



Legislative Assembly of Alberta

The 30th Legislature
Second Session

Standing Committee
on
Public Accounts

Ministry of Education

Tuesday, November 2, 2021
8 a.m.

Transcript No. 30-2-30

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

Standing Committee on Public Accounts

Phillips, Shannon, Lethbridge-West (NDP), Chair
Reid, Roger W., Livingstone-Macleod (UC), Deputy Chair

Armstrong-Homeniuk, Jackie, Fort Saskatchewan-Vegreville (UC)
Lovely, Jacqueline, Camrose (UC)
Pancholi, Rakhi, Edmonton-Whitemud (NDP)
Renaud, Marie F., St. Albert (NDP)
Rowswell, Garth, Vermilion-Lloydminster-Wainwright (UC)
Schmidt, Marlin, Edmonton-Gold Bar (NDP)
Singh, Peter, Calgary-East (UC)
Toor, Devinder, Calgary-Falconridge (UC)
Turton, Searle, Spruce Grove-Stony Plain (UC)
Walker, Jordan, Sherwood Park (UC)

Office of the Auditor General Participants

| | |
|---------------|---------------------------|
| W. Doug Wylie | Auditor General |
| Rob Driesen | Assistant Auditor General |
| Brad Ireland | Assistant Auditor General |

Support Staff

| | |
|---------------------|--|
| Shannon Dean, QC | Clerk |
| Teri Cherkewich | Law Clerk |
| Trafton Koenig | Senior Parliamentary Counsel |
| Philip Massolin | Clerk Assistant and Director of House Services |
| Nancy Robert | Clerk of <i>Journals</i> and Committees |
| Sarah Amato | Research Officer |
| Melanie Niemi-Bohun | Research Officer |
| Warren Huffman | Committee Clerk |
| Jody Rempel | Committee Clerk |
| Aaron Roth | Committee Clerk |
| Rhonda Sorensen | Manager of Corporate Communications |
| Janet Laurie | Supervisor of Corporate Communications |
| Jeanette Dotimas | Communications Consultant |
| Michael Nguyen | Communications Consultant |
| Tracey Sales | Communications Consultant |
| Janet Schwegel | Director of Parliamentary Programs |
| Amanda LeBlanc | Deputy Editor of <i>Alberta Hansard</i> |

Standing Committee on Public Accounts

Participants

Ministry of Education

Jennifer Cassidy, Acting Assistant Deputy Minister, Curriculum

Kindy Joseph, Assistant Deputy Minister, Program and System Support

Dan Karas, Acting Assistant Deputy Minister, Systems Excellence

Andre Tremblay, Deputy Minister

8 a.m.

Tuesday, November 2, 2021

[Ms Phillips in the chair]

The Chair: All right. Good morning, everyone. I would like to call this meeting of the Public Accounts Committee to order and welcome everyone in attendance.

I'm Shannon Phillips, the MLA for Lethbridge-West and chair of this committee. We have people joining through various methods this morning, so I'd like to invite those participating in the committee room to introduce themselves first, please.

Mr. Reid: Good morning. Roger Reid, MLA for Livingstone-Macleod and deputy chair of the committee.

Mr. Turton: Morning, everyone. Searle Turton, MLA for Spruce Grove-Stony Plain.

Mr. Toor: Good morning. Devinder Toor, MLA, Calgary-Falconridge.

Mr. Walker: Good morning. Jordan Walker, MLA, Sherwood Park.

Ms Lovely: Good morning, everyone. Jackie Lovely, Camrose constituency.

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

Mr. Schmidt: Marlin Schmidt, Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Ms Renaud: Marie Renaud, St. Albert.

Ms Pancholi: Good morning. Rakhi Pancholi, Edmonton-Whitemud.

Ms Robert: Good morning. Nancy Robert, clerk of *Journals* and committees.

Mr. Roth: Good morning. Aaron Roth, committee clerk.

The Chair: All right. Thank you.

We also have a number of people joining us by videoconference today. I see Jackie Armstrong-Homeniuk and Garth Rowswell from the government caucus joining us today. I don't know if there are any others. If you could, any committee members, introduce yourselves for the record, and then we will move on to hearing from the officials.

Mr. Rowswell: Garth Rowswell, MLA, Vermilion-Lloydminster-Wainwright.

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

The Chair: Okay. Very good.

We are also joined here this morning by the folks from the Auditor General's office. We have Mr. Doug Wylie, the Auditor General, and Mr. Rob Driesen and Mr. Brad Ireland, Assistant Auditors General, joining us on the line as well.

I am not noting any substitutions today, friends, unless any of you speak up.

We'll just move on to the housekeeping items at hand here. Masks are to be worn in the committee room except when you are speaking, as usual. Members are invited to take them off or leave them on, whichever, at your discretion. Your microphones are operated by *Hansard*, and our committee proceedings are live streamed on the Internet and broadcast on Alberta Assembly TV.

When you are on videoconference, please turn on your camera while speaking and mute your microphone when not speaking. Members participating virtually who want to be put on the speakers list, just send a message to the committee clerk. Members in the room, you can signal, and I will be watching, but if I miss you, please do feel free to put something in the chat. I am participating virtually today. For points of order please do just speak up, friends, because sometimes I will not see you when I am chairing virtually.

The public galleries are closed.

We'll now move to the approval of the agenda. Are there any changes or omissions to today's agenda?

Seeing none, then, would a member please move that the agenda for the November 2, 2021, meeting of the Standing Committee on Public Accounts be approved as distributed? I see that moved by Member Reid. Thank you. Is there any discussion on this motion?

Seeing none, all in favour. Are there any opposed? Thank you. That motion is carried. Members, please remute.

We'll now move on to the approval of our minutes. We have the minutes from last week's meeting on October 26. Members, do you have any errors or additions to note?

Seeing none, would a member please, then, move that the minutes for the October 26 meeting of the Standing Committee on Public Accounts be approved as distributed?

Ms Renaud: I move.

The Chair: Oh, okay. Thank you.

Is there any discussion on this motion?

Seeing none, all in favour. Are there any opposed? Thank you. That motion is carried.

Friends, we will now welcome the officials from the Ministry of Education who are here to address the Auditor General outstanding recommendations as well as the ministry's annual report and any other matters having been dealt with by the Auditor General. I will invite officials from the ministry to provide their opening remarks of 10 minutes.

Welcome, Deputy. I know that officials have been here before, but just say your name and your position when you begin speaking and then for any other officials, ADMs and otherwise, say your name and title before the first time you begin speaking so that *Hansard* can appropriately identify you. Your time begins when you begin speaking.

Mr. Tremblay: Committee Chair Phillips, can you hear me okay?

The Chair: I certainly can, and I'm seeing some nods from inside the room.

Mr. Tremblay: Perfect. Thanks. You know, good morning. I really appreciate the opportunity to speak with you today. It's a very important process, the public accounts process. I know in my career I've had the opportunity to work with this committee through this process a number of times, and I am looking forward to the conversation today.

I am joined at the table with Christine Sewell, our acting assistant deputy minister of financial services, and Emily Ma, director of budget and fiscal analysis within financial services as well. Also in the room I have Kindy Joseph, ADM of program and system supports; Jeff Willan, ADM of strategic services and governance; Jennifer Cassidy, acting ADM of curriculum division; and Dan Karas, acting ADM of system excellence.

Today I'm going to provide a brief overview of our annual report, accomplishments for the '20-21 fiscal year, and the status on our outstanding Auditor General recommendations.

In Budget 2020 government upheld its commitment to maintain or increase funding to core social services. Education's total budget from an operating expense point of view was \$8.3 billion. A more efficient and sustainable funding model for K to 12 was introduced in the '20-21 school year, and this new model gives authority, predictable funding, and more flexibility to best meet local needs as to authority level.

Most school authorities across Alberta experienced enrolment decline due to COVID-19. School authorities would have received less funding under the previous funding model, so the new funding model that was implemented in '20-21 actually resulted in more funding for the system in comparison to the old model. School authorities were provided with all of the funds committed to them for the '20-21 school year plus additional funding for COVID-19 to a total of \$263 million from the federal government in the safe return to class funding program that was implemented. School boards spent cautiously in '20-21 due to lower than expected enrolments and shifts to online learning that decreased expenditures such as busing and the use of substitute teachers in some cases.

In terms of COVID actions, the department took significant actions to address COVID impacts on student learning. These included supporting schools to use multiple approaches to deliver content when in person or when individuals were diverted online. That also included collaboration with school authorities so students had the technology they needed to participate online. A provincial education helpline was created to support families, particularly parents of children with disabilities and parents that were having children take instruction at home.

For the '20-21 school year we made provincial exams optional and distributed the aforementioned \$263 million from the federal government. This funding supported at-home and online learning, adaptation of learning spaces within our schools, and some facility alterations in response to COVID.

