoint. My personal viewpoint is that it affects a much higher number of students than we realize. It's something I was involved in in my previous ministry, on ways to prevent it. Just for your information as well, we are also including fetal alcohol syndrome and fetal alcohol effect in our curriculums in the schools during our health curriculum and our CALM curriculum, telling people what the actual effects are of drinking alcohol during your pregnancy. So we are attempting to educate the most vulnerable people, those in junior high and senior high, about exactly what can occur.

MRS. JABLONSKI: Just a supplemental. I believe we're going to find that we'll have to have a different learning system for these young students, so I just hope we're prepared for that.

DR. OBERG: Yes, and that's an excellent point. The issue right now, though, is that the medical models out there are not necessarily adequate for these kids. We are finding ways to control their behaviour, but we are not finding significant ways to adequately address it and adequately improve it. We are working on it every day, and every day there are more and better ways of doing it. We are addressing that. We are following that extremely closely. A direct response to your question is yes, we will be prepared.

THE CHAIRMAN: Mr. Mason, do you have a question?

MR. MASON: Sure, Mr. Chairman. I'd like to ask about the whole

question of the maintenance of schools, making sure the buildings are maintained and so on. I guess I got caught out in the debate by the minister over his estimates in not quite understanding how it works, but it really seems to me that the older schools should not be penalized in terms of any work that needs to be done to maintain them as part of a policy to compel school boards to build new schools or close schools so they can build new schools in areas. Can you elaborate on that? There are situations where older schools are not receiving the kind of maintenance and, as a result, are becoming very, very run down and building up a substantial deficit in terms of the work that needs to be done.

DR. OBERG: Certainly. There are two programs that deal with that. The first is an operations and maintenance program which is given on a per student basis to the school boards. So the key component to this is that it is not allocated directly to the individual schools. It is allocated to the school boards based on the number of students they have within their jurisdiction.

The second component of this is what's called the BQRP, the building quality restoration program, which is a program that is done under Infrastructure, that is looked at under Infrastructure. It includes major renovations to some of these schools – sorry; I'll counter that. I'll say somewhere between minor and major. When you talk about a boiler blowing, when you talk about some of these things, this is BQRP money that has been given to them. But the operations and maintenance is done on a per student basis to the school boards, and they decide how to divvy it out to the schools.

MR. MASON: But is it being held back? Is any of this money being held back until the utilization rates are changed?

DR. OBERG: No.

MR. MASON: What is being held back?

DR. OBERG: The only thing that would potentially be held back until utilization rates are changed is new school construction.

MR. MASON: That's it.

THE CHAIRMAN: Thank you.

In light of the hour I would like to express on behalf of the Standing Committee on Public Accounts an expression of gratitude to the minister, Dr. Oberg, and his staff. It's obvious to this person that the minister was very well briefed and well prepared for this meeting, and I think the committee is very grateful for that. The minister was gracious and thorough in his responses. We appreciate that. Thank you. If there's any information you can provide, please provide it to the clerk, Corinne Dacyshyn.

I would also like to thank again the Auditor General, Mr. Valentine, and his associates for appearing this morning.

At this time I would like to ask for a motion to adjourn, please.

MR. MARZ: I so move.

THE CHAIRMAN: Thank you.

[The committee adjourned at 10 a.m.]

