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on  
Community Services

Department of Education  
Consideration of Main Estimates

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[Mr. Doerksen in the chair]

**Department of Education  
Consideration of Main Estimates**

**The Chair:** Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. I'd like to welcome you here this evening, especially to the people who may be listening to the audio broadcast of this meeting. I'd like to note that the committee has under consideration this evening the estimates of Education for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2010. To begin with, I'd like to ask that we go around the table and introduce the members at the table as well as the minister. Minister, if you'd introduce your staff following that, I'd appreciate that as well.

**Mr. Hehr:** Kent Hehr, MLA, Calgary-Buffalo.

**Mr. Johnston:** Good evening. Art Johnston, Calgary-Hays.

**Mr. Bhardwaj:** Hi. Good evening. Naresh Bhardwaj, Edmonton-Ellerslie.

**Mr. Rodney:** Good evening, everyone. Dave Rodney, Calgary-Lougheed.

**Mr. Benito:** Carl Benito, Edmonton-Mill Woods.

**Ms Notley:** Rachel Notley, Edmonton-Strathcona.

**Mr. Chase:** Harry Chase, Calgary-Varsity. Just me and my shadow.

**Mrs. Sarich:** Good evening. Janice Sarich, MLA for Edmonton-Decore and parliamentary assistant to the Minister of Education.

**The Chair:** Thank you. I'm Arno Doerksen, MLA for Strathmore-Brooks and chair of the committee.

Minister Hancock, if you'd introduce your staff, please, I'd appreciate it.

**Mr. Hancock:** Thank you very much. Yes. I'm here with a number of members of the staff. Michael Walter is the Acting Deputy Minister for Education. Michael, it should be noted, is acting deputy minister because the deputy minister is in Paris as he's the chair of the subcommittee on education for the OECD. Alberta is recognized around the world as being a leader in education. Michael is the assistant deputy minister for strategic services. With us also is Gene Williams, executive director for strategic financial services, and George Lee, director of budget and fiscal analysis. We also have Kathy Telfer, who is the director of communications, and Sean Yam and Spence Nichol from my office, who are either in the room or will be shortly after they've had something to eat.

I'm really delighted to be with you tonight, and if I may then just proceed, Mr. Chairman.

**The Chair:** Yeah. I'll just maybe cover a few of the details of the evening that most of us are aware of. I think we know that the votes on the estimates are deferred until Committee of Supply on May 7, and any amendments that would come into the meeting this evening must have been registered with Parliamentary Counsel no later than 6 p.m. today.

The standing orders spell out and govern who can speak tonight. Committee members, ministers, and other members may participate,

but department staff, of course, may not address the committee. We'll limit our speaking time to 10 minutes. We'll begin with the minister giving a 10-minute introduction, and then the first hour after that will be allotted to the Official Opposition, followed by 20 minutes, 10 minutes each, with the third-party opposition, at which time we'll take a five-minute break and then come back for the remaining time and begin alternating between government members and the opposition.

With that, Minister, if you would give us the introduction and begin. Thank you very much.

**Mr. Hancock:** Thank you so much. I'm very pleased to present our business plan for 2009-2012. Alberta's K to 12 system is grounded in principles and accountability, which are identified in that plan, and as in the past the principles are student focused. The success of each student remains as the highest priority of the education system. In order to serve our students well, we need to be focused on the ministry's vision. The goals identified in our business plan guide our actions towards that vision. In this business plan we've renewed our vision and mission statements to be more student focused and to be more focused on the work of the ministry in support of students.

The business plan also supports and advances the expectations outlined by the Premier in my mandate letter.

- Continue to increase student participation and completion rates in health, math, science and career and technology studies courses to support economic diversification and build the . . . economy.
- Continue to improve broad-based supports and early intervention initiatives for at-risk children to improve their learning outcomes; and
- Develop a policy framework founded in opportunity, fairness, citizenship, choice and diversity to guide implementation of a long-term vision for Kindergarten to Grade 12 education.

Our core business supports four goals in the Education 2009-12 business plan: high-quality learning opportunities; excellence in student learning outcomes; success for First Nations, Métis, and Inuit students; and a highly responsive and responsible education system. Goal 3, I might point out, success for First Nations, Métis, and Inuit students, is new.

In addition to the ministry's core activities we have identified the following strategic priorities of the Alberta government. Under the government of Alberta's strategic priority of creating and protecting our opportunities, participation and completion rates in support of economic diversification and building the knowledge economy. The ministry will continue to increase student participation and completion rates in health, science, math, and career and technology studies courses.

First Nations, Métis, and Inuit student success. As I indicated when discussing the new goal, we'll collaborate with our stakeholders and partners to renew efforts to improve First Nation, Métis, and Inuit student success in provincially funded schools, strive to infuse FNMI curriculum in all subject areas and in teacher preparation, improve access to resources and support services, and work to engage parents and community. We also need to collaborate with First Nations to ensure that students being educated on First Nation reserves have access to the same educational opportunities as students in the rest of the province.

Inspiring education. Through our inspiring education initiative the ministry will engage the public in a multifaceted dialogue that will result in development of a policy framework, a long-term vision for K to 12 education, and, most importantly, increased public appreciation and a value for the importance of education in Albertan's lives.

Building and appreciating the teaching profession and the

education workforce is also important. The ministry will work with stakeholders and partners to help address emerging challenges facing teachers and the education workforce, including maintaining high professional standards, recruiting and retaining teachers, and acknowledging teacher contributions. I think it's fair to say that one of the fundamental bases in having a good education system is having quality teachers. We have quality teachers. We need to acknowledge that, and we need to make sure that the teaching profession is seen in our society as being one of the most important professions to enter into.

Under the government of Alberta's strategic priority of building our quality of life, access to early learning opportunities and intervention for at-risk students is important. The ministry will increase broad-based supports and early intervention initiatives for at-risk children to improve their learning outcomes and support the safe communities initiative. We'll develop and encourage partnerships and provide resources so that at-risk students are identified early and will have access to programming appropriate to their needs because the learning that occurs in a child's first few years has a profound influence on their success in school and their overall quality of life.

Special education services are important. Through consultation with educators, service providers, advocates, parents, and students the setting the direction for special education in Alberta initiative, chaired by the Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie, will make recommendations on education policy, accountability frameworks, and the allocation of funding for children and students identified with mild, moderate, or severe disabilities or as gifted and talented.

In the area of community-centred schools we will partner with Alberta Infrastructure and Treasury Board to develop flexible and creative strategies for school construction, and we will ensure that students are educated in well-maintained facilities that foster a safe and caring environment.

With these principles and strategies in mind, we focus on our ministry's 2009-12 budget estimates and business plan. There are six programs referenced in the budget this year. Our voted estimates begin on 129 of the estimates book. We have two primary funding streams that are important to note: the voted government and lottery funds estimates, totalling \$4.3 billion, or about 69 per cent of the budget, and then the education property taxes, which total about \$1.7 billion. About \$1.5 billion of this amount resides in the Alberta school foundation fund, which is governed by statute. The remaining \$190 million goes to local separate school boards that choose to collect their education property taxes directly from their municipalities. In addition, \$314 million is allocated to statutory expenses for payments made towards the Alberta schools alternative procurement, or ASAP, program.

The \$4.3 billion in voted estimates, the \$1.7 billion in education property taxes, and the \$314 million in statutory expenses brings support for K to 12 to more than \$6.3 billion. The overall operational increase is 3.2 per cent, 5.4 per cent if you include capital.

Our supplies and services budget was reduced by \$14.6 million, or about 25 per cent. In light of the current economic conditions the ministry is doing its part in being fiscally prudent by delaying some initiatives and reassessing activities where efficiencies may be found. I think the short of it is that we've increased budgets to school boards, to the front line, to where it hits the students, but we have had to make sacrifices in the internal department budget in terms of the programs that we maintain; \$1.2 million of this reduction is found in the first of the six programs in our budget ministry, the ministry support services, or the corporate function of the department.

6:40

The second program is operating support for public and separate

schools. That increases by \$183 million, from \$5 billion to \$5.2 billion, which will go almost entirely to increased grant funding for 62 school jurisdictions and 13 charter schools; \$107 million of the increase is the general revenue portion of the support to school boards, with the remaining \$76 million coming from education property tax revenue.

School jurisdictions receive a 4.8 per cent increase in base instruction and small class size grants for the 2009-10 year and a 1 per cent increase for most other grants, which is based on the projected consumer price index inflation rate for Alberta for 2009. The 4.8 per cent grant increase in base student and class size grants was budgeted to meet the government of Alberta agreement with teachers and what was known about the average weekly earnings index at that time.

Transportation and plant operations and maintenance grants each received a 3 per cent increase, which recognized increasing costs in providing services in these specific areas.

The budget will also accommodate an expected student enrolment increase of .6 per cent, or about 3,500 new students, for the 2009-10 year and an expected 15 per cent increase in the number of ESL students.

Other specifics include the continuation of our provincial priority initiatives. The small class size initiative increases by \$10 million to \$222 million. Funding for AISI, Alberta initiative for school improvement, increases by \$1.9 million, from \$76.8 million to \$78.8 million, or a 1 per cent increase. The student health initiative receives an increase of \$1.5 million, from \$46.8 million to \$48.3 million.

Included in the budget is \$226 million in support to the teachers' pension plan. That support increases by \$19.4 million, or 9.4 per cent, to accommodate increased employer contributions made to the plan on behalf of teachers. This increase is attributable to more teachers in the system and higher teacher salaries. An additional \$356 million is provided by Alberta finance for service on the pension fund earned prior to 1992, which saves teachers approximately 3.1 per cent of their salary. Our total investment in Budget 2009 is \$582 million.

The budget also includes the second year of a three-year funding commitment for previously announced initiatives such as innovative classrooms, career and technology studies, early learning priorities, distributed learning, students with vision loss initiative, and high school completion strategy. We'll also continue to support public engagement through Inspiring Education: A Dialogue with Albertans; setting the direction for special education in Alberta; and Speak Out, the Alberta student engagement initiative.

Our third program is school facilities. The budget provides \$760 million for previously announced school facilities projects, an increase of \$153 million, or 25 per cent, over the previous year. A lot of our budget in this area is really due to timing in work-in-progress or project construction. All previously announced projects are going ahead as scheduled. We're supporting 135 projects, including modernizations and additions, new and replacement schools, and new schools through the Alberta P3 model. In phase 1, 18 schools are under way, due for September 2010. In phase 2 we'll be providing schools, I think the first of which is expected to come on stream for 2012.

A 3 per cent increase to school boards for plant operation and maintenance. [Mr. Hancock's speaking time expired] So much more to be said.

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

Mr. Chase, you have 10 minutes to speak, or 20 minutes in an exchange. That's your choice.

**Mr. Chase:** Thank you very much. I think you've got a pretty good sense of my taking the 10 minutes and then looking forward to the answers from the hon. minister.

Just to put it on the record, we had a wonderful session within this committee on Tourism, Parks and Recreation. I appreciated the collegial support, and I know we're going to have an equally productive meeting this evening.

The minister and his family have a very similar background to mine in that his wife, I believe, is a teacher and his mom was a teacher. In his family's experience he's probably got the same 60-plus years of familial engagement in education that my wife, Heather, and my daughter Christina have together with mine. So I know he gets it. I'm not worried about that.

Also, just a historical, irrelevant fact is that during the Conservative leadership race I put it on the record in *Wild Rose Country* through Donna McElligott. The question was: who would make the best Conservative leader? I phoned in, and I gave all the attributes that Minister Hancock had that would make him a good leader. I qualified the statement, and the qualification was that he would make a wonderful Leader of the Opposition under a Kevin Taft government at that time. It's very important that these sort of bouquets that I'm tossing are not taken out of context because I don't want to appear quoted in his next campaign literature.

Anyway, the minister asked me yesterday to come up with suggestions, so that's how I'd like to start tonight. I was pleased to hear in your opening statements about the importance of establishing a strong foundation. The Education ministry has to work, obviously, in collaboration; the collaboration with Infrastructure is obvious. Possibly less obvious is working in tandem with Children and Youth Services and working with the ministry of health. For a child to succeed in school, they have to be well fed, and they have to be healthy. If they have learning disabilities, the sooner those are diagnosed and work is begun on them, the better they'll be. It's been recommended that intervention occur as early as age two when learning difficulties or disabilities are noticed so that we can immediately begin to work on them.

Now, the Learning Commission, that came out in 2003 – and the majority of the recommendations were accepted – indicated that we should offer optional, half-day junior kindergarten to give three- and four-year-olds a head start. Unfortunately, that funding hasn't been found. Likewise, there was a suggestion that half-day kindergarten, again on an optional basis, especially for kids in deprived circumstances either through their socioeconomic background or through their language deficiencies, receive the extra impetus of full-day kindergarten. Again, that's an initiative that for a variety of reasons, I'm assuming, hasn't been embraced and hasn't been funded. Therefore, school boards have been left scrambling to try and find that funding.

I've raised concerns about dropout rates or failure-to-complete rates. I'm convinced that in order to change the end result in grade 12, it's absolutely essential that we load up our support in the early grades. As I say, I would like to take it back to junior kindergarten through grade 3. It's interesting that we've had programs piloted which recognized that importance. For example, in Edmonton within the last decade there was a pilot project whereby inner-city children had reduced class sizes – this was prior to the Learning Commission – and not only did they see tremendous academic improvements, but they saw incredible improvements in self-esteem. The pilot project proved that reduced class size was a major factor in the improved confidence and competence. Unfortunately, it lasted one year. What I'm saying is that when we see these things, when we go through the EC programs and we see true progress, we need to embrace it. Obviously, the next step is to fund it.