The government accelerated \$250 million of capital maintenance, and \$44 million of that was used for mechanical upgrades related to HVAC, which obviously is an important part of our infrastructure asset base during a pandemic. A comprehensive re-entry plan was developed for the '20-21 school year to support schools to prepare for in-school learning while prioritizing the safety of students and school staff in our system. The plan included guidance on a wider range of operational issues, including hygiene, health requirements, student learning, well-being, transportation, and, as I mentioned, diploma exams. Education also distributed PPE to every student, teacher, and staff member early on in the pandemic response. On page 14 of the annual report there's an in-depth summary of actions taken in '19-20 and '20-21 to address COVID.

As the annual report shows, Education worked on four outcomes from its business plan and achieved a number of key milestones in '20-21. The new ministerial order on student learning and the guiding framework for the design and development of kindergarten to grade 12 provincial curriculum was released, and these two documents set the vision and parameters and objectives around the development of new curriculum for the K to 12 system. Obviously, we're working on the implementation of K to 6 currently.

8:10

Shifting gears, the Choice in Education Act received royal assent and took effect on September 1, 2020. The act was informed by feedback added from education partners, parents, students, and the general public through significant engagement efforts. The act strengthens Alberta's successful history of educational choice by affirming that parents have the right to choose the education they

feel is best for their children, supporting the creation of new charter schools, including vocation-focused charter schools, protecting the status of independent schools, and providing a new option for parents who choose to home-school their children.

Alberta Education updated the K to 12 funding model to improve funding and accountability processes and help Albertans feel confident that the education system is meeting student needs. The new model provides more predictable funding to school authorities and more flexibility, as I mentioned before, by implementing a three-year weighted moving average methodology. We also developed and implemented plans and strategies to support school capital planning and revised these policies and processes to ensure that we were delivering on our capital priorities with a minimal amount of red tape.

During the '20-21 school year we completed 20 schools across the province and modernized another 11. In addition, five schools were slated for replacement, and together all of these projects equalled nearly \$275 million over a three-year period.

Other key highlights with the annual report worth noting: in '20-21 Alberta's education budget funded a projected 730,000 children and students. Only 705,000 were actually registered in ECS to grade 12 across the province. Despite that lower enrolment, we did maintain funding within the system in order to support school authorities in managing COVID and inconsistencies with enrolment.

The K to 6 draft was released in March 2021 and is open for public input and remains that way until the spring of 2022. We are still focusing on implementing that curriculum in September 2022.

Alberta Education also invested \$5.5 million to build 27 playgrounds, and we undertook a significant amount of effort to reduce red tape with a 15 per cent reduction in requirements within the department for reporting, forms, and other elements of application processes that are present within the department.

I'll shift gears now to our Auditor General recommendations. Northland school division: I'll focus there. In March 2015 the Auditor General made three recommendations regarding Northlands school division. One recommendation was directed toward Alberta Education. The other two were actually directed to the school board. Significant process has been made. I will speak to the recommendation directed to Education. The Auditor General recommended the department exercise oversight of Northland school division by ensuring the division develops and executes the recommended operational plan to improve student attendance, and the operational plan identifies the resources needed and how the results will be measured and reported related to attendance.

Northland has developed and implemented a comprehensive attendance improvement operational plan that outlines numerous strategies to improve student attendance and engagement, including targets to measure progress in these objectives. They have standardized attendance tracking processes in schools across their division, and we are providing them ongoing guidance, training, and recording and monitoring of these processes. Education has developed a student attendance oversight plan, which is guiding our work in providing advice and leadership to Northland.

Through Education's oversight the Auditor General recommendations for Northland and Education have been fully implemented, but I think it is worth noting that the pandemic has had a significant impact on attendance not only in Northland but across the system, so results of all of that work that Northland has undertaken over the last number of years . . .

The Chair: Thank you, Deputy.

We'll now move on to the Auditor General for his opening comments not exceeding five minutes.

Mr. Wylie: Good morning, Chair and Deputy Minister and all committee members. It's great to be with you this morning. I'll maybe pick up where the deputy left off if I could, Chair. I'm not speaking for the deputy here; I'll just put things to the committee from my perspective.

With respect to the outstanding recommendations at Northland school division and as the deputy indicated, significant progress has been made. We do understand, though, that right now the department and the school division are not ready for us to come in and actually follow those up. I think that, as the deputy was indicating, they're waiting for the impact of COVID to pass. I understand they've made the improvements, but the results are not being achieved given COVID for the last year. We'll follow those recommendations up when we understand that they're ready for us to come in and look at them.

We have four recommendations outstanding at the ministry. The deputy referred to three. The one that he did not mention was dealing with – in 2018 we'd made a recommendation to the department that it improve its processes related to the monitoring, assessing, and reporting on school jurisdictions' accumulated reserve balances. Now, as the committee members will know, the accumulated operating reserves are an important financial indicator within the education sector. You know, there were metrics and checks and balances put in place that the department had oversight for. We looked at those processes, and essentially we found that the department was not applying its oversight processes consistently. Now, the department has indicated that improvements have been made, and I can report to the committee that we're actually in the final stages now of completing our assessment of the department's progress, and we will be reporting the results of that work in our upcoming fall report, which will be released very shortly.

I think that covers them, Chair. Again, we have four recommendations that are currently in the outstanding status, but with respect to the first one, on reserve balances, we're doing the work, and we're reporting that shortly. With respect to the three relating to the Northland school division, we will wait for the department and school division to indicate they're fully implemented, and then we'll come in and do that follow-up work and report to the Legislature when our work is done.

Thank you, Chair.

The Chair: All right. Thank you.

We will now move to our first rotation, which is 12 minutes. We'll begin with the Official Opposition. Please proceed.

Ms Pancholi: Thank you, Madam Chair, and thank you to the department officials for being here today. Deputy, I'm just going to begin by saying that if I cut you off at any point, my apologies. I'm not trying to be rude. We just have a very limited amount of time here to chat about a very important subject.

Deputy, you mentioned a number of times in your opening comments – and it's mentioned in the annual report – that the expected enrolment for the 2020-21 school year was that 730,000 students were projected, but only 705,000 actually registered, which means that there were 25,000 fewer Alberta students registered in school last year. That is a concern. I believe we need to have a little bit more information about what happened to those students and what efforts were made to ensure that those students actually received schooling in the last school year.

I'm going to begin by asking that you table in writing for this committee a detailed breakdown. Just aggregate those 25,000 students who were expected to enrol that didn't register. If you could just aggregate them by the following: by grade across the province, including anticipated enrolment versus the actuals, and

then by grade for each school division, including anticipated enrolment versus actuals. I'll just ask you to make a commitment that you'll table that in writing with the committee. I see a nod, so I will say yes.

Moving on, what can you tell us, Deputy, about who those 25,000 Alberta students were that did not register for school last year and whether or not they actually received any formal education at all?

8:20

Mr. Tremblay: Thank you very much for the question. It's a foundational one. There are a number of different points I want to make with regard to enrolment. First off, a significant number of those individuals actually moved to a home-school environment. Ten thousand individuals moved from a home-school environment and were obviously picked up by our funding model. There was also a significant amount of reduction in kindergarten enrolment. I think that, you know, intuitively most people would understand that kindergarten is optional in the province, and parents during the pandemic made a decision to hold individuals back from going into kindergarten. Those are the two primary drivers behind the reduced enrolment.

Ms Pancholi: Thank you, Deputy.

I'm going to ask a few more questions about that. With respect to the home education students, why would that not have still been picked up as registered students? As you mentioned, they were picked up by the funding model, so why would those students not appear in your enrolment? As well, were those students all receiving supervised home education programs, meaning supervised by an accredited private school or by a school authority?

Mr. Tremblay: Our home-school students are picked up. It's just in a different operating expense.

I don't know, Christine, if you want to provide a bit of detail on how the breakdown exists between students in the school versus home-school students.

We will provide that breakdown for you if you wouldn't mind.

Ms Pancholi: Sure. Thank you. I'd appreciate it if you could also indicate, yes, how many were actually – you mentioned the Choice in Education Act as well – being basically registered in a home education program without supervision.

I want to go back to the kindergarten. You may be aware that Alberta actually scores the lowest in the country with respect to investment in early childhood education. You mentioned that kindergarten is optional. I'm actually a parent of a child who was in kindergarten last year. I know – this is a bit anecdotal, of course – from a number of parents of children the same age as my daughter that they chose not to register their child in kindergarten because they did not feel it was safe to do so. Given the big drop in enrolment in those younger grades, in kindergarten and ECS programs – you're indicating that's a big portion of it – I want to know what efforts the department made to ensure that parents felt it was safe to send their children to school last year.

Mr. Tremblay: I want Christine to answer your previous question regarding the numbers around home-school kids in terms of how they're incorporated into the budget. Did you want us to answer that question? We can.

Ms Pancholi: If you could answer that question in writing – sorry – just because we have limited time. I'd really like to talk about these kindergarten-age students and what efforts the ministry made to ensure that those youngest students were enrolled in school last year.