There are programs going on throughout Alberta. One that I heard about in Edmonton is called the guerilla reading program. That involves every single person in the school, many parent volunteers, and many community individuals. What they try to do is one-on-one instruction at the grade 1 and kindergarten levels so that by grade 3 the children's literacy and numeracy skills are set. As a result of having achieved those skills at an early age, the confidence is there, and they continue to succeed.

6:50

Another very interesting program – the minister referenced First Nations. On the Morley reserve they are so successful with a new reading program that is relevant to First Nations heritage; it's culturally supportive. The result is that twice the number of children, particularly in the primary grades, are now attending the school, to the point where they don't have sufficient space within the existing school because this program is so popular and so community supported that there has been such a dramatic turnaround. Taking the program that works so well on the Morley reserve and taking it to other cultural centres, other reserves – we've got these wonderful examples, so we need to take advantage of them.

The hon. Member for Bonnyville-Cold Lake brought forward a motion, Motion 503, that recognized the importance of not just eliminating standardized achievement tests – that wasn't the point – but replacing them with an educationally sound tool, and that's diagnostic testing. When it comes to where we spend our money, where we make our investments, the wonderfulness of diagnostic testing is that it's administered early on in the year so that you have an opportunity, then, for the rest of the year to work on the weaknesses and also work on the strengths of students. Because it happens early on in the year, it becomes a teaching tool.

With the standardized achievement tests – you've heard me go on about this numerous times – the child is out of the division, so it's an end-of-the-year circumstance. While it does serve as some type of an evaluation tool, it cannot begin to compare with the functionality of a diagnostic test, nor can it compare with the variety of evaluatory methods that children have, including portfolios, that have been very popular and provide a personal touch to education. These are some of the areas where we can embrace children in the division 1 circumstance.

It's also important to recognize, again working with the ministries of Health and Children and Youth Services, that the need for physical fitness also applies to mental well-being. Just simply mandating daily phys ed but not providing incentives in the way of funding, creating, for example, junior high school sized gymnasiums for new elementary schools, would be a major recommendation that I would have because there's only so much you can do with skipping ropes and equipment in hallways in comparison to having the runaround expanse or opportunity of the gymnasium.

At the junior high level in terms of keeping kids, we need to recognize the importance of CTS. [Mr. Chase's speaking time expired] I'll continue from there. Thank you.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Chase. Just before we go to the minister's response, we've had two members come in just after our introductions. If you'd introduce yourselves, please.

**Mr. Johnson:** Thank you, Chair. I apologize for being late. Jeff Johnson, Athabasca-Redwater.

**Mr. Lukaszuk:** Thomas Lukaszuk, Edmonton-Castle Downs.

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

**Mr. Hancock:** Thank you, Mr. Chair. A number of interesting comments there, and I'll try and deal with each of them in order. First of all, the emphasis on working collaboratively with other ministries is absolutely an essential part of the mandate. Working with Children and Youth Services and Health, I would say that last August, for example, we hosted jointly a conference we called Collaborate for Kids' Sake! where we brought together educators and health professionals and social service professionals and talked about exactly that, how we can provide what I would call wrap-around services to schools.

Children come to schools. We expect our teachers to be able to differentiate instruction in classrooms based on the differing learning styles and different attributes that a child brings to the classroom. But it's unfair to expect teachers in classrooms to have to deal with the social issues, the family issues, the community issues that children bring, so we need to have the wraparound services in place. There needs to be strong collaboration between the school and the community in terms of health, in terms of social services, in terms of a strong school resource officer program, those types of supports which make it possible for schools to support children so that they can be ready for learning and so that teachers have a fighting chance of success in the classroom. Absolutely important.

We've got a number of ways in which we engage in that. We support early opportunities for families to have early diagnosis, and we're doing an EDI mapping program to properly map out the needs and what's available in the communities. There's lots of work happening in that area. It's absolutely essential.

With respect to kindergarten, that's an interesting ongoing discussion about early kindergarten, junior kindergarten. I happen to be a fan of junior kindergarten. There's a very good pilot project operating in my constituency which shows its effectiveness for at-risk students. At-risk students are not just inner-city students. They're students who are at risk for any number of reasons and can benefit from that early support.

I think it's fair to say, though, that school boards have done a pretty good job; they've done an excellent job. There's a 97 per cent participation rate in kindergarten across the province, which means that school boards have been able to take the flexible funding model that we have in place and allocate the resources in the areas that they think will do the most good, and clearly they voted for kindergarten. I think that's a very positive thing to say.

One thing I would put in place there, though, is that sometimes people hold up Finland as being the model. Well, in Finland students don't start school until age 7, so it's a much later start process. When they talk about the success rate in Finland, they don't promote the early kindergarten model.

As well, if you read – there's a number of different areas, but the book I'd quote would be a book called *Disrupting Class*, which says that we waste an awful of money, their theory, on early kindergarten programs when we really need to be focusing on having parents read to their children and talk to their children between ages zero and three and that if you don't talk reasonably to a child between ages zero and three, the rest of it can be catch-up. There's lots of debate about how resources could be best applied to get children to get that early start, that I think we all would agree is important.

I certainly agree with the contention that a good start early on improves the dropout rate or the high school completion rate. No question about that in my mind. That's why every year I've supported a golf tournament, for example, for Success by 6. I think it's important that children get a good early start, and that saves us a lot of money down the road.

On the aspect of high school completion we are devoting resources. I think we've got about \$6 million budgeted to work on

projects for high school completion. That doesn't mean those resources get devoted to the high school because, clearly, it's about student support through their schooling. Student success is predicated by having an adult role model or mentor being able to do the transitions between nine and 10, for example, or grades 6 to 7, elementary to junior high, in those early years. So that's all important in the completion rate.

You mentioned a couple of great programs in terms of early literacy. I think those are excellent. Our AISI project is designed to encourage those types of programs to be developed at the local level, and then there are opportunities for sharing the successful projects across the province. I think it's important to say with respect to AISI that we shouldn't have the expectation that all the projects they're engaged in will be successful. I think we should be pushing the edges and being ready to learn from them. Where we do have successful projects, we should be able to see how they could be adapted to other areas.

7:00

You mentioned Motion 503 and replacing PATs with diagnostic assessment. I think it's important to recognize that both formative and summative assessment is necessary in a good education system. You certainly need to be able to do diagnostic assessment to help the learning process for children, and teachers need to be doing assessment for learning right through the learning process for a child, but we also need to be able to assess the success rate of the system. This is not high-stakes testing that's saying that you're testing the teachers, but I know jurisdictions, for example Edmonton public, that sit down with their principals on an annual basis for a results review. They look at their results, and they talk about how they can improve those results, and if they do a longitudinal analysis of their results, they can see where there are areas that can be improved upon in terms of a school's performance or a department area's performance within a school. That's important, too. What I said in the House in the debate on 503 was that we ought not to be moving away from what we have until we know that we're going to something better. It's not to say that we shouldn't change what we're doing for assessment, but we should do it on a rational basis, and that's what I'm committed to doing.

With respect to physical fitness and mental well-being, well, obviously we would share the view that being physically fit adds to mental well-being and adds to the learning process. We've mandated not phys ed but daily physical activity and invested \$1.6 million per year in that process. There are a number of very good programs operating – the names of them don't come to my head right now – Ever Active Schools and a number of others, which are working with schools, with teachers in developing ways of involving students. It's not all about going to the gym.

However, I would indicate as well that as we review our requirements for facilities going forward and what the facilities ought to look like going forward, one of the things I'll be very interested in looking at is what the appropriate size of gymnasiums ought to be. Many of us grew up in small schools with small gymnasiums with cement walls, and many of you probably had the same experience as I did, running into those walls too often when doing a layup. But let's not focus on the gymnasium as being the centre of physical activity because when you go home, you don't have your gymnasium, so it's important to learn to engage in physical activity on a daily basis and in ways you can around your house, around your community.

I think that got everything that was being mentioned.

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

With that, we'll go back to Mr. Chase for another 10-minute segment.

**Mr. Chase:** Thank you very much. Again, just in terms of suggestions and working in collaboration, last year Statistics Canada indicated – and this was in the fall, before the recession really hit hard – that we had over 78,000 Alberta children living below the poverty line. What I would hope is that the government through, again, interministerial collaboration would provide funding and support or tax incentives or some way of ensuring that children came to school fed and, to take it one step farther, clothed. We've all heard horrible stories of a child coming to school in the middle of the winter wearing runners. "Why are you wearing runners?" "Well, because it was Joey's turn to wear the boots," that kind of thing. Community volunteers and coat collection projects and so on can do a lot, but I would hope the government would take on a large role.

The minister and I have been at numerous meetings, like Breakfast for Learning for example, where \$1 to \$2 can provide a warm lunch or a sustainable breakfast for children. There are also programs such as the Meals on Wheels duck soup program, but the number of schools that are lined up to eventually be included on that list is so long, so again from a health recognition point of view, from a child well-being point of view, I would hope that we would, you know, address the limitations to education, which start off with poverty and well-being.

Also, when it comes to the early intervention and the later intervention, for that matter, it's absolutely essential that funding be provided for psychologists and psychometrists. Part of my questions on Tuesday – or I think maybe it was last week – had to do with the assessment of children at various levels, and I was at that point talking about severe special needs. We seem to have large differences in the numbers that we had between the ministry numbers and the school board numbers, and you had indicated that we're currently funding more than half of the identified special-needs children.

When it comes to behavioural and other concerns, for a child to get an aide, they have to have a coding, and without psychologists and psychometrists a number of these children go uncoded and have a very rough start, to say the least, until they're finally caught. It's frequently the teacher, obviously the front-line person, or maybe the parent who catches this need, but the time it takes from an identification to getting an aide is something that's a large concern.

I have raised previously in the House my concern over the freeze in severe special-needs funding, and I mentioned, for example, the two Calgary schools, Christine Meikle and Emily Follensbee. I believe as much as possible in the notion of inclusion, but obviously children whose needs are as severe as the children attending Christine Meikle and Emily Follensbee require special adaptive programs. There are a number of children who have certain disabilities, but with the support of an aide – and that support can't just happen on a half-day basis but on a full-day basis – they gain an awful lot from being in a regular classroom, and the so-called average children in the regular classroom gain a lot by working with the children who have some special needs, so that's extremely important.

Moving into the junior high school, I really want to emphasize, because that's where I spent the majority of my 34 years, the importance of supporting the options. You mentioned CTS, and I know CTS recently was the recipient of millions of dollars in grants. That's wonderful because we have to recognize that an academic situation is not for every student, so we need an early time, such as junior high, to give them a taste of everything that they could

potentially be successful in and give them a chance to excel, whether, as I say, it's academics or moving towards a trade.

I cannot overemphasize the importance of having options like fine arts, music, drama. Those are the options that keep kids involved. I know, having, for example, coached wrestling for 25 years, the importance of clubs and coaching. I also did yearbook for a number of years. Those are the types of programs that keep the at-risk kids involved, the hands-on, the performance programs. Sometimes we get so caught up with the three Rs that we fail to see, at the junior high level especially, that what keeps kids are the programs in addition to the academic programs, so emphasizing those is extremely important.

At the high school level in order to keep kids, we need to support them. I brought out the statistic, which has been the case for years and years and years, that 75 per cent of ESL students fail to complete high school in a five-year period. Depending on, obviously, when they emigrate to Canada, if we can catch those kids earlier in their elementary experience and provide a really strong English as a second language support program, then, again, we'll see tremendous improvement rates in these students.

**7:10**

Something that caused my academic career to be a little longer than I'd first intended was math 30, so I would really like, in terms of interministry collaboration, for advanced ed and public ed to look at the emphasis placed on the math theory at the grade 12 level versus the applied math. I think both should be given equal recognition, and it should be left to the university as to the streaming of the students who graduate with applied math, as to whether they can take on the physics and the statistics and the engineering and so on. I think that would make it easier to move forward.

Again, it's not your responsibility directly, but if we want to encourage kids to finish their high school programs and go on to college or a technical institute or whatever, there have to be sufficient spaces for them to graduate into, working closely with the advanced education minister to make sure that those opportunities exist and that we have seats for all the students who have the grades and can afford to go. We're losing people.

Now, I'm going to go – I know I'm running out of time quickly – into some of the other, more generic concerns and specific questions. School facilities and maintenance. The funding for school infrastructure, line 3.0.1, page 132 of the estimates, has decreased by \$27 million, or 5 per cent, from the 2008-09 budget and has decreased a staggering \$170 million, or 27.6 per cent, from the 2007-08 estimates.

**Mr. Hancock:** I'm sorry. I missed the reference.

**Mr. Chase:** Page 132, line 3.0.1, how dramatically the infrastructure budgets have decreased.

Basically, in Calgary alone we have an infrastructure deficit between the public schools and the Catholic schools approaching close to a billion dollars. If you go province-wide, that deficit is probably approaching a billion and a half. The repairs continue to be needed, and if we continue a sort of a patchwork approach, things just worsen. I think the gymnasium floor, for example, at Ernest Manning high school in Calgary was replaced about three different times because of a leaky roof, so here's where we can be efficient.

Thank you. I'll continue there.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

**Mr. Hancock:** I guess the good news on that one is that now we're

replacing the Ernest Manning school, so the floor won't have to be replaced anymore.

Just a number of items there that you've raised that are interesting and important. The 78,000 Alberta children living below the poverty line. Obviously, one of the reasons why we need to value education as a society is because education is the way out of poverty and the opportunity for success. It may be a bit of a chicken-and-egg argument about whether you do the education first to break the poverty cycle or whether you can put enough funds in to actually take children out of poverty. Where we would agree is that children can be successful if they come to school ready to learn, if they're not hungry and they have the necessary clothing and support.

Those are important things to do. I guess the real issue or question is how to best do them. We've got some very good programming available. In Northland school division, for example, where there's a significant level of poverty and support needed, we actually directly fund \$3.1 million to the school lunch program. We have provided some support this year on a one-time basis to Breakfast for Learning to help them maintain because it's a very good community-based program.

I would argue that government could put a lot of resources into breakfast programs and lunch programs, but it may not be the most effective way to actually deliver those types of programming. I would use as an example the many ways across the province that I'm personally aware of: a school in southeast Edmonton where the principal on her way to work every day stops at Cobs and has an arrangement to pick up some of their excess goods from the previous day and makes them available to students who perhaps come to school hungry.

One of the things that really impressed me over the years – this is when I first got started, and I was minister of intergovernmental and aboriginal affairs – was a young lady in Red Deer who worked for the Native Friendship Centre, and she took it upon herself to liaise with the school where a lot of aboriginal students attended or were supposed to attend and said: what do you need? They talked about hunger, so she basically said: call me by 10:30 any morning, and let me know how many children – aboriginal, nonaboriginal: it doesn't matter – have forgotten their lunches. Then she went to Loaves and Fishes, a Christian soup kitchen in Red Deer, and arranged for them to provide lunches.

Community engagement in the issue of poverty is a very, very essential tool to overcome it. One can say, "Well, that's just abdicating government's responsibility," but sometimes you can pour a lot of resources into basic things like that and not be nearly as effective as some very simple solutions supported, I believe, with public resources. So supporting the organizations to get started, supporting the people in doing those jobs can be an awful lot more effective, both in terms of delivery of the service but also in terms of the understanding of the community of the nature of the problem and the role of the community in solving that problem. I'm a very big fan of the groups that are stepping forward to help out in those areas. I do agree that it's a very important area. Students can't learn if they're focused on their hunger.

In terms of early intervention and funding the psychologists and the psychometricians, I think you called them, first of all, we're not funding half of the identified student need; we're funding twice the identified student need. That in itself was what drove us to the realization that we really had to get the policy right. That's why the Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie, leading the steering committee on setting the directions, has been around the province twice now on consultations leading up to the forum in June to set the right policy framework.

Hopefully we can get away from the need to do a medical model

diagnosis and actually get to some form of a model – I shouldn't be telling the steering committee what to report to me, but hopefully they're getting to a model which will be based on the needs that the student has in terms of whether it's some form of adaptive technology or aide support or other type of support so that they can get the supports they need to be effective in learning. That's a much more difficult thing to figure out how to fund appropriately, but it's going to be a lot more effective if we can get the policy right and get the funding framework right for it. I would argue that it's not really more psychologists and psychometricians that we need to diagnose and code but rather to get away from pigeonholing people by codes and trying to figure out what they need to have to be effective in the classrooms.

In terms of the funding on that side, you talked about the freeze in funding and raised the question in the House the other day about B.C. spending \$32,000 per child. Well, I went back and had a look at those numbers. In fact, they do spend \$32,000 per child for about 515 children, more or less. It might be a little higher than that. They don't fund \$32,000 for all of their severe special-needs children. In fact, they fund at three different levels. When you take a look at B.C.'s funding, we actually spend more on special-needs children in this province than B.C. does. I think that's right; it's subject to checking. We have a lower student population and fewer special-needs students even at the code level. So we're actually funding at a higher level than B.C., notwithstanding that they differentiate their funding between the \$32,000 and the \$16,000 and some lower number.

Basically, on the coded basis we fund school boards with, again, flexible funding so that they can apply them. Where we get into some trouble with the current model is not just on the medical diagnosis basis, but also we get into trouble because people think that because we fund it on a per student basis, the funding should go to that student. When you have an average funding model, you know, if you have an aide, of course, you need twice as much funding for a student who needs an aide, and you might not need as much funding where there are two or three students in a classroom with a less severe need.

7:20

So I'm counting on the steering committee a great deal. We've got some excellent people who come from the field, who come from a variety of experiences, who bring health backgrounds, who bring a background of having children with severe disabilities, teachers from the classroom, a principal from one of the schools in my area, who runs probably the finest school I've been in in terms of being welcoming to all students. I think they're going to come forward with some really informative results, which will help us design the appropriate framework and then the appropriate funding formula.

We said that we would hold the funding constant until we got there, and we're doing that. That doesn't mean that a school board can't come forward and say: we've got more students, and they should be funded. They can. But based on the funding model we have now, we fund twice as many as we should be funding, so the Auditor General should really be hitting me on the head for that.

In terms of the options in CTS it's absolutely important that there's a wide variety of programming available so that every student can find their passion. Fine arts: you'll find if you look in our program goal 1.2, specifically references the need for humanities and arts education. One of the curriculum revisions that's going on right now is the fine arts curriculum area. There's work being done on that now. Unfortunately, that probably will be slowed down a little bit because of the areas that we did have to cut back on.

Definitely, there needs to be a robust education. You mentioned



wrestling, and I'll end with that and come back to some of the other comments later because I think I'm running out of time. The importance of programming like that is so essential. All I have to do is reference the young lady wrestler from the University of Calgary who won the gold medal in Beijing. She happened to be from my old hometown of Hazelton, in northern British Columbia. Her family were what might have been euphemistically referred to as Vietnamese boat people – in other words, refugees from Vietnam – who were adopted by the United Church in Hazelton, and the family moved to Hazelton. I don't know whether the wrestler was born in Hazelton or born on the way or in Vietnam. A teacher in Hazelton started a wrestling program, and about 60 per cent of the students in the school engaged in that wrestling program. So it wasn't an elitist program; it was an engaging program. Out of that comes a young lady who becomes a gold medalist for Canada. Now, if that isn't the classic Canadian story, I don't know what is.

It really does point to the value, not just because she got a gold medal but in terms of someone who can come from that kind of a background, of having the opportunity to excel and compete and be a strong student as well, as I understand it, at the University of Calgary. Absolutely, we need robust programming so that everybody can find what they're good at, what their passion is, and how they can excel.

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

Mr. Chase, the floor is yours for 10 minutes.

**Mr. Chase:** Thank you, my last major 10 minutes before we get into the mix. I appreciate that personal connection with the student. Her coach, the national Olympic wrestling coach, Leigh Vierling, was my student in grade 6 in 1980. I introduced her to wrestling, so there are overlapping connections. We never know what kind of impact we're going to have. I think I probably made as much of an impact in gymnasiums as I ever did in academic classrooms.

I want to thank the minister for anything that he might have had to do with getting the Wild Rose Foundation grants being reinstated. I've heard that we got them back again. The Wild Rose Foundation has supported literacy and fighting poverty locally and globally, so I'm pleased to hear that there's some degree of reinstatement of that program. It manages to leverage funding almost like a microcredit basis. They can do wonders with it, so I'm glad it's back.

The \$760 million for school capital projects – this is from the business plan, page 81 – including \$252 million for capital maintenance and renewal, fiscal plan, page 37. School infrastructure capital support will be nearly \$1.7 billion over the next three fiscal years to support 135 previously announced capital projects, including \$760 million for 2009-2010. Questions – again, feel free to give them to me in writing because we're going to run out of time; I know that. What exactly is the breakdown of the funding for the facilities in alternative procurement? It states in the fiscal plan that \$252 million will go to capital maintenance and renewal. That's fiscal plan, page 37. How much will go to alternative procurement?

Why is the department further decreasing much-needed school infrastructure funding? I indicated that in Calgary we're a billion dollars in deferred deficit for infrastructure. Western Canada high school walls and sills are falling down, as the nursery rhyme goes. Given that it's cheaper to build when the economy is not booming, why isn't there more funding for school infrastructure? Again, working with Finance and the Treasury, I would really like you to get your pleas in for the sustainability fund and capital fund to get these schools brought up to date. This would be a make-work project for a lot of unemployed people at considerably reduced rates for materials and for construction. This is definitely the time to be catching up.

In 2007-08 \$96 million went to infrastructure maintenance renewal. Mr. Henke, during Public Accounts, acknowledged that \$96 million wasn't enough. Can the minister tell us what would be enough; in other words, what is the total amount of deferred maintenance in public schools throughout the province? I threw out the figure of about a billion and a half based on primarily the Calgary experience and then expanding to Edmonton, Red Deer, Medicine Hat, and of course all the rural schools. How much of the current infrastructure budget is targeted for rural schools?

On page 72 it states that community-centred schools are a priority for this ministry. However, community schools continue to close even though this ministry acknowledges that the number of students will substantially increase in the coming years. How does the government justify closing schools in communities where they are desperately needed when new schools are waiting to be built, which will take both time and money? The space utilization formula, for example, has to be brought into line with the reduced class size initiatives. The budget does not have anything on what the government will do to prevent unnecessary school closures, so can the minister please share how the government plans to keep schools open? The space utilization formula is tying local boards' hands in terms of determining, for example, hallways as educatable classroom space.

Does anything in this budget directed towards ministry resources and functions go towards review of the school utilization and the implementation of a new method for determining school closures which will prevent schools from unnecessarily closing? We want to have vibrant inner-city communities, and of course they're the first ones to lose their schools in a lot of cases. Strathearn was one that I attended with the Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar when it was facing closure. The number of students is growing, so why do we continue to see schools close? Will the minister revisit the school utilization formula?

P3 or alternative procurement. In the fiscal plan on page 37 \$761 million is for capital projects; \$252 of this is for capital maintenance and renewal. Can you give a breakdown on how the remaining \$509 million will be used and what is the amount allocated to P3 schools? You can also reference page 110 in the capital plan. The Auditor General is expected to review the P3 contract that has tied up so many taxpayer dollars. Given that this province cannot count on economic stability, we're suggesting that 30-plus year, in some cases, the most recent, 32-year, contracts that guarantee an unknown amount of education dollars to P3s is not fiscally responsible. Which line item includes P3s? Is now really the right time to cut the school infrastructure budget for public projects in favour of these long-term, expensive P3 contracts? I know there's an ideological argument there, but I'd like to get a sense of where you're coming from.

Why is there an increase in the 2010-11 target amount from what was forecast in the 2008-2011 business plan, \$11.1 million, to what is now being forecast in the 2009-2012 business plan of \$16.6 million. These costs are projected to increase to \$21.9 million in 2011-2012. What are the long-term, example 2015-2020, debt servicing costs that are expected?

On page 108 of the fiscal plan it states in the margin that "to date, \$1.8 billion has been approved to be alternatively financed through P3s." The estimated savings of \$118 million of the construction of 18 P3 schools was based on modelling done during the boom. What are the current projections given the economic downturn? Before this administration commits \$1.8 billion for more P3 schools, will the minister wait until the Auditor General's report on ASAP 1 has been completed? Taxpayers need to know the risks this minister is willing to consider with P3s.

7:30

“The Transportation grant rate increases 3 per cent to \$258.5 million.” That’s from the Education budget website. Children with special needs face very long bus times even within urban settings such as Edmonton. Some rural children spend upwards of almost four hours on buses. There are no provincial limits to the amount of time children can be on buses.

The Alberta School Boards Association (ASBA), in its three-year strategic plan, has identified student transportation as one of its three advocacy priorities for 2007-2010 . . .

The report concludes that the ASBA studies to date as well as the September 2007 school transportation survey all point to overall funding shortfall pressures faced by the majority of school boards in the province as they attempt to deliver service acceptable to their communities.

In the Millarville case of that young child being hit, he was hit crossing the highway. The importance of providing sufficient funding for boards to pick kids up on the side of the road where they’re living can’t be overemphasized.

In response, boards have raised transportation fees by approximately 60 per cent in the last three years and/or have borrowed from other areas of board operation to fund their transportation system. These pressures, if left unresolved, will push Alberta’s student transportation system past its breaking point.

That comes from ASBA, *At the Breaking Point*, May 28, 2008, page 2. Fifty-eight per cent of school boards that were polled, a total of 60, said that if they had to rely solely on provincial funding for transportation costs, they would lose money. That’s also from the ASBA May 2008 report. There are 74 school boards in total, so a survey of 60 would provide pretty accurate findings.

Given the increases in transportation fees parents are being charged, it is clear that transportation is sorely underfunded. Why such a small increase to transportation funding, considering the great need? Is the department reviewing current funding formulas for metro, urban, and rural transportation? Due to the shortage in transportation funding school boards are having to cut back the number of routes they offer. The result is ever-increasing bus times. What is the department doing to reverse this trend?

Special-needs education. What specific initiatives . . . [Mr. Chase’s speaking time expired] I think I have one more chance, probably, within the evening, and I look forward to that chance.

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

**Mr. Hancock:** Thank you. Well, there was a whole litany of stuff, so obviously I’m not going to get to all of it, but if I miss it, I might pick up and supplement in writing later, as was indicated.

Let’s start with the transportation funding, where you ended off. Over the past five years transportation funding has increased by 25.5 per cent, or \$52.5 million, while transportation enrolment has decreased by 3.7 per cent. Transportation funding has actually increased rather dramatically compared to the students served. The whole issue of transportation has been raised by ASBA and by school boards individually, and I’m really delighted to say that my parliamentary assistant from Edmonton-Decore has taken that project on to review transportation across the province.

There are, I think, a lot of things that we can do, and I have talked to school boards about looking at transportation from a regional perspective. It doesn’t make sense to run three buses down the same road to pick up students that are basically going to the same places. There are a lot of things that we can do to be more effective in our use of transportation.