Mr. Tremblay: Maybe I'll talk a bit about how the COVID response worked within the Alberta government with regard to K to 12. Obviously, the Education department had a significant role to play in implementing specific programming to support schools across the system, to help schools work through operational challenges that they may be dealing with, and to stabilize funding for school boards and school authorities. We worked in partnership with Health to implement strategies that were public health related, but those public health related strategies were at the discretion of the chief medical officer of health. I know there is going to be a lot of conversation around COVID today. I want to kind of level set the roles and responsibilities with each of the two departments. I think it's important . . .

Ms Pancholi: Thank you, Deputy. Sorry. Thank you. I appreciate that, but outcome 1 of your business plan for Alberta Education is to ensure that Alberta students are successful. I understand that there are health measures that are taken by different departments, but ultimately your department is responsible for ensuring the success of Alberta students. We're hearing today that 25,000 students last year were not registered in school. A big portion of that were younger students. I'm asking what steps your ministry took to ensure that all Alberta students were successful, which is one of your stated outcomes. I'm asking what additional measures you took as a department to ensure that those students got an education last year.

Mr. Tremblay: Yeah. Your question around what we did to support students: happy to answer that. Number one, we provided stable funding for the system to use in terms of all of the programs that are delivered by school authorities even though enrolment was lower. That's number one.

Number two, we very early in the process provided PPE and hygiene supplies and cleaning supplies for the entire system to support in-classroom instruction. We provided guidance through our re-entry plan, that helped provide advice and context for local school authorities to make decisions on how to deliver curriculum across the system during a pandemic. We were able to access federal funds that were above and beyond what the province provided for school operators. We actually worked with individual school authorities to shift classrooms, create cohorts, and on some occasions schools in order to respond to operational circumstances that were prevalent in a local context.

We worked daily with Health to advise them on public health policy decisions that they were making, not only within the context of grade 1 or kindergarten but also across the entire system, and we had daily contact with school authorities across the system to ensure that they had the suitable information they needed from the chief medical officer of health to make those important local decisions.

Ms Pancholi: Thank you, Deputy. Thank you. I appreciate that.

What I'm asking, though – and I appreciate all those efforts – what I'm saying is that ultimately at the beginning of the September 2021 school year you would have seen a big drop in enrolment. It was clear that schools were making decisions about moving online; some were, you know, obviously providing in-school instruction. You would have seen as a department information about the lower enrolment, the drop in enrolment. For a parent, hearing that there's a stable new funding model does not provide the security they need to know that their child is going to be safe to go to school. That was the direct question. I'm asking what responsibility your ministry took, either working directly with school boards who showed that they were having lower enrolment than expected – maybe it was all of them. Again, we're looking for that breakdown. But what efforts

did you take as a ministry when you saw that decline in enrolment, knowing the long-term impacts of that, to actually communicate with Alberta parents to ensure that more students were registered in school?

Mr. Tremblay: I don't think it's our job as a department to ensure more kids are registered in school at the kindergarten level. That's an individual parent choice. Parents choose to opt their kids in or out of kindergarten. I just want to clear that element up.

In terms of what we did with school boards, it is ultimately what I just articulated a few minutes ago. Even though we knew there was an enrolment reduction in many of our school authorities across the province, we still maintained the funding for those school authorities so they could deliver essential programming, implement COVID protocols, and ensure that the classroom environment was as safe for our kids as it needed to be in order to deliver services.

Ms Pancholi: Deputy, sorry. Apologies. I've only got two minutes left, so I'm going to continue on. I also want to ask about children with disabilities. I was hearing from many parents saying that last year, the year which is under consideration under this annual report, was a year where students with disabilities, essentially many, did not even get schooling. I had parents say: we just wrote off the year for education.

Can you provide some information for this committee – you can table it in writing if you don't have it available right now – as to how many of those students who did not register for the school year last year were children who were identified with disabilities, either coded or scheduled to receive or were receiving PUF funding in the ECS year prior to kindergarten? Can you also indicate if you were keeping track of how many of those children with disabilities maintained enrolment in school – I mean, actively were receiving an education program – throughout that school year and any information about what efforts your ministry took to ensure that students with disabilities continued to have an active education program during the school year?

Mr. Tremblay: I'd like to try and answer that if you wouldn't mind. One important, I think, contextual piece for the last year is that even when we were shifting schools or the entire system or a region of the province to online learning, students with specialized needs were still able to access in-person instruction with the appropriate health guidelines in place. I just want to clear up any misconception that there was an exemption provided for individuals with specialized needs to still continue to access that important support in the school regardless of what was happening with that individual school or board or region from the online learning perspective. I just want to make sure that that's really clear, that we were very sensitive to that particular student population in the system.

8:30

The Chair: Thank you, Deputy.

We'll now move to the government side for the first block of time, which is 12 minutes.

Mr. Turton: Excellent. Thank you very much, Madam Chair, and thank you very much, Mr. Tremblay and the rest of the department officials, for coming here today. Obviously, having a very young riding – I think Spruce Grove-Stony Plain has one of the youngest average ages out of any riding in the province. I know that Spruce Grove is also one of the fastest growing communities in the country. Everywhere you look, there are kids, and education is, obviously, a huge priority for myself and my constituents.

I have a number of questions, many of which will actually also pertain to COVID response, because I know that's obviously a huge issue for many parents and elected officials right across the country and province. My first couple of questions revolve around pages 14 and 15 of the annual report. It really talks about the COVID-19 impacts on student learning and well-being. The impact on children across the province was significant from COVID-19, so I just want to ask a couple of questions regarding that. I know your ministry provided additional funds to school authorities to assist in a safe return to in-person learning. I was wondering if you can perhaps identify where those funds were being drawn from, and how are they being distributed? I know that school authorities are varied right across the entire province, so it would be interesting to see your rationale and how those funds were being distributed to help out school authorities and children right around Alberta.

Mr. Tremblay: Sure. Thanks for the question. In 2021 school authorities had access to more than a billion dollars in additional funds, of which three-quarters was directed to taxpayers. Obviously, this included \$250 million in capital maintenance, \$43 million in the critical worker benefit, additional funding for PPE, additional funding for online learning, as I mentioned, an additional \$250 million from the federal government. Even though enrolment was down, we still maintained what would have been \$130 million in lost funding under the previous model and a number of other funding elements that school authorities benefited from.

Mr. Turton: Excellent. Thank you very much for the answer.

At this point I also want to just highlight the incredible work that the school authorities in my riding have been doing and just give a little bit of a shout-out to Parkland school division, Evergreen school division, St. Matthew school, Living Waters because, obviously, they had very trying circumstances dealing with COVID and making sure that the kids receive a good education.

In conversations many of those education professionals have told me they were concerned about some of the conditional requirements for the use of some of those funds and supports that the province gave. I guess my question is: can the ministry please provide the committee with the conditional requirements for school authorities in the use of those funds? Obviously, many school authorities around the province are concerned about extra strings being attached that just, you know, make it a little bit more of an issue with trying to disburse those funds, so I'm just wondering if you could elaborate on that a little bit.

Mr. Tremblay: Sure. I think I mentioned this in my opening remarks. Obviously, red tape reduction is an extremely important element to the government of Alberta's mandate to reduce red tape, reduce burden, make things more clear in terms of reporting and applying for funds. Alberta Education is held to a significant target around red tape reduction. What we're attempting to do is strike the appropriate balance between making sure that we're effectively managing taxpayer dollars from a program delivery point of view but also, again, providing greater clarity, eliminating redundant steps, and ensuring that what we're asking for from school authorities is needed in order to be accountable with those dollars.

Over the last year and a half we've undertaken a significant amount of analysis on our programming around conditional grants, around our funding model, and around reporting that surrounds that, engaged with stakeholder leaders and system leaders, and we've actually seen a 15 per cent reduction in red tape across the department. A lot of that actually centres around application processes and reporting processes that relate to providing money to the system. Our work is not done in that regard. We still have some

additional red tape reduction targets that we need to accomplish over the next year and a half, but we are on target with that 15 per cent reduction based on that in-depth engagement that we undertook with system leaders over the last 18 months.

Mr. Turton: Excellent. Thank you very much for the response.

I just want to pivot a little into a slightly different direction for my last question. It has to deal with, specifically, the effects that the pandemic has had on First Nations, Métis, and Inuit students. Just outside of Spruce Grove-Stony Plain we have Paul band First Nation to the west, Enoch First Nation to the east. Obviously, many students in those two First Nations communities, you know, come into Spruce Grove and Stony Plain to receive their education. I guess my question is that on page 15 of the annual report it highlights the supports provided to First Nations, Métis, and Inuit throughout the 2020-2021 school year. But I would like the department to provide the committee with maybe a more detailed account of the supports provided to these students in schools.

Mr. Tremblay: Thank you very much. I appreciate the question. I have some details here I'm going to share with you. Obviously, one of our top priorities is supporting FNMI learners across the province. It's an important part of our business plan. It's an important part of our strategic mandate. Within that context, FNMI students attending provincial schools were eligible for supports provided within their schools. However, no COVID-dedicated funding specifically was allocated to FNMI learners because we know that in attending our schools, they would have all of the supports that we were providing to the entire system. School authorities were given the flexibility to direct funding and support as required, as always.