There was a transportation safety report. The Department of

Transportation was good enough to provide funding to assist with safety strobe lights and things like that, reflective adaptations to buses, driver training standards, those sorts of issues. Again, one of the things we have to make sure is that student safety, whether it’s at school or on buses, is a number one priority for every board. I think that’s got to be top of the agenda for everyone. We’ve got to also make it a public safety issue. You referenced the tragic incident at Millarville. Totally unnecessary. It’s not a matter of which side of the road you pick up a child on or drop them off. It’s that if a school bus is stopped on a rural road with lights flashing, you don’t pass it. There’s no real accounting for stupidity.

We do need to do a lot more work on the transportation model. As I said, the Member for Edmonton-Decore, my parliamentary assistant, is working on that process.

In terms of the infrastructure side of things, probably I think the number would be close to what you suggested, about a \$1.4 billion deferred maintenance requirement. We’re dealing with that deferred maintenance in a couple of ways, one, as you referenced, by the IMR – I think it’s IMR – budget of \$96 million a year, which isn’t nearly enough to deal with all of the deferred maintenance. Deferred maintenance is also dealt with by taking some schools out of utilization when they’re no longer needed – and I’ll reference your points on school closure in a moment – or by the major modernization projects that are going ahead. With 135 projects across the province right now on new or major modernization, we’re eating into that deferred maintenance. Could we be doing it faster? Absolutely. I mean, if there was an unlimited supply of money, I would guess that \$325 million a year would be a good number to aim at in terms of getting us on a regular program to catch up on deferred maintenance and stay ahead of the maintenance issues.

One of the advantages of the P3 model, of course, is that there’s no deferred maintenance on those. They’re not going to be adding to our maintenance burden because those are going to be maintained over the 30-year period, and the school is returned to us in quality shape. So we don’t have to budget for the maintenance. That’s one of the real advantages of the P3 model, and that’s not a philosophical issue. That’s just a very practical process on how you budget for and maintain public buildings in a prudent way.

In terms of community schools and community closures and how you reconcile that, I reconcile it by saying this. When we started talking about Inspiring Education and the future of education across the province, one of the first things that was raised to me both at the School Boards Association and at other venues was, “Is this a mechanism to get rid of school boards?” I said: “No, it’s not. This is about designing the future of education. Governance, obviously, is one of the discussions that has to happen.” But it’s not about getting rid of school boards because fundamentally you need to be connected with the community if you want the community to have a value for education.

If you’re going to have school boards, you ought not to do all of their jobs. One of the jobs that’s very important is how you allocate resources locally in the most important way to keep the schools where children need them and in terms of what the communities need. School closure and school allocation is probably one of the most fundamental decisions that a school board makes: where they need to have their schools, how they’re going to make sure they have schools where the kids are, how they’re going to get kids to schools, the whole question of how long children should be on buses as a provincial rule. As soon as you make up a new rule – and that’s one of the problems you have, that every time you have a problem, you write a rule for it – then you create other problems.

My preference would be to say: we have locally elected people to deal with the provision of education on a local basis. Hopefully,

we're providing sufficient resources to do that on an effective basis between the per-student grants, the supplemental grants for FNMI education, for ESL education, for distance learning, for small schools by necessity, et cetera. Give it to them in a global budget, and they can then determine what schools they need to have, where they need to have them, and hopefully then we can assist them with maintaining the schools properly that they need to have and, yes, closing the schools that they no longer have a need for.

School capital. You talked about the variation in the numbers, and part of that really is a question of cash flow, when monies are needed to service the building projects that we've got. Ideally, I'd like to see us over a 10-year, 15-year, and 20-year time frame have a sustainable capital amount that we work towards. We're going to have some issues going forward because we know that we're going to have an increasing student population at the elementary level, and obviously that'll move through. We'll have to make sure we have the student spaces in place.

As we're going right now, we have a total of 38,140 new student spaces coming onboard with an enrolment growth expected of 10,000 students. There's, obviously, a considerable amount of replacement going on in that process, so that's dealing with some of the issues that you raised. I think I've touched on most of the areas that you were talking about.

7:40

The transportation issue. It's very important that we have the right transportation. We increased the budget there by 3 per cent, but I should say that we also fund school boards for every amount they pay over 60 cents a litre for diesel fuel, so they're sheltered from the increased cost of fuel. Their costs, hopefully, will be going down with respect to the operations side of it. There was a problem. The problem wasn't so much the funding as it was being able to access the number of drivers that they needed and those sorts of issues.

The P3 process: let me just touch on that briefly. From my perspective it's not a philosophical thing. It's a question of looking at all the different ways – and I need to look at some more different ways – to lever the resources we have to get the schools that we need in the right places at the right time, so I'm going to look at all sorts of alternative processes and recommend them to Treasury Board where they make sense. P3s make sense in certain circumstances. If you can aggregate a number of buildings together to create economies of scale, to interest construction consortiums to come together and to build those, and if you can do that while saving some costs as well as building into that the maintenance cost and the risk factor over a longer period of time, you can actually demonstrate a real value in that process.

Some of the issues that people raise about that are issues of quality. Well, we don't have to sacrifice quality for a P3 project, and we've demonstrated that on the P3 projects that we've had in this province. The Department of Infrastructure as our overseer in the area can set the standards, and we're building to LEED silver standards now. I know Minister Hayden would like to get to LEED gold standards, but we're building to LEED silver standards now. We're satisfied that we're getting better quality than we're actually even asking for. In the project the builders have a vested interest in making sure that they build quality because they have a liability: they have to give it back to us after 30 years in good condition. From that perspective it appears to be working very well to date. We're getting value for money, and I think any audit will show that.

The Auditor General, in fact, indicated in his remarks on March 4 that with respect to private-sector profit, for example, the reality is that there's always going to be a profit in the building of schools.

The builders that do it earn a profit. What we're getting is the best price and the best value for money, and I think that in phase 2 of ASAP we'll be able to demonstrate flexibility in that process as well.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Minister. At this point we'll go for 10 minutes to the leader of the third – pardon me – to the member from the third party, Ms Notley, please.

**Ms Notley:** Excuse me; I need to go out and have a small heart attack with that one.

I'd like to actually do this a different way than the 10-and-10 kind of format. I've done this in all the other estimates, and it works a lot better, much more sort of back and forth really quickly with questions and answers. I'll try to limit my ideological rants to as few as possible, which is a challenge, but I'll try.

**Mr. Hancock:** I'll limit my ideological rants as well.

**Ms Notley:** You will limit yours as well. Or your, you know, glossy stuff to read that's not ideological necessarily.

Anyway, as it appears as though I'm only going to get one round of this because I'm not high enough on the list to come back and ask questions, I'd like to start just a little bit on the issue of the special-needs funding and the special-needs issues. I'm sure this information may be out there, but I don't have it at my fingertips. What is the actual number in the budget that is dedicated? We've talked a lot about freezing it or holding it, whichever, freezing it or maintaining it, however you want to put it. I'm just not sure what the actual absolute number is.

**Mr. Hancock:** Somebody will find that for me as you go on.

**Ms Notley:** Okay. That was my first question.

Now, you've mentioned a couple of times, particularly in the last little bit, this notion that we may at this time be funding twice what we should be. Now, I'm assuming, but please correct me if I'm wrong, that you're just saying that sort of facetiously in relation to how the Auditor General might try to apply a set of rules.

**Mr. Hancock:** No. Let me clarify that. First of all, it's \$454 million: \$413 million for severe disabilities, \$41 million for mild and moderate, gifted and talented.

**Ms Notley:** Sorry. Was that \$413 million for severe?

**Mr. Hancock:** Yes. It's \$413 million for severe and \$41 million for mild and moderate, gifted and talented. That is 19,500 students in the severe category from grade 1 to grade 12, \$298 million, and 15,700 children in ECS mild, moderate, and severe, gifted and talented, \$156 million. So those are the numbers.

Now, when I say overfunding, I'm not being facetious. I've also been very clear to say: based on the policy and the formula that's in place. In other words, in order to be a severe special student and get funding, you have to be coded. In order to be coded, you have to have a diagnosis. To get a diagnosis, you have to have a professional indicate that there's a medical condition, and there have to be two or three pieces of paper in the file, and then you're qualified. When they went and did the review, that wasn't in place for all the students who were being funded. In fact, it wasn't in place for half of them. That doesn't mean that those students don't need support.

**Ms Notley:** Right. And that was the key.

**Mr. Hancock:** That's why we're doing the special-needs review and making sure that instead of having that kind of a medical model, we have a model that actually funds on the basis of what students need to get a proper education.

**Ms Notley:** I'm a little worried, though, that what's happening here is that we're confusing the appropriateness of the eligibility criteria assessment process versus the appropriateness of the supports that would then flow. You know, what you're talking about, of course, is that people went in and looked at files. I think anybody who works in the system will tell you that a file just doesn't connect properly with the student in way too many cases. But it's not because the student doesn't need the help, as you noted; it's because the skill level and the time and the resources within the school, which is typically where most of the stuff that gets into the file is generated, are simply inadequate. So, absolutely, the idea of re-evaluating the expectations around the criteria is reasonable, but I don't know that it means that you change this notion of what flows as a result of it. That's my concern.

**Mr. Hancock:** Well, it has to change why it flows. Right now it's flowing presumably based on a diagnosis and a coding that's resulting from the diagnosis; therefore, some money flows. If that doesn't happen, then I don't have a justification for flowing money. I mean, we have processes that I have to be accountable for. I can't be accountable on this process because this process doesn't work right. So we've asked a steering committee of people from diverse backgrounds who are knowledgeable about the whole area to consult the public in a broader context and experts in the field in a broader context and to help us to write the right policy framework to make sure that students get the support that they need. Then we'll design the funding formula, which helps us to make sure that the funding flows appropriately.

**Ms Notley:** Right. I guess the concern is that I suspect the funding is still flowing appropriately in many, many, many more cases than you think. Just because the paperwork isn't filled out, the fact that the extra resources are needed is still the case.

**Mr. Hancock:** I would agree a hundred per cent with that.

**Ms Notley:** Right. Then there would also be a concern around – I mean, you talk about moving away from the medical model. I'm the first to acknowledge that the medical model can sometimes be more witchcraft than science, but the problem is that you move away from that, and the level of expertise becomes even more distant. My experience in this area is that there is a gross variance in terms of the expertise level around a lot of these disabilities once you move away from those with any sort of medical background. There are simply not the resources given to other people working in the system to make those kinds of assessments.

7:50

**Mr. Hancock:** Well, my experience would be that there's a gross difference in viewpoint on the medical side as to what's needed in a learning community. There's not a great deal of connectivity there all the time. In fact, the diagnosis of a person with, for example, Down's syndrome doesn't necessarily tell you what that person needs in order to be successful as a learner. So it's not necessarily always helpful. In fact, in my experience – and I have quite a bit of experience in the school system with special-needs students and their families – while it may be valuable to have a diagnosis, it's not always instructive in terms of what supports the student needs to be

successful. That's not to say that you don't need to have it, don't want to have it as part of the process, but that's really not the issue at this stage.

I am presumptive to say that we'd move away from a medical model because I have a steering committee and not to prejudge what they're going to tell me, but what I really would like to know is how do we assist teachers and schools with the children who come to them and make sure that they have the supports that they need and that the students have the supports that they need and that the families have the supports that they need so that there can be an integrative process. I mean, there have been in the past some very difficult situations where families have had funding from Children and Youth Services, as it is now, and then when they became school age, somehow there was a presumption that all that support should translate to the school system. A lot of that problem has been dealt with over the years with better integration between the departments and families. But we do need to support family, student, teacher, and school in that process.

**Ms Notley:** Yeah. I mean, that all sounds good. I just worry that the idea of coming up with the best way to help the learner – you know, that sounds great. But as you move away from any of the rules in this very grey area, if you move away from the black and white, then you move into an area where you ultimately could end up with much more variation in terms of how children are dealt with from place to place. As you know, there is a gross variance, as well, between how children will be dealt with within the system even if they have a diagnosis, the same diagnosis in the same grade but two different classrooms, two different schools, and they're getting two entirely different levels of support. So as you move away from even that little bit of clarity that comes from the diagnosis, you run the risk of creating even greater discrepancies.

Anyway, let's move on.

**Mr. Hancock:** Before you do, though, I think what's really important from what you're talking about is the need, as well, in other areas in terms of teacher preparation, in terms of support for school boards, in terms of understanding what the expectation is in terms of children. So it's more than just the classification of the student and the application of some dollars; it's about the full set of support.

**Ms Notley:** Oh, absolutely. Teacher preparation, teacher education. I mean, there are a lot of teachers out there that don't have what they need to have when it comes to a special-needs background.

Anyway, just moving on. One thing: we've frozen the funding, but there are union agreement wage increases while the funding remains the same. Is it accepted, then, that the amount of assistance is going to go down per child as a result? Forget the dollars. No one cares about the dollars; they care about the bodies that are in the classroom helping their kid.

**Mr. Hancock:** Well, when we put together the budget, we did it in a fairly careful way given the resources we had available to make sure that, from our perspective, school boards had the global budgeting that they needed to be able to address the various things that they had to do. They have the 4.8 per cent increase across the board on the per-student funding; 70 per cent to 80 per cent of their costs are teacher wages. Inflation, as I understand it, is about 1 per cent for the year. So they have some flex room in there. We provided 3 per cent for the operation and maintenance budget. A little less than 50 per cent, maybe more than a little less than 50 per cent goes to wages. Based on the understanding that 4.8 was the

average weekly earning index – and that’s another question – they had sufficient in there to cover wages on their nonteacher staff. We weren’t uncaring when we put the budget together in terms of the wage pressures that school boards would have to deal with.