With our new funding model, we've been able to consolidate the number of grants and the number of restrictions that a school authority was subjected to under the previous model, which allows them flexibility to adapt their programming to specific populations within their school authority. We've seen that flexibility in action already within the COVID response.

With respect to supporting successful outcomes for FNMI learners and eliminating that achievement gap between those learners and other learners within the system, there is a series of programs that we do deliver. But we do have a number of direct funding relationships with a number of nations across the province to develop additional teaching resources, to identify unique pedagogy strategies for teachers in adapting content for FNMI learners, and for setting education outcomes and building capacity with staff to better support that very important population group within the K to 12 system.

We can provide you a significant amount of detail on those programs. But out of respect for your time – I think you're at three minutes and 30 seconds – we could provide that, or, if you want, I can delve more deeply into the programming, whichever you prefer.

Mr. Turton: Yes. Thank you for the comprehensive answer. I think that if you could send it in the form of a written format afterwards, that would be appropriate. I know many of my caucus colleagues have a number of questions as well. If you could just submit that answer in writing, I think that would be appropriate.

I guess that, just before I turn it over, I again just want to commend the incredible work that you guys have done. You know, Mr. Tremblay, you and your department officials over the last year: it has been trying, obviously, with COVID-19, and you have a very incredible burden to bear. Thank you very much for the work you do as well as to just all of the education professionals and teachers, that I know are paying attention to this video as well, maybe not at

this point because they're probably in school. But afterwards I'm sure many of them will be paying attention. So, again, thank you very much for the work that you do.

At this point I'll turn it over to my colleague MLA Lovely. Thank you very much.

8:40

Ms Lovely: Thank you so much, Member.

Mr. Tremblay, I have not yet had the opportunity of meeting you and your team, but I just wanted to say good morning to you. Thank you so much for the work that you do. I just wanted to echo what my fellow colleague has stated here. We're so grateful for the work that you've done to get us through COVID. I mean, we're not out of the water just yet, but we have suffered our piece as part of this global pandemic. You know, education is very important to every generation, and we want to make sure that our kids get the education that they need.

I had a lot of constituents reach out to me over the last, well, since COVID began, expressing all kinds of different concerns, and lots of them decided that they wanted to home-school their children for various reasons. You know, some families have immune-compromised individuals, and they just felt that it would be safer to keep their kids at home and limit exposure. I'm so glad that we've got parental choice and that if people want to home-school their children, that can be an option for them. In my community we've got the Battle River school division, Elk Island Catholic school division, and we also have the Kingman Christian academy and a new charter school that they're looking at putting up in the Holden area. I wish success to all of these different groups.

Now to my questions here. The first outcome for the department is extremely clear and very important. Outcome 1 is analyzed on pages 16 through 55. I would like to ask some questions based on the information provided in this section. Page 16 mentions that \$7.8 million was spent on curriculum renewal, K to 12, in 2020-21. Can the ministry explain precisely what this means? Particularly, can the ministry explain the difference between the new draft curriculum and the renewed curriculum?

Mr. Tremblay: Sure. The renewed curriculum refers to the overall project to review and develop new curriculum while the new draft curriculum is used to reference the draft that was released on March 29, 2021. A curriculum renewal includes the development of new K to 12 curriculum in eight subjects in both English . . .

The Chair: Thank you, Deputy.

We'll now go over to the Official Opposition for the second rotation of nine minutes.

Mr. Schmidt: Thank you very much, Madam Chair. I just want to go back to this issue of a billion dollars in additional COVID supports. I think the deputy minister in his response to Member Turton's question said that there was \$250 million for capital maintenance renewal, \$244 million for the critical worker benefit, \$250 million from the feds for safe restart. Then he said that there is an additional amount of money for funding for the 25,000 students that didn't show up and then PPE and online learning. Can the deputy minister break down how much the government spent on PPE and on online learning?

Mr. Tremblay: Sure. Thanks for the question, MLA Schmidt. Maybe I'll talk to PPE. We did provide very early on in the COVID response \$10 million to the system for PPE. That was to provide PPE for all staff, students, and teachers within the system. That's the clarifying point that you asked.

Christine, do you have information on the online funding pieces for MLA Schmidt? Perhaps if you could give us a minute. We're just going to grab that number if that's okay.

Mr. Schmidt: If you can provide that in writing, that would be fine. If you could table that, I would appreciate it.

Mr. Tremblay: Sure.

Mr. Schmidt: I want to go to the \$244 million in capital maintenance renewal. Now, you said in your introductory remarks that that was \$44 million for HVAC repairs. Can you tell me how you – is it fair to say that the ministry targeted \$244 million in capital maintenance and renewal on projects that would enhance safety for children from COVID in schools?

Mr. Tremblay: With our capital maintenance program I want to maybe provide a bit of a context around that, how that program works. We set the funding amount in a particular budget, and the individual maintenance priorities are set by school authorities themselves, so . . .

Mr. Schmidt: In this budget year, then, the department didn't direct school authorities to direct their capital maintenance and renewal to COVID-specific measures.

Mr. Tremblay: Again, if we would have directed the school authorities to do that, there may have been a misbalance in priority setting at a local level based on the individual knowledge that school authorities have on their infrastructure assets. So if we would have . . .

Mr. Schmidt: Thank you very much, Deputy Minister.

Is it the position of Alberta Education and the government of Alberta that COVID-19 is airborne?

Mr. Tremblay: That question would be more appropriately directed towards Alberta Health and our chief medical officer of health.

Mr. Schmidt: Did you ever ask the question of that to the chief medical officer of health when setting your infrastructure priorities for the year?

Mr. Tremblay: In terms of any sort of information around how COVID spreads or whether it's airborne or not, obviously that's something that's more appropriately directed towards the chief medical officer of health.

Mr. Schmidt: But the question to you, Deputy Minister: did the Department of Education ask the chief medical officer of health that question and respond by reprioritizing your infrastructure priorities?

Mr. Tremblay: Well, we certainly funded \$44 million of HVAC-related projects across the system, which is a significant increase over any other year that we provided CMR accelerated funding, so I think . . .

Mr. Schmidt: How many HVAC systems did that upgrade, and were those upgrades sufficient to deal with airborne COVID in schools?

Mr. Tremblay: Again, any sort of conjecture I might have on the efficacy of HVAC systems as it relates to evolving information on COVID would be more appropriately placed with the Department of Health.

Mr. Schmidt: Do you know if school authorities consulted with the Department of Health when they were upgrading their HVAC systems?

Mr. Tremblay: Of the key elements of all of our infrastructure priority setting, whether it's capital maintenance or capital investment in construction, one key element of that capital process is health and safety. It's a key criteria for setting any of our health or any of our infrastructure priorities in the system, and we know that school authorities consult with a number of different agencies in setting those priorities at a local level based on our funding framework.

Mr. Schmidt: This is the longest way to say no to the answer to that question that I've ever heard, so congratulations, Andre.

The other \$200 million in capital maintenance and renewal: what COVID safety measures were those directed to? Does the department know?

Mr. Tremblay: Maybe I'll turn it over to ADM Joseph, who is our lead on capital planning, if you're okay with that, MLA Schmidt, to make an attempt at your question.

Ms Joseph: Thank you very much for the question. I just wanted to provide a little bit more information on how those dollars are directed. The \$250 million that was provided in capital maintenance and renewal was provided to the system. The school authorities themselves actually report into the Department of Education in terms of what they feel their priorities are, and they do assess those based on the criteria that we've outlined earlier.

One of them is health and safety concerns. The school authorities themselves would determine what health and safety concerns they may want addressed. The department then assesses the prioritization of the school authorities as well and essentially does a double check against the criteria that we were using. That \$250 million that was provided: in terms of the actual expenditure primarily the prioritization was completed by school authorities themselves.

Mr. Schmidt: You just said that you double-check the prioritization. Did you reinforce or did you even look to see if COVID-19 safety measures were the top priority for school authorities when making these decisions?

8:50

Ms Joseph: There are a number of things that we look at around health and safety, of which there's health, safety, and security of students or staff in either medium or even long term, but the initial assessment is done by the school authority itself. Then we go back through and re-examine that assessment. We don't actually go back and, I guess, do a fulsome double check, I suppose, on the minutiae of that. We do a high-level overview and a review of all the criteria, which includes health and safety . . .

Mr. Schmidt: So what I'm hearing in the 30 seconds that I have left is that you're saying that you spent \$244 million on COVID supports, but you actually had no mechanisms whatsoever in place to direct school authorities to actually spend that money on measures that would effectively mitigate the risk of transmission of COVID in schools. Is that correct?

Ms Joseph: The \$244 million was stimulus funding for capital maintenance.

Mr. Schmidt: That's not what you said at the beginning of the meeting.

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll now move over to the government caucus for the second of the second rotation, which is nine minutes.

Ms Lovely: Well, thank you, Mr. Tremblay. I'll just pick up where I left off. We were talking about page 16, where it's mentioned that \$7.8 million was spent on curriculum renewal, K to 12, in 2021. Can the ministry explain precisely what this means? Particularly, can the ministry explain the difference between the new draft curriculum and renewed curriculum, and can the ministry provide details of how these funds were spent?

Mr. Tremblay: Sure. Thanks. I might be a little bit repetitive here just because we got into this question during the previous rotation. Again, renewed curriculum refers to the overall project to review and develop new K to 12 curriculum while new draft curriculum is used to reference the draft that was released on March 29, 2021, the K to 6 draft. Curriculum renewal includes the development of new K to 12 curriculum in eight subjects in both English and French in alignment with the 2020 ministerial order on student learning and the guiding framework for the design and development of kindergarten to grade 12 provincial-level curriculum. Alberta K to 12 curriculum is transforming to a knowledge-based curriculum, where students develop essential knowledge as a foundation for critical thinking as well as cultural and civic literacy. The maintenance of the existing K to 12 curriculum is ongoing until the new curriculum is developed and fully implemented.

As to how the funds were spent, \$7.6 million was spent on content development for eight subjects in both English and French; \$217,000 was spent on engagement activities, including the curriculum working group, which obviously was a key component to developing the new draft, and analysis of public survey results and the engagement process around the ministerial order on student learning. With respect to your question on – I think that I'll stop there, actually.

Ms Lovely: Well, thank you so much, Mr. Tremblay.

My next question is on page 18 of the annual report. It mentions the collaboration between the ministry and Enriched Academy in offering a financial literacy pilot project for grades 10 through 12. What metrics were in place to measure the success of this project? According to the metrics was the pilot project a success?

Mr. Tremblay: Sure. Thanks for the question. With respect to your questions on the financial literacy program with Enriched the collaboration through a conditional grant was targeted to reach 3,000 students in grades 10, 11, and 12 by the Enriched Academy online course to learn more about money management. The pilot project was measured and evaluated in three ways. Students completed a pre- and postassessment to measure their growth in understanding basic financial knowledge. Students completed a survey rating the course and providing feedback on its benefits and the areas for improvement, and teachers completed a survey to provide feedback on the course.

The pilot project was very successful. The final report indicated that Enriched Academy actually reached over 4,500 students in grades 10, 11, and 12. The final report indicated that both teachers and students gave the Enriched Academy a very high mark, an A for the course. Students' knowledge and comfort level with money more than doubled after taking the Enriched Academy course, and 84 per cent of teachers felt Enriched was a good addition overall to their course offerings. Actually, 91 per cent of teachers felt the pilot and Enriched Academy should be expanded to all students across the province.

Ms Lovely: Well, thank you for the fulsome answer, Mr. Tremblay.

Pages 20 and 21 go through what was done to increase opportunities for students to engage in hands-on learning experiences. Can the ministry provide some details on the different initiatives the ministry undertook to achieve this, and how successful were these initiatives?

Mr. Tremblay: Yes. Thank you for that question. Skilled trades, apprenticeships, and vocational education have equal value, merit, and worth as a university degree. I actually was previously the ADM of apprenticeship many years ago, and that applied learning model is crucial not only to provide learners with broader opportunities and career options, but also it has a direct correlation to the health of the overall economy.

Career education programming from 5 to 10 includes a number of different elements, and I will go through it right now. Career and technology foundations, which is grades 5 to 9, is designed to enable students to explore their interests while learning of various occupations through hands-on experience.

Career and technology studies, grades 10 to 12, offers flexible programming, enables schools to design unique programs and meet student needs and draw on community resources. Dual-credit at grades 10 to 12 provides opportunities for students to earn credits for high school and for postsecondary simultaneously through applied learning. Off-campus education programming, grades 10 to 12, through the green certificate program; the registered apprenticeship program, RAP; and work experience: all of those things provide education opportunities to investigate a variety of different career opportunities and gain practical experience.

Many of those students actually forge a relationship with an employer that is actually sustained beyond their educational experience, both, obviously, within a K to 12 context but also within a postsecondary context as well.

Ms Lovely: Well, thank you so much for the answers, Mr. Tremblay, and again for the work that you and your team do.

With that, I would like to cede the remainder of my time to my colleague MLA Reid.

Mr. Reid: Mr. Tremblay, thank you to you and your team for joining us today. I appreciate having you here and discussing the activities of the ministry over the last year. I also want to extend my appreciation for the work that the ministry has done to try to maintain as much normalcy as we can for our children and to ensure that they still have access to quality education during these difficult times. I think that's an essential part of the recovery of our province and the world, to ensure that our children are well looked after and equipped for the future. So thank you for all that you've done.

I really just have one question, focusing on outcome 2 from your annual report, related to objective 2.2. It states, "[ensuring] First Nations students have access to the provincial education system." The annual report then goes on to outline the innovations in the First Nations grant program, which supports a partnership between our First Nations and our provincial school jurisdictions to develop projects and to give more supports to our students and our staff and our caregivers on our First Nations. Specifically, on page 58 it mentions that "the department managed 51 ongoing... projects totaling approximately \$31 million." I'd like to ask if the ministry could outline your role in managing these projects. What oversight is in place to ensure that the funding is spent as efficiently and effectively as possible so that we are truly delivering the best outcomes for our First Nations students?

Mr. Tremblay: Thanks for the question. I really appreciate it. Obviously, it's a foundational part of our business plan and our

annual report on how we need to support FNMI learners across the system. I'll get into a bit on the grant management side of things first if that works for you. The department does undertake grant management activities, including the review and approval of proposals as well as the review and approval of interim and final reports. Conditional grant applications and proposals are viewed by our FNMI director. We're actually a very unique department from that perspective, where we actually have an ADM and a team that's solely dedicated to advancing FNMI educational outcomes across the system. That group actually puts their... [A timer sounded] Oh. Sorry. I was just getting to something really interesting for you.

9:00

The Chair: Well, I'm sure we'll get back to it, Deputy. If you're skilled enough, you'll be able to bring it back.

Now, we are going to move over to the Official Opposition side for I believe it's the third rotation of nine minutes.

Ms Renaud: Thank you, Madam Chair. Just a quick question for Mr. Tremblay. As the deputy minister were you aware of the significant and persistent concerns from Alberta parents, educators, content experts, and school divisions about the curriculum in this fiscal year that we're talking about?

Mr. Tremblay: Well, thanks for the question. As you know, we had released a draft in March of 2021.

Ms Renaud: The question was: were you aware of the concerns? Just a yes or no is good.

Mr. Tremblay: We've received significant survey responses, with a whole bunch of different perspectives on the curriculum. Some concerns...

Ms Renaud: Okay. I'd like to move on, then. I'd like to ask about the work of the curriculum. The annual report reads like the ministry is very proud of this work, but there's been a huge blowback from parents. The Alberta Teachers' Association has passed a nonconfidence vote on the minister because of the proposed curriculum. The Association of Alberta Deans of Education released a statement saying that they weren't supportive of it either.

So a few questions on this topic. First, in 2020-21 you had a plan to pilot this curriculum for the following year. Internally you must have had some kind of threshold for the number of students needed to participate in piloting or, put another way, a large enough sample to account for geographic variation, income variation, new Canadians, recent immigrants, people with disabilities, Franco-Albertans, you know, amongst the student base across all subjects. My question is simply: what percentage of students did you need to pilot the curriculum in order to get the feedback that you needed as a ministry?

Mr. Tremblay: In terms of statistical relevance, the fact that we do have over 360 teachers piloting the curriculum across the system, with all grades and all subjects, will give us a strong indication of the effectiveness of the curriculum in the classroom from a...

Ms Renaud: That's 360 teachers, but what percentage of students did you need to pilot the curriculum in order to get the feedback that you needed?

Mr. Tremblay: Again, any time you have field testing and applied testing of curriculum in the classroom, it is a valuable component to informing whether that curriculum needs to stand or...

Ms Renaud: Is that 10 per cent, 15 per cent? What percentage would the ministry establish as a benchmark? There's got to be a number.

Mr. Tremblay: Yeah. Any time you have teachers actually piloting the curriculum in the classroom, it is beneficial to informing . . .

Ms Renaud: Three hundred and sixty teachers piloting the curriculum is sufficient for the province of Alberta. Is that what you're saying?

Mr. Tremblay: When we do have teachers piloting all subjects and all grades, that is an important part of our overall engagement process.

Ms Renaud: An overall curriculum pilot of 360 teachers for the entire province is sufficient?

Ms Lovely: Point of order, Madam Chair.

Mr. Schmidt: How could you even have a point of order, or are you just going to . . .

Ms Lovely: Yeah. I do have a point of order.

Mr. Schmidt: . . . obstruct the question here?

The Chair: Okay. Go ahead. Yeah.

Ms Lovely: Sorry. I feel that the member is just, you know, persistently, needlessly repeating the same question to the point of needing Mr. Tremblay.

The Chair: The Official Opposition.

Mr. Schmidt: Yeah. Well, Member Lovely is just making up the standing orders. There's nothing in the standing orders that she referred to even as a point of order, so I would recommend that we move on.