We also have across the province school boards who are in, by and large, a very healthy position. Their accumulated operating surplus has increased over the last three years. They’re now in the range of \$400 million. So there’s not a lack of capacity in the system to deal with the pressures that we have. I think it’s fair to say that while we tried to budget to make sure that the pressure was not on the school boards, we took the pressure internally in the department and made sure that we put forward the money that we needed to. Subject to addressing the average weekly earning index issue, we were pretty satisfied that we had been fair to the school boards so that they could accommodate all of their needs.

The students that we’re talking about are being funded as students, and they get the increase that the per capita grant gets, and they get the increase on all the other areas. The one thing that we said a year ago, when we started this funding formula piece, was that we would keep that funding constant. We wouldn’t reduce it, which would have been absolutely unfathomable, but we didn’t have a justification for increasing it unless people could show that they had an increased student load. So we kept that constant, as we promised, but we’ve adjusted all of the other factors. School boards have global budgets. We don’t go back to them and ask them to account for how they spent their severe special-needs funding. It’s a formula to allocate resources, and they take all the resources they get and allocate them where they need to.

**Ms Notley:** I thought part of this was driven by the fact that you felt that they weren’t actually justifying how they were spending it because they didn’t have proper coding and proper file management, all that kind of stuff.

**Mr. Hancock:** No. The system isn’t working properly in terms of understanding how we properly resource each student in their learning environment, so we need to address that. I mean, everybody agrees, I think. There have been five different reports, I think, on special needs over the last number of years that I’ve been involved. We do need to get that right. Everybody agrees with that.

**Ms Notley:** Am I correct, though, that at this point, it’s a school board by school board decision on whether or not they’re going to backstop what is a slow drop in the amount of special-needs funding that they’re getting relative to inflation, wage pressures, all of those kinds of things? You’re basically, ultimately, looking to the school boards who have these surpluses to make the decision to backstop it, but it’s not necessarily guaranteed.

**Mr. Hancock:** They’ve always done that, year over year. To the best of my knowledge, nobody has gone in and said: “You got X number of dollars for coded students. Demonstrate how you spent all those dollars on coded students.” In fact, that was one of the reasons that the review was done, as I understand it. It was before my time in the department, but one of the reasons the review was done – the number was set in 2000 based on a 1999 analysis of the student population.

What they did was say that the student population – just pick a number – was 500,000, and 10 per cent of students are coded, so you’ve got 50,000 students that are coded special-needs. One of the school boards would say that, well, in your jurisdiction you had 200,000 students, so you had 20,000, 10 per cent of yours. From the year 2000 to now they’ve taken that 20,000 number and upped it by

the amount of the grant. It has no real bearing on the actual number of students. So a number of school boards were saying: “This is not right. The demographics have shifted. You have to redo the analysis.” They did the review and discovered that the demographics may have shifted, but there’s no connection between the rationale behind the formula and the money that’s going out. So it was all wrong, and it all had to be fixed.

**Ms Notley:** I wonder if I can quickly jump to – well, very quickly, and this is probably just a question which you may have to get back to me on. You mentioned the roughly \$1.4 billion deferred maintenance, and you talked about the \$96 million in IMR, and then you said that the major modernization initiative would cut into the deferred maintenance problem there. Can you just give us the numbers around how much you expect that to be over the course of the next two or three years? If not now, you can get it to me later.

**Mr. Hancock:** Yeah. We’ll see if we can get you some numbers on that. I was just giving a global piece in terms of how we’re eating away at the deferred maintenance. Deferred maintenance is an issue for me. I need to be able to deal with it, and \$96 million a year is not going to get us there. In terms of how that \$1.4 billion is reduced by ASAP projects coming on, I know, for example, that Calgary is looking to close a number of schools when they get the schools in the new areas.

8:00

**Ms Notley:** Or even the major modernization thing.

**Mr. Hancock:** Yeah. Exactly.

**Ms Notley:** If you could just let us know, that would be great.

**Mr. Hancock:** Can I just go back to one piece that I missed out before?

**Ms Notley:** Really quickly, though, because I want to ask one more question before I run out of time.

**Mr. Hancock:** Okay. Thirty one million dollars in health care premiums are in school boards’ hands, and that can help them with some of their issues. They paid \$31 million in health care premiums on behalf of their employees that they don’t have to pay anymore. That can easily factor into some of their shortfall issues if they have some.

**Ms Notley:** Depends how many grandparents they have, I suppose. But, anyway, a different issue.

On the issue of class size, we’ve talked a lot about that. I know the Member for Calgary-Varsity brought it up in QP with you. At the time you said: well, part of the problem is space, as well, as we try to bring those numbers down. We know that the numbers are actually going up and that we’re not anywhere close enough to the ACOL targets. I just want to give the anecdotal picture of the school that my children go to, which is an inner-city school where neither of them has been within five or six students of the ACOL recommended numbers. One is now in the 4 to 6 range, and the other is still in the K to 3. At no time ever have they been able to get close to that number.

The biggest problem, of course, is that even when they’re able to sometimes bring in part-time teachers to help coteach in the class, there’s no room for the class to go to. Sometimes they had for a period of time been taking them into what was at one time a

darkroom with no windows – I think it was a closet – and, you know, teaching them in the hallway. How do we deal with those things?

**Mr. Hancock:** That's, I think, a very important question. First of all, I would say, though, that the numbers have not been going in the wrong direction. They've been going in the right direction, but they haven't been going in the right direction fast enough. In 2004-5 they were at 19.7 average; now they're down to 18.2. The guideline was 17. They're only down .2 from last year, so it's not moving fast enough notwithstanding the amount of money that's been invested.

**Ms Notley:** Of course, the objection that we can agree to disagree on at this point is on using averages. We'll just move away from that.

**Mr. Hancock:** Well, you have to have some way. You can't set a finite rule in every classroom for one of the reasons that you just mentioned. I mean, what do you do with the extra kids once you've filled all the classrooms in the school? That's the real issue going forward that we're going to have. Our demographics would suggest that our school population is actually starting to increase now. It's been flat for a long time. Now it's starting to increase.

The real pressure is going to come on in the next number of years in the K to 3s particularly as we need more spaces for the new students coming in. We've already got in some of the schools no way to get to the class size average because there are no more rooms for them to be in. That actually comes into combat with the school space utilization formula, which measures things. We do have to have a very good look at the space utilization formula process, which is only one of the inputs into determining priorities for new schools. We have to look at demographics in terms of where we need the new schools because of exactly that issue. It's not so much resources going to hire teachers; it's where the students are going to sit in a classroom that was designed for 25, is holding 25, and there's no place to take those kids and put them other than perhaps on the stage or dividing the gym, which is not a good solution.

**Ms Notley:** Yet we keep closing inner-city schools.

**Mr. Hancock:** Well, the inner-city school project in Edmonton was one of the best examples of what should be done in terms of renovating the receiving areas, providing better learning opportunities for the students there, and a whole lot of good things that came out of that. So closing a school is not necessarily a bad thing; it's how and why and where the students go.

**The Chair:** I need to interrupt this exchange at this point. Let's take a quick five-minute break and be back here at 10 after the hour, please.

[The committee adjourned from 8:05 p.m. to 8:11 p.m.]

**The Chair:** I'll call the committee back to order here. We'll go to alternating between the government members and the opposition.

I'll ask Mr. Bhardwaj to take the floor, please. You have 10 minutes or 20 combined with the minister.

**Mr. Bhardwaj:** Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. Thank you very much, Minister. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to engage in this conversation. A few different areas I'm actually going to be talking about, four key areas I'm interested in. One is funding for school boards. The second area I would like to talk about is high school completion rates. I also want to take a look at class size initiative, and, of course, time permitting, I want to take a

look at career and technology studies. I might switch it back and forth a little bit because career and technology studies is my passion. That's what I've taught for a number of years. So depending on the time, I might cut the others out a little bit and go over to technology studies.

To begin with, Minister, we're hearing a lot about the funding for the school boards. I realize and I know that Statistics Canada announced a new rate for the average weekly earning index; that was March 31, 2008. As a result, the Education budget provides school boards with a grant increase of 4.8 per cent, where the actual stat indicated by Stats Canada is about 6 per cent. There are a lot of questions being asked by the boards. What is the ministry doing to address the shortfall? If you don't mind, we can go back and forth, question by question, please.

**Mr. Hancock:** Sure. Up until the middle of March the projection for the average weekly earnings index was 4.83 per cent. In mid-March we learned from the StatsCan website that they were reviewing their methodology with respect to the calculation of the average weekly earnings index, and at the end of March, as you say – it was on March 30, I think – they published a new number and, in fact, restated numbers back to the year 2001 based on a new methodology. That new methodology drove out a number of 5.99 per cent, 6 per cent.

That raised a bit of a conundrum for us. We met with the School Boards Association and the Alberta Teachers' Association to determine how to deal with that change in methodology, and we have a letter of understanding between the three of us that we will over the next few months determine what that means for our agreement and, therefore, for the agreements between school boards and the ATA across the province. The possibilities, I suppose, are to say that the agreement was based on the methodology utilized when the agreement was set up – in other words, use the old calculation, which would drive out the 4.83 per cent – or we could come to an agreement to say that the methodology more accurately determines average weekly earnings, which was what Stats Canada, I guess, would say, and therefore we should go to the new methodology; or maybe we should be determining a different way of calculating average weekly earnings. We haven't determined that as yet.

What we've said to school boards is that the Premier's commitment in February to school boards and at the time the agreement was made was that we would fund whatever that is. They don't have to worry about their budgets. Whatever we end up determining, that will be funded to them. Now, that may cause me some problems down the road in terms of where I find the money if we determine to go to the average weekly index as now published, but that's not the school board's problem. That's our problem.

**Mr. Bhardwaj:** So if I'm hearing it correctly, then, if you agree with the school boards, then they would be getting their 6 per cent if that's the agreement you guys arrived at.

**Mr. Hancock:** If we end up determining – this also impacts across government and the Legislative Assembly, which is not government, of course. As MLAs we've foregone the increase this year. That's based on average weekly earnings. The minimum wage calculation by policy is based on average weekly earnings. There are a number of different places it impacts. We need a corporate decision from government, and then we need to sit down with the School Boards Association and the ATA and come to that number, whatever it is. If we do have to jump to the 5.99 per cent, it'll mean an impact of \$21 million this year, and I'll have find that either by going back to Treasury Board or by looking internally for it. The one thing that

we've said to school boards is that the Premier has said we would meet our commitment to fund the wage increase for teachers.

**Mr. Bhardwaj:** Thank you very much. I think that's very, very good news for the school boards.

**Mr. Hancock:** We told them that on budget day, and we told them that two weeks before budget day, so there should be no angst on their part at all about that.

**Mr. Bhardwaj:** Okay. Well, thank you very much. I'll certainly convey that message back to them as well.

I'm going to quickly change topics here and take a look at high school completion rates. As indicated in the Premier's April 3, 2009, letter to you, part of the mandate is to improve the high school completion rate. What are some of the specific steps that the ministry is undertaking to accomplish this goal?

**Mr. Hancock:** Well, as mentioned earlier in the back-and-forth, part of it is making sure that there's a robust learning experience so that students are interested in being in school and find the learning style that they need to have. There's been a lot of work, for example, done on CTS programming to make sure that there's a pathway for every student, not just the academic pathway. Not everybody's going to go to university. There are people who want to go into the trades. There are a number of different ways. One of the keys is robust programming.

One of the other keys, research would suggest, is that successful students can always point to a role model or a mentor, an adult in their life that's made a difference, often a teacher. We've got a partnership, for example, I think, with Big Brothers Big Sisters on a mentorship program, developing mentorship programs. Schools are moving into that area. There's a clear indication that some of the problems are with transition, so we're working on the transition areas. We have a program where I think it's \$6 million that we've dedicated to go out to school boards to fund pilot projects to demonstrate in this area what areas could be a success. As was mentioned earlier today, you go right back on high school completion; it's not something you can fix in grade 12. It's something that really starts in early childhood. The best success is to make sure we have very robust early childhood, early diagnosis, and support for children in grades 1 to 3.

**Mr. Bhardwaj:** Okay. Thank you very much. Just going along the same lines, then, in terms of the high school completion, you mentioned the mentorship program, and you mentioned the transition program. In 2009 the budget itself doesn't specifically address high school completion. Would the school boards – you mentioned \$6 million – be given some extra funds in terms of bringing in some of these initiatives to improve their completion rates?

**Mr. Hancock:** Well, the \$6 million is to help boards develop specific plans to improve high school completion, but there are other programs. For example, we've been funding technology for schools. Arguably that will help to improve the learning opportunities and make school more relevant. Because we know that the students of today are big technology users, we have some specific funding for CTS programming and equipment, a funding program in that area; the evergreening, \$12 million going into that; innovative classrooms, \$18.5 million going into that. So a number of different ways that we do actually fund. Everything that we do is geared to helping students finish high school. There's no silver bullet in this. There are a number of different funding areas that will help to address that.

8:20

**Mr. Bhardwaj:** Okay. Thank you very much.

Moving along, then, to page 74 of the business plan. Performance measure 1(f) indicates that high school completion rate targets increase in each of the next three years. Is there a long-term target set for successful completion rate?

**Mr. Hancock:** That's a good question.

**Mr. Bhardwaj:** I thought the other ones were good, too.

**Mr. Hancock:** Yeah, they were all good questions.

I should say that we've done a number of things about student engagement. For example, we have the Speak Out Alberta initiative, which also is about engaging students to understand from a student perspective what makes school interesting and effective for them, and we have the Inspiring Education dialogue, which is going to be looking at the longer term in terms of what's going to be effective for education.