The Chair: Thank you, Member Schmidt.

I will just remind the members that when points of order are called, one should make reference to a standing order that is relevant. Let's now move on.

Ms Renaud: Let me try this a different way. What were the ministry's expectations on the number of school boards that would be willing to pilot the curriculum? There's got to be a number. There's got to be a threshold, a benchmark. What is acceptable, and what is not?

Mr. Tremblay: For us, we entered the process of piloting knowing that, like many other of our elements of the system, we always provide a level of discretion for individual school boards and school authorities. We didn't . . .

Ms Renaud: Sorry to interrupt again, but I've got very little time. My question is actually quite simple. I tried to get an answer from the ministry before. This is a big deal. This is a new curriculum. This is a lot of students, so there has to be a benchmark so that we can evaluate the work that this ministry is doing. The question is quite simple. What were the ministry's expectations on the number of school boards that would be willing to pilot this curriculum?

Mr. Tremblay: I'll restate our objectives as a department. Maybe I'll restate . . .

Ms Renaud: Actually, I'm going to move on then if you're unwilling to answer that question. So what message does it send when 95 per cent of school boards, representing approximately 99 per cent of students, are refusing to pilot any elements of the curriculum?

Mr. Singh: Point of order.

Thank you, Madam Chair. The point of order is under the standing order that the member "speaks to matters other than the question under discussion." The committee has convened for the purpose of considering the minister's account, particularly the outstanding recommendations from the office of Auditor General and the ministry's annual report 2020-21. The matter that has been raised by the member is not within the boundaries of the same topic. The matter that was mentioned by the member is outside of topic at the hand of the committee today, thereby making it a point of order under 23(b), warranting the member to be called to order.

Madam Chair, the draft K to 6 curriculum is not within the matters that this committee has convened on today. May I remind the member that the survey regarding the draft curriculum is still ongoing and will end by February 2022, and I will encourage the member to engage . . .

The Chair: Thank you, hon. member. I believe that you have made your point that the point of order is under the relevant standing order, that it is outside the matters.

The Official Opposition, please.

Ms Pancholi: Thank you, Madam Chair. Pages 16 and 17 of the annual report clearly outline the process that was gone through around the curriculum development within the scope of this committee's review. Other members of this committee have already asked questions about curriculum development, and the ministry officials themselves have been commenting on it. Clearly, the curriculum development, which happened within this year, was within the scope of this committee's review.

The Chair: Thank you to both interventions. Yes. In fact, in the minister's letter on page 6 of the annual report it is one of the first matters that is dealt with in terms of the curriculum development process. The member is advised to keep her comments within that around the draft process and the metrics, resources, and outcomes that were expected from that process.

Thank you.

Ms Renaud: Thank you, Madam Chair. We understand that 95 per cent of school boards, representing roughly 99 per cent of students, are refusing to pilot any elements of the curriculum. Mr. Tremblay, I'm sure that your department is aware of this. The public is aware of this. Parents, educators, content experts, school divisions are aware of this. Why did your ministry choose not to hit pause and go back to the drawing board?

Mr. Tremblay: There are multiple ways that school authorities can provide feedback on the curriculum. I know your questions are focusing on the piloting, and I've attempted to answer your questions in that regard. We are also offering a number of different flexible needs in which school authorities can provide detailed feedback on the curriculum if they've chosen not to pilot.

We've actually received a significant amount of written correspondence from a number of different school authorities across the system with their detailed feedback, and obviously we would accept and deeply consider that feedback as well.

Ms Renaud: Thank you, Mr. Tremblay. I understand what your answer is, that you've told us that there are ways that people can provide feedback, and we are well aware of that. That was not my question. You know, in the community that I represent, St. Albert, the two school boards have been abundantly clear that they do not support this. They've given feedback, and they still don't support this as do many others across the province, but I'm going to move on.

I'd like to ask some questions about the hiring process that led to Dr. Chris Champion being selected to write significant portions of the curriculum that is mentioned in this annual report. Dr. Champion wasn't hired into the minister's office, but he was contracted by the department, so my first question is this: was Dr. Champion hired through a competitive hiring process?

9:10

Mr. Tremblay: There's two parts to your question, but maybe before we get into that, I'll be really clear about how curriculum is developed within a government context.

Ms Renaud: My question was about the hiring process, about Dr. Chris Champion, so we've moved on from curriculum. Perhaps you can give us that in writing if you like. That would be great. Let's talk about the hiring process of Dr. Champion.

Mr. Tremblay: I just wanted to clarify a component of your question, where you said that the individual wrote curriculum. That's factually inaccurate. Curriculum is written by department staff. Advisers advise on curriculum, so I just wanted to make sure . . .

Ms Renaud: I would amend that to "advise," so let's change that to: he advised on curriculum. Can you tell me about the hiring process of Dr. Champion? Was it a competitive hiring process?

Mr. Tremblay: I will ask Jennifer Cassidy to come in and talk about how we work with subject matter experts. Jennifer, if you want to come to the open chair.

Ms Cassidy: Thank you for the question, and good morning. I'm Jennifer Cassidy, acting assistant deputy minister of curriculum division. Subject matter experts are involved in the curriculum development process. They provide advice and recommendations into content that may be included in the draft curriculum. They work with department staff writing up content that staff are responsible for.

Ms Renaud: Sorry. I'm sorry. I'm going to intervene again. I have only – what? – less than a minute left. I appreciate the information on how subject experts are used, and, you know, if the department would like to give us more information in writing, that would be appreciated.

I have a question for you, Mr. Tremblay. Given the ministry business plan and the outcomes that are clearly outlined for us, how does hiring Dr. Chris Champion align with the outcomes and goals of the ministry? Knowing what you know about his previous work, I'd like you to talk about how his work aligns with the outcomes of the ministry.

Mr. Tremblay: Again, we took on a number of subject matter experts, further perspectives on curriculum. A curriculum is developed by department staff. We received . . .

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll now go to the government side.

Mr. Reid: Thank you, Madam Chair. Deputy Minister, I'd just like to invite you to continue to respond to my question from the last block, if you could. Give you an opportunity to respond to our participation and work with our Indigenous and First Nations folks.

Mr. Tremblay: As I mentioned, our FNMI secretariat does work with the system on a regular basis with regard to a number of different grants. I'll talk about the key priorities for these grants. A number of the priorities we focus on through our investments is early childhood education and primary schools, student-centred supports, children and youth not in school, parental caregiver engagement, and, obviously, Indigenous languages.

In considering each of the applications, they're evaluated based on whether the proposed goals and activities align with the purpose of the innovation and First Nations education grant program, which is our primary grant program in the system, that the activities and the proposal are measurable, whether they are in duplication of proposed activities or similar projects, and that planned activities are achievable within the time frame specified. Ultimately, what we want to see is progress around achievement and progression and participation. The grants are actually constructed in the way that when the dollars are disseminated into the system, communities can report back on that process and on the achievement of the dollars. We do require interim reports and ongoing reporting to ensure that those dollars are focused on improving FNMI outcomes across the system.

Mr. Reid: Thank you very much.

I'd like to cede the balance of my time to Ms Armstrong-Homeniuk, please.

Ms Armstrong-Homeniuk: Good morning. It's nice to meet you, Mr. Tremblay. I have a few questions for you this morning. I just want to start off by: Alberta has excellent teachers, school leaders, school authority leaders, and, as most of us can probably attest to, we've had great teachers in the past that have led us to be the compassionate, wonderful human beings we are today. I just wanted to take this moment to thank all the great teachers that I've had and everyone else. Also, I would like to put a big shout-out to my school boards in my area, which would be Elk Island public, Elk Island Catholic, Buffalo Trail school division, and the St. Paul education regional division, SPERD, it's called. It's a very diverse school board, and there are many, many great schools in it also.

My question for you is: obviously, a key part of our education system is the teachers, school leaders, and school authority leaders. The 2020-21 year presented new challenges to all three of these groups but also presented opportunities to innovate in ways that may have not occurred under normal circumstances. Pages 95 and 96 outline some of the initiatives the ministry took to "support the development of the teaching workforce in areas of demand and need." Through the chair, can you tell the committee the details of these initiatives?

Mr. Tremblay: There are four different programs which address the development of the teaching workforce in areas of demand and need. Alberta Education is partnered with Fort Vermilion school division and the Northern Alberta Development Council, under Jobs, Economy and Innovation, to administer a bursary program. It's called the northern student teacher bursary program. Students apply online through the NADC website, administered under Jobs, Economy and Innovation. The NSTB applications are collected in September to align with the beginning of the university term. NADC receives applications through their online application

system and monitors student enrolment status and postgrad employment. NADC tracks teachers, months of return teaching service, and eligible school authorities and provides status reports to Alberta Education.

Practicum co-ordinators at teacher education programs help distribute information about the program and encourage applicable students to apply. Students that receive the bursary are tracked as they apply for teacher certification and begin working through employment submissions made by school authorities to the Education teacher workforce information system. This enables tracking of where they are working in the north and for how long.

We also have a program called the rural practicum bursary. Alberta Education is partnered with Fort Vermilion school division and teacher education universities to administer the bursary program. The university practicum co-ordinators collect completed application forms. Teacher preparation programs across the province place students and validate student bursary applications prior to bursaries being awarded. University practicum co-ordinators send eligible applications to Alberta Education. Alberta Education reviews those to confirm eligibility, and Fort Vermilion school division disburses the funds to successful applicants.

I want to talk a little bit about the CTS bridge-to-teacher certification program. Alberta Education partners with school authorities and the University of Alberta to administer the CTS bridge-to-teacher certification program. The program allows individuals with subject expertise such as certified journeypersons, health care professionals, and information technologists to complete a minimum of 36 credits of teacher education, after which they are conditionally authorized to work as a teacher. Funding is provided via a conditional grant from the department to each eligible school authority.

9:20

The school uses these funds to support the CTS program participants while the individual is enrolled in their teacher preparation program. Participants each receive \$50,000 in funding support. The bridging program is available to public, separate, francophone, independent, and First Nations school authorities, so it has broad application across the system. School authorities select the participant who meets the school authority's needs for a CTS teacher. That individual needs to meet the University of Alberta's bachelor of education admission requirements.

I also want to talk about the math bursary program. That program is administered again by the department. Teachers apply through a dedicated bursary mailbox for preapproval to ensure that they are taking an approved math pedagogy course. Upon course completion teachers can then apply for the bursary funding, which is paid out of Education's budget.

All four initiatives were very successful. The northern student teacher bursary provided funding to 20 students, for \$160,000 in total. The rural practicum bursary and others: 30 rural practicum bursaries awarded in 2021, for a total of \$60,000. Thirty teacher education students from six postsecondaries were supported from across the province. The CTS bridge-to-teacher certification program: there was \$750,000 provided for that, with 15 individual bridge to certification participants. Under the math bursary program 122 individual awards were provided, for a total of \$124,000.

As you can see, we are supporting teacher development across the province in a very targeted way. With that, I'll conclude and take any other questions.

The Chair: Thank you, Deputy.

We'll now go to the Official Opposition side.

Ms Pancholi: Thank you, Madam Chair. Thank you, Deputy. I'm just going to ask you respectfully for a very straightforward yes or no answer to this question. If you're unable to give a yes or no answer, I'm afraid, at least for our members, we're going to have to assume that the answer is no. Was Chris Champion hired as a subject-matter expert for the curriculum through a competitive process?

Mr. Tremblay: No.

Ms Pancholi: Thank you. Can you table for this committee a copy of Mr. Champion's contract, please? And I'd appreciate it if you could just provide that in writing. I'm now going to turn it over to – can I actually get confirmation of that, that you will table that?

Mr. Tremblay: Like, I'll have to get back to you on that, on what the privacy elements of that are.

Ms Pancholi: Thank you.

I'll turn it over to my colleague MLA Schmidt.

Mr. Schmidt: Thank you very much. My questions are about the back-to-school plan in September of 2020. Now, the plan allowed for significant variations across the province in how education was delivered. For example, at Edmonton public schools kids could choose quarterly whether to learn online or in person, but Calgary public decided to allow the switch only once, in January. We have one curriculum and one set of education standards, but when it came to COVID-19 planning, apparently each school division was allowed to determine its own way of delivering that. What was the public policy justification for this kind of direction?

Mr. Tremblay: Thanks for the question. For that question I'll provide the following. Obviously, there were provincial-level guidelines and public health requirements for some elements of society. Within the K to 12 system we did have provincial requirements around masking, sanitation, cleaning, and a number of other areas. However, in terms of individual decisions that were made around shifting classrooms or grade cohorts, that was left to individual school operators based on their own unique circumstances, predominantly around operational issues. As an example, as you know, we were doing contact tracing last year. With contact tracing there is also a requirement to quarantine. That often created shortages of substitute teachers and teaching and administration staff. For those reasons, we allowed school operators to shift online.

We also allowed school operators to deliver curriculum in unique circumstances that worked for their own local context in conjunction with consultation with their parents. As you mentioned, there was a quarter system at EPSB. Calgary used something different. But we did leave those operational decisions at the discretion of local authorities as long as they were following overall public health guidelines as set by the chief medical officer of health. So we were striking an appropriate balance . . .

Mr. Schmidt: Thank you, Deputy Minister. I think I got the answer to that question.

One of the pieces that you touched on in your answer was this issue around staff. We know from the budget figures that you significantly underspent even the budgeted amount at the beginning of the year. Presumably, part of that is because there weren't enough teachers hired and, as you said, there were a lot of mandatory isolations that led to this yo-yo, with students in and out of the classroom, which is exactly what the ministry said they wanted to avoid when they announced the back-to-school plan in

the summer of 2020. So what was the plan to staff up and hire more teachers prior to the 2020 school year beginning?

Mr. Tremblay: Staffing is always at a local level, and, as you know, in Alberta, with a board-driven public school system, that staffing is at the discretion of local authorities. They're in the best position to understand individual student needs and parent needs based on the trustee-governance model that exists in Alberta. That's always been the case with regard to staffing decision-making. We feel that school boards are in the best position to make that determination. Does that mean that there weren't . . .

Mr. Schmidt: Thank you, Deputy Minister. I mean, it's quite clear from your own budget figures that you reduced the amount of spending even from your budget amount, so it boggles the mind to think that they could have hired more staff at the local level without the money in the budget to staff. Did the department consider offering any incentives to bring back teachers who had retired or otherwise left the profession in order to cover projected teaching shortfalls in the 2020 school year?

Mr. Tremblay: Thanks for the question. Again, we actually maintained and increased funding in the fiscal year we're talking about, not only within the context of our new funding model but also additional funding received from the federal government. So there were significant resources provided to incent whatever local decision-making was required by school authorities to implement education within their jurisdictions.

Mr. Schmidt: Thank you very much, Deputy Minister. If it was up to local school authorities to make their own staffing decisions, then how is it that Alberta Education fired 20,000 people on social media?

Mr. Tremblay: I'm not sure I understand the question, MLA Schmidt. Sorry.

Mr. Schmidt: Well, perhaps the deputy minister wasn't paying attention, but early on in the pandemic the Education minister took to Twitter to inform 20,000 employees of school boards across the province that their services were no longer needed.

Mr. Singh: Point of order.

Mr. Tremblay: I'm sorry, MLA Schmidt. I don't comment on social . . .

Mr. Singh: Thank you, Madam Chair. The point of order relates to 23(h) and (i) from the standing orders. The member makes allegations against the ministry and imputes false or unavowed motives to another ministry there. The member has made allegations detrimental to the person of the minister. The statement made by the member, though it may relate to the functions of the minister, also relates to a personal matter. This claim against the minister is unacceptable.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, hon. member.

Ms Pancholi: Madam Chair, this is clearly within the scope of the review before this committee. There were no imputing motives given to any member of this Assembly through the member's comment and question. It was a factual statement about what occurred during the scope of this review. There were no imputing motives.

9:30

The Chair: Thank you. I do find that there was a government announcement made within the context of the fiscal year under consideration. It was not just put out on social media. There was in fact a government announcement as well, but it was also announced on social media because that is one of the ways that @youralberta and others communicate. So in that sense it concerns an operational and resourcing decision that was made within the fiscal year under consideration.

Mr. Schmidt: Thank you, Chair. It's fair to say that the Department of Education made an announcement that 20,000 people working in the education sector's services were no longer needed. Is this the normal process by which education workers are informed that their jobs have been terminated?

Mr. Tremblay: In terms of your question, are you asking about the notification process for termination of employment? I just want to better understand your question. Sorry, MLA Schmidt.

Mr. Schmidt: Well, help me understand. It was up to school boards to hire people, but it looks like it was up to the Department of Education to fire people. Is that correct? Does the Department of Education direct school boards to fire people?

Mr. Tremblay: We don't, no.

Mr. Schmidt: Then explain to me: how is it that the Department of Education could let 20,000 people know through a government announcement that their services were no longer needed? Is that the normal process for terminating positions in school board authorities?

Mr. Tremblay: We don't hold employment agreements with individuals that teach within that K to 12 system. Those decisions are ultimately made by local authorities based on whatever operational realities they're dealing with at the time. I'm not sure about the social media piece. That predates me in terms of how that was articulated, but what I can say is that staffing changes, staffing adjustments, the deployment of staffing budgets, and anything related to resources in the K to 12 system from a human perspective are undertaken by individual school authorities based on the budget that they receive from the Alberta government, which, as I've mentioned on a number of occasions earlier during this session, was actually maintained and increased in the fiscal year we're discussing today.

Mr. Schmidt: What is it that the government announced, then? Should they have announced just cuts to the school boards that would have resulted in 20,000 firings?

Mr. Tremblay: Again, I can't conjecture on that particular announcement. What I can tell you is how the system does work on staffing at a local level.

The Chair: We'll go back to the government side, please, for the next rotation.