The long-term rate is that 90 per cent of students would complete high school within five years of starting grade 10. Hopefully, we could at some point set a stretched target, say, 95 per cent because we know that in the future effective participation in the workforce and in the economy is going to require some form of postsecondary education, not just university but college, NAIT or SAIT, the trades. We need to aim for every student to complete school.

**Mr. Bhardwaj:** Okay. So we're basically hearing that in the future – at some of the schools I've taught at, their completion rate for high school is as high as 98 per cent of the students enrolled, and they are completing high school within three years. At what point would it be appropriate to say that your ministry has accomplished – let's say that we were to set 95 per cent as a performance objective – that 95 per cent of the students will complete high school within three years or within, possibly, even five years? What are some of your thoughts on that?

**Mr. Hancock:** Well, the goal that we've set is that 90 per cent would complete within five years. I mean, there's an expectation that some students do take longer for a number of reasons, whether they're engaged in sports or whether they've got barriers to success, or whatever. The time frame to get there – it looks like our five-year rate right now, at least the last measurement we had, 2006-07, is 79.5 per cent. So we've got some way to go. But I think that because we're focusing so specifically on that and in some of the areas on getting the programming much more robust and improving the enrolment and, as I said, putting some resources specifically into designing programs for high school completion, I think we can hope to move that up more dramatically than we have.

**Mr. Bhardwaj:** When we're looking at high school completion numbers, at the actual number of students completing, I've always believed that it is a three-year program, so it should take people three years to complete that program. I understand that, you know, some play sports and others are involved in other extracurricular activities. Why four? Why five? Why not just stick with, you know, "It is a three-year program; it should take you three years to complete that program," and leave it at that? Why are we specifically dealing with the numbers, you know, of 79 per cent or 80 per cent of the students completing within five years? Why is it important?

**Mr. Hancock:** Well, we do keep all three. We have a three-year completion rate. The last one showed at 71 per cent, the four-year

rate at 76.3 per cent, the five-year rate at 79.5, and all of those have been improved over the five-year period from 68 per cent to 75.2 per cent. So there's been improvement in those rates; they're continuing to go up. We're doing a lot better at it, but I think you do have to recognize that what's important is the outcome.

The outcome is to have students complete. Sure, it would be ideal to have people complete in three years – that's the most efficient and effective use of public resources – but not everybody's going to do that. I think that by aiming at a five-year rate, that's more realistic. That means that people are not dropping out and going off and doing something else and then coming back at a much later date. That's really, sort of, the completion within the purview of what might be expected in terms of while a person is still a high school student. We do have better rates, actually, if you go out – I think the return rate by the time people are 25 is significantly higher. We measure that as well. What we're trying to do is make sure that we have an opportunity for our students to complete within a reasonable time, recognizing that there are student differences.

**Mr. Bhardwaj:** Okay. Thank you very much.

I'm just going to change the topic here and move on to the small class size initiative. On page 132 of the government estimates it states that \$222 million is committed to class size initiative. I'm just assuming, perhaps, that hiring more teachers and creating more spaces is the bulk of the \$222 million. Is there more to this initiative than simply increasing the number of operational classrooms?

**Mr. Hancock:** Well, the money essentially has been provided to hire teachers. I think it's fair to say that \$222 million is all about hiring more teachers. There have been 2,900 new teachers hired as a result of the small class size initiative. I think that as you've discerned from earlier conversation, there's more to meeting the class size guidelines than just the provision of more teachers. That's where the challenge going forward is going to be difficult. I mean, we've added 17,000 new spaces in 2009-10, 38,000 in the next five years. We're going to have a challenge over the next number of years – that's why we've engaged in the workforce plan – in attracting and retaining the teachers we need to maintain the class sizes. Those are going to be challenges going forward. The \$222 million refers to money that's being provided to hire the teachers.

**Mr. Bhardwaj:** Thank you very much. Since the inception of this small class size initiative, the government has invested nearly \$1 billion in that. My question would be, then: during the same time frame, if you were to take a look at the results and compare the results to previous years, are they the same, or have they gone down? How are they? What would you say was the result or the outcome?

**Mr. Hancock:** The outcome has improved over the years in terms of class sizes. Our averages across the board have improved. High school, grades 10 to 12, for example: the commission's recommendation was 27; the provincial average is 22.7. As I recall it, every jurisdiction has met the class size guideline on their jurisdictional average across the province for grades 10 to 12. I think they've done the same for 7 to 9 and 4 to 6. The one area that hasn't been met is at the K to 3 level. The average is at 22.7 for grades 10 to 12, so they've done more than meet the 27 average; 22.4 for 7 to 9 as opposed to the 25 guideline; 21.2 for grades 4 to 6 as opposed to the 23 guideline. All of those are down from the 2004-05 numbers. The K to 3 one is the one that hasn't been met.

The other thing that we have to take a look at, having had this kind of experience with it, is to see whether class size actually has the impact on learning that it's supposed to.

**Mr. Bhardwaj:** That was my other lead-up question.

**Mr. Hancock:** That's something we really need to look at to say: does the data hold up to show that that's the most significant place to invest? We've invested a considerable amount of money. In order to achieve the K to 3 and to keep the ones we've got now, we're going to have to invest a huge amount of money, actually, in more student spaces and in more teachers. So we'll have to have a very close look to see whether or not that's the most effective place to put the resources, and that will obviously entail a discussion with the ATA and with school boards, but I think it's a question that needs to be raised.

8:30

**Mr. Bhardwaj:** Just for clarification, then, Minister, in terms of the small class size initiatives all of the research does indicate that having smaller class sizes should impact student achievement. My question to you would be: do we have any data to suggest that this is the percentage of growth or that this is the impact the smaller class size initiative has made on education? Maybe we can leave, you know, grades 1 to 3, but looking at all the way through up to high school.

**Mr. Hancock:** That's what I'm saying. We need to take a look at our data to see what impact it's had. I think on a cursory look you could look at it and say that there have been smaller class sizes in rural Alberta, for example, and they haven't necessarily engendered stronger results, so it bears looking at.

**The Chair:** Thank you for that exchange, Minister.

Mr. Chase, you've got 10 minutes.

**Mr. Chase:** Thank you very much. This seems like a jigsaw puzzle with pieces missing because of the time interval.

Going back to our last exchange, I want to thank you for acknowledging that P3s are not the end-all or be-all, the silver bullet solution. I also want to point out that traditional methods have been used for years and years and years very successfully. You can aggregate without going to P3s, and you can achieve economy of scale and efficiencies in productivity traditionally as well. So just another point.

I was very pleased to hear you recognize – and this isn't a question I've asked you in the House – the importance of supporting and maintaining locally elected school boards. Questions I have asked in the House – feel free to comment – are on the notion of giving back more autonomy to school boards, you know, going back to 1994, when they had control over half of their budget. I know the argument was put forward that we wanted to create equivalency across the province in terms of learning opportunities, but that can be accomplished through general revenue funding as opposed to just strictly relying on the portion of property tax, which in 1994 used to account for almost half of a school board's budget, but it's a reduced amount, as you pointed out.

Now, going on to special-needs education, what specific initiatives will be new, increased? How will at-risk children be identified? Will every child be tested? At what age? You mentioned when you were talking with the hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona sort of the chicken-and-egg argument about the need to identify but, once identified, come up with a whole series of strategies. But there is still a point where you have to identify the need in order to have them funded. What are the performance measures? How much additional funding will be allocated to respond to the increased number of children that will be identified?



How much has Setting the Direction for Special Education cost to date?

The ministry stated in Public Accounts on page PA-318 from April 15, 2009, that special-needs children will be “fully integrated.” If you could explain exactly what that means and what effect that will have on both funding and staffing. I earlier brought up the notion that I do favour inclusion wherever possible but the need for aides to make that inclusion a success. As you pointed out, depending on the degree of severity of the special needs, it is possible that one aide can work with two or three children quite successfully.

Strategic priority 5, page 72 of the business plan, states that early intervention initiatives will be increased. A couple of concerns with early childhood services are the lack of ministerial responsibility over programming and the lack of protection. Kids in ECS do not have the same perceivable rights as kids in K to 12. Is the minister also looking into these concerns, which would lead to amending the School Act to increase the protection of children in ECS? I know that you’re opening up the School Act, and hopefully this is one of the considerations.

Given that funding for ECS only increased by 2 per cent, is the department assuming that there will not be an increase in the number of students attending ECS even though strategic priority 5 states that the initiative would increase? This is particularly troubling, given the projected increase in student enrolment. This increase was acknowledged and discussed, so it’s a matter of how we fund it. How do you expect the fifth strategic priority to be successful without the increase in funding necessary?

Given that attracting teachers for K to 3 is difficult, what funding or programs are there to target increasing their numbers? I appreciate the acknowledgement that division 2, division 3, and division 4 have received lower pupil-teacher ratios. That’s really important. Once we get it working at the front end, then we’ll truly be able to evaluate.

Strategic priority 6 only states that recommendations will be made concerning policy, accountability frameworks, and funding. Given that the special-education review did not allow groups to participate, how complete a picture will this review process actually provide? The funding for severe special needs has been frozen at the 2008-09 levels. How do you account for the freezing of the funding?

Despite the endless consultations, parents, teachers, and the public still do not feel that their input is being sufficiently considered. Performance measure 4(a) hasn’t changed in 2007-08. It is still 58 per cent and has failed to meet the target set out last year of 61 per cent. Setting the Direction and Inspiring Education are major consultation initiatives that are geared to changing this perception. What in the minister’s view is the reason behind the failures of these initiatives to change the perception that stakeholder input isn’t being considered? How much funding has gone into the initiatives?

What is the current status of the framework for literacy in the K to 12 system? This was alluded to in Public Accounts on page PA-325, April 15, 2009.

Private schools. Of course, this is a major concern that I have raised numerous times in the House. Last year the government announced that they were going to increase funding support to private schools if those schools agree to more reporting measures; \$16.4 million more will be spent to support accredited private schools in 2009-10 than during the 2008-09 budget, section 6, lines 6.0.1 and 6.0.2. Given the funding pressures felt by school boards in the public system, why did you increase the amount of funding for private schools?

Given the numbers of children going to school hungry, especially in these tough economic times, are you considering increasing the funding that you mentioned with regard to breakfast and lunch programs?

Rural schools. Although the student population is becoming increasingly urbanized, one-quarter of students continue to live in rural areas. There have been many rural school closures in the last year. For example, the Golden Hills school division has seen four schools either close or reduce the number of grades they serve. Once you start reducing grades, you know that school closure is likely to follow. One of the results is that students are having to endure increasingly long bus rides and limited after-school programming due to the long bus ride home.

What specific actions are being taken to reduce the number of rural school closures? How are you trying to attract and retain teachers for schools in remote locations? How many rural schools use technology to offer a variety of programs? In other words, has the SuperNet reached all the rural communities? Are they able to access it with their current technology? Is it compatible? In the 2007-08 annual report, page 29, the strategies listed to sustain rural schools are based on increasing technology and online courses and to discuss challenges and promising practices. Where are the strategies that would provide adequate funding for rural schools, incentives for teachers to live and teach in rural communities – in the old days there was such a thing as the teacherage, kind of like the parsonage – similar to those for doctors, adequate transportation formulas, improved utilization formulas, et cetera? In other words, where are the strategies that would actually make rural schools more viable?

**8:40**

First Nations. First Nations population growth surpasses the birth rate for nonaboriginal people. It’s growing three times faster. As a result, the need for targeted programming is increasing. This was noted on page 70 of the 2009-10 business plan. The state of education for First Nations children continues to be less efficient for a variety of reasons than it is for nonnative children, whether it’s on reserve or in urban settings. I mentioned a notable example on the Stoney reserve at Morley.

It is well known that education plays a central role in the depressed socioeconomic well-being of aboriginal people. High school completion is half that of nonaboriginal people. Acceptable, excellence standards: of those students who self-identify and write grades 3, 6, and 9 PATs, only 50 per cent achieve acceptable standards compared with approximately 80 plus per cent, and only 5 per cent achieve excellent compared with approximately 18 per cent.

I know that when it’s a reserve situation, we have to work with the federal government. It’s not strictly the province’s concern, but with the rapidly growing increase in urban First Nations children, we have to be prepared.

Of those students who self-identify and take diploma examinations, 10 per cent fewer students achieve the acceptable standard. The number of students going to postsecondary school is not dramatically increasing. Performance standards of high school completion . . . [Mr. Chase’s speaking time expired]

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Chase.

We’ll go to the response from the minister, please.

**Mr. Hancock:** Thank you. I’ll try and deal with most of those. First of all, the school taxation property tax issue. I got into a bit of trouble last year raising that issue. I’m not going to do that again. The fact of the matter is that we went to province-wide collection of that tax because there was such a high discrepancy, particularly in the industrial-commercial tax base across the province. That needed to be evened out. I don’t think you can go to a formula and say,

“Well, give it back to the school boards, and then even it out out of provincial revenues” because what do you even it to? Somebody raises a high industrial tax base from a high industrial area, and then you average everything up to that? There’s no simple solution to that.

School boards do have to have the autonomy and respect that they need to engage their local communities, but I don’t think there’s any reverting to the tax base. They do have the opportunity in the existing School Act to increase school taxes by 3 per cent based on a referendum. A couple have tried to bring forward a referendum. Nothing has been successful in that area, and municipalities are very, very dead set against giving it back to the school authorities. In fact, they’d like to have it eliminated.

In terms of special needs, I think we’ve answered that question in a number of different ways earlier in the session, so I’m not going to repeat all of that process. You know, the fact of the matter is that we have a full review of special-needs programming through Setting the Direction. Quite frankly, I have no idea where you come up with the concept that people have been not allowed to participate. There has been a high degree of participation across the province. It has been a very effective process of engagement of both stakeholder groups and parents, teachers, educators, school boards. I’m actually very happy with the two rounds of engagement, the public engagement plus the online engagement. We’ve been oversubscribed for the forum coming up in June. So it has been a great process.

You asked why that hasn’t changed the satisfaction rates? Well, because you’re looking at last year’s satisfaction rates, and we haven’t measured the effect of the engagement yet. Between Inspiring Education and Setting the Direction and our Speak Out Alberta, I think we’re doing a great deal of engagement. In fact, some of the background work that we did suggests that it’s – I think the number I was reading was 74 per cent of Albertans have talked about education in their family groups or otherwise within the last six months and consider education to be extremely important. I think that’s a huge success for us.

In terms of attracting teachers to K to 3, I’m not sure that there’s a problem. But I will say this: we’ve got to do a much better job as a society of valuing teachers. I’ve said this to the Teachers’ Association. I mean, people have been denigrating the teaching profession; teachers have been denigrating the teachers’ profession for a long time. We’ve got to change that attitude so that being a teacher is seen as one of the high callings in society. If we want people to get into education and stay in education – it pays, actually, very well. It could pay more. Obviously, everybody wants to be paid more. If you go to Finland, it’s not the pay scale that makes being a teacher a high calling. It’s the attitude of society and the attitude of people that says that the best and the brightest coming out of the school system aspire to be teachers. That’s what we need to aspire to in this province and this country.

Rural schools and the closure of schools. Again, I would go back to the fact that we have done an awful lot in terms of connectivity. You mentioned the SuperNet. The SuperNet is now going to all of our schools across the province. We’ve provided a lot of funding for technology. We have video conferencing suites. I don’t know if they’re in every school but are certainly available throughout every school jurisdiction in the province. I can tell you, for example, about one of the teachers that I met through the excellence in teaching awards last year who was out of the Buffalo Trail school division and taught a chemistry class in three sites at one time. Another teacher, that I met last summer at a technology conference talking about distance learning, was teaching Cree right across the Grande Yellowhead school division out of her home base in Edson, taught in Hinton and Grande Cache and other locations. There are

a number of different ways that robust programming can be accessed by rural school divisions to supplement what they have available.

School boards have got to have the ability and the responsibility to decide what schools they need and where they need them. You can’t sort of say that we need school boards with local autonomy and then come back and say, “But you’ve got to have a rule that they can’t close any schools, and you’ve got to have a rule that they can’t keep people on buses for any particular period of time, and you’ve got to have a rule that says that they’ve got to have this kind of . . .” – why would you have a school board if you made all the decisions?

We’ve done a lot, I think, in this province. The SuperNet was probably one of the best investments made in terms of moving forward to make sure that technology and education and access to a world view were available to every student across the province.

Support for hungry students. I think we went around that in the last go-round, so I’m not going to go back and repeat that. I think that as a community, as a society we have to make sure that children have the basic supports that they need, but that doesn’t mean that as a school program and as school funding that’s where we should be focusing our resources. That’s a bigger issue. I think we need to be helping in that area.

You asked about private-school funding, and I’ll end on that. Last year there was a decision made to increase the private-school support, their student-based grant, from 60 per cent of the public school grant to 70 per cent and to provide them with operation and maintenance funding on that basis. They still don’t get any of the other funding, but they have those two grant processes. To access that increased grant funding, they had to provide a higher level of accountability so that we knew they were doing the appropriate job for students in Alberta. The outcome we want is for every student to get a good education.

Now, what would have happened if we didn’t provide that funding? Well, what was happening, rightly or wrongly, was that a number of private schools were affiliating with public school jurisdictions, becoming alternate programs in the public school jurisdiction. Three, I think, last year moved to the Palliser school division, in any event. You would have ended up with more students in the public system, which might be appropriate, but you would have been funding them at full level plus the transportation grants plus the other grants, so a significantly higher amount of money would have been expended to support those students in the public system. I’m not suggesting that that’s right or wrong, but if you’re talking about allocation of resources and saying, “Well, why did you put that kind of resources into the private system when it could have been used in the public system?” if you hadn’t put it into the private system, you would have needed even more in the public system to compensate for the additional students.

The private-school system has been serving students in Alberta as one of the choices that Alberta students have. Those students that go to private schools are entitled to get a good education. The choice costs their families some money, yes, but our concern is that every student have access to a quality education. My concern with private schools is that they provide a level and quality of education to those children that are attending and that they meet acceptable standards that we would require of the public system.

**8:50**

We’ve been funding private schools in this province at some level for a long period of time. There’s always an argument about what the right level or appropriate level of funding is. I think caucus and government made a decision last year to move to the 70 per cent level for some very good reasons. The increase in the budget this year supports that increase in funding level as well as the 4.8 per cent increase in the grant levels.

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

At this point we'll go to Mr. Rodney. You have 10 minutes to speak or 20 minutes in an exchange with the minister. It's your choice.

**Mr. Rodney:** My preference, if it pleases the chair and if it's permissible with the minister, is to go back and forth for the next 20. Are you open to that, Mr. Minister?

**Mr. Hancock:** Sure. Yeah.

**Mr. Rodney:** Very good.

My first question. By the way, I'm not going to go into years of personal experience in the profession in different countries. My resumé doesn't matter, but the thoughts of my constituents do, so that's where these questions are coming from, Minister. I hear from parents regularly on these sorts of issues, not just in my constituency but other places, because they know the background. I sometimes hear about classroom space and, you know, criticism that in some areas of Alberta there's a crunch there. I know you've referred to some of it. I just want to open the door to perhaps further comment on whether, indeed, this classroom space issue is an issue or not. That's item one.

Item two is the backlog that we do hear about, at least through the media, when it comes to deferred maintenance of schools. I guess I'd just like a comment from the minister on classroom space and deferred maintenance, what the ministry is planning on doing to address these issues when, in this budget anyway, it appears there are no new projects in this regard.

**Mr. Hancock:** On the classroom space issue I mentioned before that we're bringing on 38,140 new school spaces – I guess that would be by the year 2011 – and in that time the enrolment growth is projected to be 10,000 students, so we're gaining by 28,000 student spaces. Now, that's not all going to be a gain in space because there'll be some student spaces that are in the wrong buildings or the wrong places that will undoubtedly be closed down. That deals with some of the deferred maintenance issues as well as some of the space issues. But there's no question that there are challenges with respect to classroom spaces, and there are growing areas of the province where we have priorities in terms of what needs to be built next, and allocation of scarce resources is always a difficult process.

We've engaged in a process of building schools now that can be expandable with modulars that are very, very modern in design and structure. They're not the old portables that some of us went to school in. We have a contract to acquire those modulars. We have a program to acquire them, and that will help us with both the critical need areas and with the critical maintenance areas. In some cases we have to replace some of those old portables that are worn out, or in some cases we need to add classroom space because they're at a critical juncture.

What we have with the budget we've got now is 135 projects under way. We're completing 12 new schools this year, 32 new schools in Edmonton and Calgary under the ASAP programs between 2009 and 2012. Given that the four metro boards serve half of the student population, it makes sense that those projects be dealt with, as we are, in a priority in terms of Edmonton and Calgary and the surrounding areas. But we will need to deal with some of the outlying areas and some of the space crunches that are happening around the province.

**Mr. Rodney:** Thank you for the clarification, Minister.

On to something that you brought up, actually, just now in your

answer, and that was in reference to high-growth areas. It's quite well known that more than half the capital budget is going towards phase 1 of what you called ASAP, the Alberta schools alternative procurement. I like to refer to it as ASAP, as soon as possible, and it truly is that. That includes my high-growth area of Calgary-Lougheed, where, I'm pleased to say, we've got quite a bit of action in that respect. It wasn't just my area. Again, it's 18 schools in Edmonton and Calgary, as you know. What can you tell the rest of the province when it comes to P3s and where their schools are? We've got 18 in the two major cities. What do you have to say about the rest of the province?

**Mr. Hancock:** Well, in ASAP 2 there are some in the outlying areas, but in, I would guess, the suburban regions – Okotoks, Langdon, Spruce Grove, Sherwood Park – they get schools in ASAP 2. In the capital plan we're building schools in Airdrie, Chestermere, Drumheller, Carstairs, Canmore, Fort McMurray, Grande Prairie, Lethbridge. Of the 135 projects, there are 18 in ASAP 1. There are, I think, another 14 in ASAP 2. So there are a lot of other projects under way.

We are doing a number of things that are, I think, innovative. We're doing value studies. We're helping jurisdictions to refine their need and make sure that what we're building is actually going to meet the needs, and we've had some very interesting results from that that will help us move forward. We're also doing some regional studies to take a look at what we have available in regions. The first one, the pilot, was done down in Medicine Hat, and that will help to inform us in terms of how we go forward in that area. We're doing one now in the Red Deer region. That will help us to inform things going forward. Immediate growth needs, as I said, are being met by – since 2004 we've spent \$125 million for the construction of more than 400 modulars.

There are a number of ways to meet the growing needs. It's always a challenge. I mean, could we use more resources in the area? Absolutely. Alberta, as you know, has a very aggressive infrastructure program, and we're spending more on infrastructure development than any other jurisdiction, so the question is: how fast and how far can you go? We're looking at – and I will be going to Treasury Board – proposals in terms of what we might do to lever our resources.

There are some interesting projects being proposed around the province where you can partner with a municipality on a project or work with developers on projects in certain areas, or in some cases perhaps we even need to see what the opportunity cost of building versus not building would be and determine whether it might be appropriate to borrow for those sorts of projects. Those are things that we have to look at going forward, but in the meantime I don't think we have to apologize for the size of our building program and the number of schools that are being built as we speak.

**Mr. Rodney:** Well, I can certainly tell you, Minister, that you wouldn't have to apologize in my part of town. I know that constituents are very, very pleased, but I was concerned about the rest of the province. I appreciate that you answered that in the first part of your answer, but you had a little addendum that makes me ask this question. Without putting words in the minister's mouth, was what you mentioned about partnerships a reference to a phase 3 or 4, or is it a little too early to tell?

**Mr. Hancock:** Well, I think it's too early to tell, but I think there are a number of ways of going forward. There could be other opportunities for public-private partnerships, but they don't all have to be in the same mode or model. There are different ways of doing public-

private partnerships. I believe that we should be exploring. For example, if you're in an area where there are four or five developers in a growth area and there are a number of pieces of land set aside for schools, I think we should be approaching the developers and saying: "There's going to be one school built in this area. Here are the three or four eligible spots. Sharpen your pencils, come to the table, and tell us what you might do." If it makes sense, then go ahead and do it. I think that's one way of proceeding.

Another way is that in my area we are just completing a high school for the Edmonton public system. The Edmonton Catholic system has a high school coming forward in phase 2 of the ASAP program, and the city of Edmonton is building a rec facility. If we could have gotten our act together, we could have built those three projects as one project, perhaps used thermal energy, found some different synergies to build it, and created a real project, like they did when they built Percy Page, Holy Trinity, and the rec centre in Mill Woods 20 years ago.

9:00

**Mr. Rodney:** That sounds a little bit like the south Fish Creek recreation centre, which is also a YMCA, and there's a library in there, and there's a high school in there, just outside the boundaries of Calgary-Lougheed. It happens to be in a constituency close by. That's an example where we were involved, and that was years ago, as a matter of fact. You know, that was years ago. Now we're in a different economic reality. I don't call it a downturn or a recession; it's just a reality that we're dealing with here. A lot of Albertans out there have questions about how we're spending our dollars in this and other budgets. They're wondering how much money we're saving doing things with this particular model, say phase 1, as an example. Do you have an answer for that yet, Minister? Has this alternative procurement process saved money for Albertans in the long run, or is it too early to tell?

**Mr. Hancock:** Well, one of the analyses that you have to go into to justify the ASAP program or an alternative purchase program is that you have to do a business case model, and then you have to do a present valuation of it. That has to compare to a public comparator. In other words, you do the traditional build model and then compare it against the P3 model and only proceed if the P3 model gives you a benefit. The benefit for ASAP 1, I think, was \$118 million that was factored out. That comes from a number of different factors in the model. One of them is, of course, the cost of the build.

There's also the long-term maintenance and those processes. There's a huge advantage from a program department perspective in terms of the maintenance model. As we've talked about, there's a significant amount of deferred maintenance in the system whereas on the P3 project there will not be deferred maintenance. That is taken care of up front in the process.

The short answer is that the comparator shows \$118 million on the ASAP 1 project. What it will show on the ASAP 2 project remains to be seen, but that will be public information.

**Mr. Rodney:** Thanks for that. I know we're almost out of time, so I'm going to ask the last three questions that I do have, Minister, all together. I don't know if you want to make a note. There will be three questions. They refer to your business plan.

A number of times we see that one of the goals is to prepare students well for employment and active citizenship, including the crucial area of career and technology studies. The first question is: what is the ministry doing – and I'm looking for specifics if I could be so bold as to ask for that – to achieve the goal of preparing students for employment and active citizenship? You know,

sometimes you hear about these CALM classes and how they're not great. I'll be honest with you; I'm a fan. I used to teach it, and I found the more homework a teacher did, the more they brought to the program, the more kids got out of it. Again, I'm looking for your answer on that.

Second question. Could you explain how funding for CTS has been affected by the new budget? We hear about the importance of certain programs, and people are really worried when it comes to cuts, especially when there are direct relations to employment and active citizenship, as the goal suggests.