Ms Armstrong-Homeniuk: Hello there. This is wonderful to be back again, Mr. Tremblay. I was just going to tell you that the initiatives you talked about were successful, it sounds like. They sound like very great initiatives.

On page 96 outcome 3.4 discusses collaboration that occurred between Education and the Ministry of Advanced Education to enhance the level of subject-matter expertise in the teacher

workforce. Can you explain, Mr. Tremblay, in greater detail what this collaboration looked like?

Mr. Tremblay: Sure. Thanks for the question. Alberta's education funding model frees up resources by reducing red tape and administrative costs while giving school boards the autonomy and flexibility to invest in classrooms based on student needs. We can talk a little bit about the governance aspect to this. I'm just going to put you on mute and talk to my staff for a second.

Mute, please.

We've got our documents mixed up. Apologies for that. We're going to go to acting ADM Dan Karas at the empty chair to provide an answer to your question. Apologies for our administrative mix-up.

Ms Armstrong-Homeniuk: Thank you.

Mr. Karas: Good morning, everybody. My name is Dan Karas, acting assistant deputy minister, systems excellence division. In regard to your question about how the department works with the Ministry of Advanced Education, building on Deputy Minister Tremblay's earlier comments regarding the CTS bridge-to-certification program, there's a partnership with the University of Alberta whereby individuals who wish to obtain teacher certification who are journeymen holders work closely with the University of Alberta to obtain teacher certification.

There are other pieces here as well where we do work closely with the Ministry of Advanced Education. The Ministry of Advanced Education works closely with us in regard to memorandums of agreement. There are MOAs between Alberta Education and Advanced Education in regard to teacher certification, so we ensure that teacher education programs align with both the Education teacher quality standard, and we undertake any necessary program alignments under Advanced Education mechanisms.

The MOAs with the teacher education universities refer to all the bachelor of education programs. Under these MOAs we receive confirmation of approximately 2,000 Alberta BEd graduates per year who are recommended for teacher certification by the deans of education. Certification is issued and tracked through the Education teacher workforce information system.

Thank you.

Ms Armstrong-Homeniuk: Thank you.

I'd like to cede my time over to my colleague MLA Jordan Walker.

Mr. Walker: Well, thank you so much, Chair, and thank you, Deputy Minister Tremblay, for being here. I really enjoyed the discourse today. I really noted your comments on school choice. One of the biggest reasons I ran was to ensure and enshrine school choice into law, and I'm so happy that we achieved that. Promise made, promise kept.

Now, my questions will focus, Deputy Minister, on Alberta's K to 12 education system in terms of governance and management. I know in my area in Sherwood Park we have two great school boards, and we have a francophone system as well. We just announced a new K to 12 francophone school, which we're very happy about. So all of these matters are very important to my constituents. My first question is: outcome 4 for the department relates to governance and management. Key parts of this desired outcome that I would like to focus a few questions on are outcomes 4.2 and 4.3 and 4.4. Now, page 108 lists some of the details of the new funding formula for school authorities that was introduced in 2020-2021. Can the department really go into the detail of this

formula and explain the impact it had on the education system over the past year?

Thanks.

Mr. Tremblay: Alberta's education funding model frees up resources by reducing red tape and administrative costs. Apart from the cap on system administration none of the grants in the new model are targeted to school authorities, so school authorities do have the flexibility to allocate their resources to best meet their student needs. We've talked about that numerous times during our meeting today, that local flexibility is extremely important because not every school authority is the same in terms of its geographic context, its student mix, its staffing mix, and certainly what's occurring in the broader community.

9:40

An efficient and sustainable funding model for K to 12 education ensures that all schools have the resources they need with that local flexibility. The previous funding model was not flexible enough to contain costs and involved too much administration. Overall it wasn't a sustainable model. We had numerous grants that compartmentalized funding into different categories, which ultimately created less flexibility for school authorities. What we've been able to do is – not only is the new system predictable in terms of a school authority being able to ultimately calculate what they'll receive in future years based on their past, current, and projected enrolment, so they can almost calculate their funding before the allocation occurs, but we've also consolidated many of the grants that we actually haven't had in place into fewer grants so school authorities can flex those funds in a more responsive way, obviously still being required to report in on the results of those dollars.

The ultimate shift in governance was meant to increase predictability, increase flexibility, acknowledge the local autonomy of school boards and administrators but still make sure that we're managing the overall cost of the education system at a macro level. It was really about striking that critical balance to ensure that local autonomy and overall fiscal accountability were an important part of how that governance would unfold from a decision-making perspective on the ground.

Mr. Walker: Well, thank you, Deputy Minister, for that very thorough answer. I would say that I think your department has struck that balance, and I really appreciate your comments around flexibility. We have a great multiplicity of choice in our school system, and that's what the parents that I talk to want and appreciate, and we have that as well in Sherwood Park.

I see my time is done. Thank you, Chair.

The Chair: Thank you hon. members. Now we'll move to the final rotation, which is: each side has three minutes to read questions into the record. I would ask from department officials that they forward their responses to the committee clerk within 30 days.

Official Opposition, your three minutes begins when you start speaking.

Ms Pancholi: Thank you, Madam Chair. To the deputy and department officials: can you please table for this committee a detailed breakdown of how many students were enrolled in accredited private schools for the 2020-21 school year as well as how many students were registered in home-education programs that were not under the supervision of accredited private schools or school authorities? With respect to the 360 teachers that you've indicated are piloting the curriculum this current school year, can you please provide a detailed breakdown of which grades, which

subjects, which geographic locations, and in which school boards these teachers are teaching?

I'll turn it over to my colleague MLA Renaud.

Ms Renaud: Thank you. On page 14 there's a note about a provincial education helpline that supports parents of students with disabilities. If the ministry would please table the following information: the total cost in this fiscal year for this helpline, the number of FTEs that were assigned to this helpline, and how many individual calls were received on this helpline, and also what are the evaluation plans for this work?

My second question is: on page 162 there's a reference to a bad-debt expense with the Alberta school foundation fund, and the minister approved nonpayment of property tax for the city of Cold Lake. I'm wondering if the ministry would table details of this decision.

My third question is: the deputy minister talked about capital investments around I think it was at Northland. I remember in 2015 there was a significant discussion around the substandard housing for teachers in remote areas as well as that some of the buildings that students were being taught in were needing some work. I'm wondering if the ministry can table a detailed list of the capital maintenance and renewal investments that are being made in the Northland school division.

Finally, my fourth question is about PUF. If the ministry would please table the exact number for this fiscal that we're looking at, the projected number of students that did not enrol in kindergarten, so the ministry clearly has an idea of how many students chose not to enrol in kindergarten. How many of those students would have been likely to receive PUF funding or were receiving PUF funding, and how many students in kindergarten in the 2020-21 year were receiving PUF funding? That is it for my questions.

Mr. Schmidt: Thank you. I would also like the department to table any information or advice that the ministry received from the chief medical officer of health or any other public health expert on whether or not COVID was airborne and provide a detailed breakdown of all of the capital maintenance and renewal projects that were funded with the money that was identified in the 2020-21 fiscal year.

The Chair: That time, I believe, has elapsed, so we'll go over to the government side for their three minutes. I will just allow the clock to restart – there we go – and your time will start when you start speaking.

Mr. Singh: Thank you. My question is on recommendations from the office of the Auditor General. What is the progress of work on

the office of the Auditor General's outstanding recommendations that the department improve monitoring, assessing, and reporting progress on school jurisdictions' accumulated reserve balances?

What is the progress of work on the office of the Auditor General's outstanding recommendation that the department provide oversight of the system to improve student attendance in Northland school division?

What is the progress of work on the office of the Auditor General's outstanding recommendation that the Northland school division develop a plan to improve student attendance?

What is the progress of work on the office of the Auditor General's outstanding recommendation that the Northland school division improve its guidance and procedures to monitor and enforce student attendance?

Thank you, Madam Chair.

Mr. Tremblay: We're going to try and answer all that if that works for the committee chair. Does that work? We still have a minute and forty seconds.

The Chair: This is just to read questions into the record at this point for written follow-up, the way that we handle these three-minute blocks.

Mr. Tremblay: Oh, my mistake. Apologies.

The Chair: Government side, do you have any additional questions to read in to the record? I'll just give you a moment there, and seeing none unless someone pipes up. We're good? Okay.

We can move on to other business. I'm just going to look for a head nod there.

Mr. Reid: We're all good, Chair. Thank you.

The Chair: Okay. Thank you. We'll move on to other business then, hon. members. Is there any other business for our meeting arising today? Hearing and seeing none.

We'll move on to the date of the next meeting, which is Tuesday, November 16, with the Ministry of Seniors and Housing.

We'll now move on to our adjournment portion. Those who are at the table, please be reminded to remove your own bottles and cups for the safety of LAO staff, and I'll call for a motion to adjourn. Would a member move that the meeting this morning be adjourned? I'm seeing that from Deputy Chair Reid. Thank you. All in favour? Okay. All right. Thank you. Are there any opposed? This meeting is now adjourned.

Thank you very much, hon. members.

[The committee adjourned at 9:49 a.m.]