Finally, I do believe it's safe to say, having travelled around the province a fair bit, that there are a number of opportunities presented by CTS courses, but they're not necessarily equally available wherever you go in Alberta, particularly in certain rural and smaller schools. The last question: is there any motivation for schools to begin to offer CTS classes where they might not have been in the past in order to allow students the same opportunities?

If you want, I can repeat the questions. You've got them all, do you?

**Mr. Hancock:** First of all, in terms of preparing a student for employment, the CTS programming is being reworked as we speak. There are, I think, five pathways in that process. I think there are six pathways, actually, now, one of them being a safety area. For example, in the health pathway that's just being piloted, I think there's actually an announcement going out tomorrow on funding in that area for 10 pilots. That's going to be \$12 million over the next three years to pilot sites in a number of different jurisdictions so that students who want to get into the health professions and occupations can get a start in high school and learn whether that's an area for them. So that's part of the health high school concept that was developed and announced during the election, and that's now coming to fruition with the pilot projects going out. That's an example of how the CTS program is being made more robust with pathways to career opportunities for those that want to engage it.

We've also been evergreening CTS equipment with \$12 million for upgrading and enhancement, and there have been a number of projects in that area. I might say that the WorldSkills competition in Calgary is going to leave a legacy of equipment for the province. In fact, one of the legacies is a mobile lab that one of the school boards will have, to address your rural equation, to take opportunities around.

You're never going to get absolutely equal access. That's not possible, so what you need to do, again, is to have school boards decide what is most suitable for the students in their areas, what their students need to have access to, and how they can get equitable access to appropriate programming. I think the work that we're doing in making the CTS curriculum more robust, defining the pathways, helping to fund the equipment – then, we haven't lost sight of the regional skill centres concept to make it more possible for more students to have access. But that is a longer term strategy. Obviously, it requires resources, and as you mentioned, these are tough times to be ambitious about new programs.

**Mr. Rodney:** Wow. That was a concise answer. We have a few minutes left?

**The Chair:** We do.

**Mr. Rodney:** Then I will thank, by the way, the hon. member Naresh Bhardwaj for his input into the last series of questions.

On to the next, and I know this pertains to a certain segment of our society. It's a bit of a sensitive topic, Minister, but it's of

concern to all Albertans, I'm sure. In the new business plan, 2009-2012, there's a new goal focusing on success for our First Nations friends, Métis, and Inuit students, and I've had this question posed: why is this of special interest at this particular moment in time? Some would suggest it's an admirable goal, but why now? You mentioned this area of fiscal restraint, for instance. Really a two-part question. Is the minister providing additional funding to assist school boards with this implementation of a new business plan goal, or is it something that doesn't require it somehow?

Second question. I know that until now there haven't been tracking results when it comes to reporting FNMI student data publicly. Would that be a component under the new goal?

**Mr. Hancock:** A little question came up in the House the other day from one of our colleagues, and I think it's a very important question because we have had FNMI education as a strategy. It is a part of our business plan, so it's not that this is something that we've just invented. We made it into its own goal because it's so particularly important for us to focus on going forward.

First of all, the fastest growing young population: I think 50 per cent of First Nations people are under the age of 20. I forget what the number is exactly, but in any event there are a lot of young people in the FNMI population, and it's growing rapidly. We have the third-largest FNMI population in the country, and I think it's growing by about 39 per cent.

Now, that's coupled with unfortunate results in terms of education. The 2006 census had 44 per cent of FNMI people in Alberta over the age of 15 not having completed high school compared to 22 per cent for non-FNMI Albertans. That's not good for the students involved, and it's not good for Alberta. We need that population to be as well educated as the rest of the population, so we need to really focus on that.

I'm pleased to say that the Council of Ministers of Education met in February – it's a concern right across the country – and we've agreed to make a concerted effort and to highlight it this year across the country. At that meeting I had the opportunity with Gene Zwodzdesky, the Minister of Aboriginal Relations, to meet with the aboriginal leadership from the province who were there with us, and we agreed to form a partnership to really focus on how we can increase the value of education in the FNMI community and focus on success and focus on strategies because whether you're living on reserve or in the urban centres, Albertans have a vested interest in a well-educated population. Because the population is quite mobile, moving back and forth, we have to move away from the boundaries and make sure that every child in Alberta has access to an appropriate level of education.

9:10

**Mr. Rodney:** No further questions. Thank you very much.

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

At this point we'll go to Mr. Chase, your fifth, I think, and final opportunity for 10 minutes this evening.

**Mr. Chase:** Thank you. I'm pleased to have so many teacher colleagues within this committee. I mean, we rule. What can I say?

Going back to the First Nations briefly, performance standards of high school completion, Rutherford scholarship eligibility, high school to postsecondary transition, and diploma examination participation rates are all under development. Why are these standards not already in place for FNMI students, especially given the tremendous increase in the number of First Nations on and off reserve? When will the results of these standards be made available?

With regard to scholarships in general, something that I would very much like to see changed. Please ensure that opposition MLAs receive the scholarship results so that we can congratulate our successful high school graduate constituents who've received these. This is really important. For whatever reason we're not receiving this information.

In the 2007-08 annual report an aboriginal youth suicide prevention pilot program was created, encompassing 16 communities. This is from page 31. What is the current status of these programs? Are these programs still being funded? Are they being expanded?

I'm now moving on to education standards.

**Mr. Hancock:** Page 31 of what?

**Mr. Chase:** Page 31 of the 2007-08 annual report.

As I said, I'm moving towards education standards. You know my personal opinion and that of the vast majority of educators, that provincial achievement tests should be abandoned. However, given that there is data, how does the minister explain the decrease in over half of the measures in 2007-08 from the year previous? Given that there are considerable decreases in the performance of students last year, what measures are being instituted to reverse the trend in 2009-10? There was a decrease of 4 per cent in the belief of parents, teachers, et cetera, that students are taught attitudes and behaviours that will make them successful in work when they finish school. Can we account for this decrease?

Only a selection of diploma examination results is included on page 76, and I've heard concerns from constituents that the physics 30 test was too difficult. What about the results from all the other courses that were listed in the 2008-2011 business plan such as chemistry 30, physics 30, social studies 30, and pure mathematics 30?

How much money is spent on the delivery of provincial achievement tests, and could you break that down by grade level? How much funding will be used to develop early diagnostic testing in 2009-2010?

High school completion rates continue to be lower than most other provinces. In 2006-07 the dropout rate increased by 0.3 per cent from 2005-06. The target for 2009-10 is 4.6 per cent. Given the rise in unemployment, the recessionary reality, we have potentially more kids staying in school, and we may achieve this target just by that fact. It will be an influence anyway.

The rate for high school completion in Alberta is one of the lowest in all the provinces. Given that the rate has not improved much, what specific funding and programming is planned for 2009 that would improve completion rates and counteract the problems that we've previously experienced? Given that the targets and measures are based on a more general definition of completion, thereby padding the number of completions, could you break down the number of high school completions according to whether they are credentialed or noncredentialed? We won't go into a whole lot of that because we've talked about three years, four years, five years, et cetera. I really appreciate the questions of MLA Bhardwaj, a teacher, on why are we talking about four and five years when three years is the expectation.

Given the continued financial strains on school boards, it would seem as though more operating support would be needed, particularly to keep schools from unnecessarily closing and to make sure all schools have the necessary resources and supports to deliver high-quality education. Since the Auditor General's recommendations has the ministry been able to better assess school boards' needs?

Some generic sort of catch-all type questions. How many rural schools were closed in the past year? How many urban schools were

closed in the past year? What is the number of net student spaces that will be created in the next three years? You've talked, I think, about something like a 32,000 figure, I believe was the case. Again, I don't expect these to be on the tip of the tongue, especially the projections, so written answers will be wonderful.

How many modernization requests has the minister received over the past year, and how many of those requests were approved? I gave examples in the last two days of not a whole lot happening in terms of modernization projects in Calgary or Edmonton on the priority lists. How much money was requested for modernization projects last year, and how much money was released for those projects? How many projects that have been approved in previous years are still not completed due to a shortage of funds? What is the province's current liability of students attending school in questionably safe buildings either due to disrepair, damaged roofs, or due to asbestos? I'm very familiar with the average age of urban schools, which is in the area of sort of 40 plus, but if you could provide me the average age of rural schools.

With regard to the asbestos, if it's left alone, it's not a problem. But in terms of the modernization of the projects, sometimes because of the amount of asbestos in the school you're forced to make a decision: is it cheaper just to demolish the building and rebuild it? I know, for example, that Western Canada high school, which is one of oldest if not the oldest high school in Calgary, has had windows falling out. It's had the facade reinforced on the outside of the school. It looks like it's under construction, but it's just stabilizing. So if you could give me a sense as to where we're at with some of our older schools like Western Canada. The last figure I heard was somewhere in the area of between \$60 million and \$70 million to start from scratch. Then we have other high schools like Bowness high school, where there's a math wing that has sort of been part of the sick school syndrome for a number of years. I would appreciate answers to those questions.

I won't run out the clock. I look forward to the last word, so to speak.

**Mr. Hancock:** Well, you've given a wide variety of questions, so I'll just have a stab at some of them. Development of standards. First of all, we've been dealing with the self-identification of FNMI students for a very short period of time in terms of data collection. You need to have some background data before you can actually proceed to developing meaningful standards. That work is in process. As well, I think it's important also as we work with First Nations to be able to deal with data protocols with First Nations so that we can share information appropriately, so I think it's prudent to work with the data and develop it in an appropriate way to set appropriate standards rather than to set standards for the sake of having them. That's why we have projections for standards to be set under that goal and, certainly, I think, both across the school jurisdictions and with leaders in First Nations and Métis communities a commitment to work towards satisfactory outcomes and projects and programs to achieve those satisfactory outcomes.

9:20

With respect to scholarships, I'm afraid you'll have to raise that one with Advanced Education because they actually deal with scholarships out of the heritage scholarship fund. I assume you're talking about the Rutherfords, for example. That's not information within our department.

The reference to the annual report: I'm sorry; I don't have the annual report in front of me. I'll have to go back and check that.

With respect to the provincial achievement tests, the number, as I recall, for the PAT 3 test is \$345,000 to administer the test. That

includes, I think, the money that's spent with teachers developing the tests and teachers marking the tests. The overall cost for all assessment is \$545,000 for the grade 3, of which \$300,000 is paid to teachers who mark and help develop the tests.

We'll get to the numbers for the overall assessment – I had those at hand before – but, you know, I think it's important to talk about why we do PAT 3s, 6s, 9s, and diploma exams. There's been this mythology, I think, created that all assessment is about student learning. I think assessment for learning is extremely important. That is done in classrooms across our province. Teachers, as professionals, are in the best position to assess their students' learning and assess the efficacy of their teaching to determine whether students are learning their subjects and their skills and moving forward at an appropriate pace, etc. Assessment of the system is important to be able to know that the system is working.

It's not simply a matter of replacing PAT 3s with diagnostic assessment. Diagnostic assessment is important. We're developing diagnostic assessment tools. Right now it's a very expensive process, but with appropriate tools and technology we hope to be able to make it more accessible to teachers, to have better tools that are locally developed. Teachers and school boards use all sorts of assessment tools right now both for diagnostic and for assessment processes. It wouldn't be prudent to move away from an assessment process that we have at grades 3, 6, 9, and the diplomas at grade 12 with some 25 years of data that's available, longitudinal data, to just throw that out and say: well, we don't need to do that anymore because it doesn't help students learn. It does help students learn insofar as it helps systems adapt and change and understand what needs to be changed.

I can show you some portrayals of trend lines of data which would show that in a certain circumstance everything else is trending normally, but the science is not working. That would inform a school that something is happening with respect to science teaching that needs some work. That doesn't necessarily point at a particular teacher. That doesn't point at a demographic group. It's not used for ranking and to say that this school is worse than another school. But there is a value to it.

We need to be able to move from where we are now to where we need to be. When I was England at a ministers of education forum in January, one of the things that I was able to engage with is a group that's developing an assessment protocol over the next three years to properly assess what we've been talking about as 21st century learning. What are the knowledge, skills, and attributes that we need in the 21st century? Innovation and creativity and those things: how do you properly assess that? There are some exciting things happening in the assessment area.

We ought not to just sort of say: well, this is high-stakes testing, and it all should just be abolished.

**Mr. Chase:** Sorry. Could I just suggest a potential compromise? That would be to lower the value of the standardized achievement tests.

**The Chair:** Actually, I think the time is the minister's right now.

**Mr. Hancock:** Mr. Chairman, I appreciate that because I do have a lot more answers to give. The fact of the matter is that provincial achievement tests at 3, 6, and 9 have absolutely no bearing on a student's mark or progression unless a teacher decides to use them as part of the student's mark or progression. The only place where the standardized testing has any part of the value of the student assessment is at the grade 12 level, the departmental examinations on the 50 per cent. That's appropriate to make sure that there's a

balancing factor across the province. I'm one of those students whose departmental exams actually improved my marks considerably. Lots of people say that they should have more weight on the school-based mark or more weight on the departmental. It depends on whether you did better in your school or better on your departmental. There needs to be some equivalency across the province, and that's what the standardized testing accomplishes at that level.

In terms of high school completion rates, I think we talked a lot about the strategies and the programs that we're dealing with in that area.

Early diagnostic testing. I don't know the exact number off the top of my head that we're investing in the development of early diagnostic testing, but if we can, we'll get that for you.

In terms of the state of schools, average ages, et cetera, that's fairly detailed. I don't have that at top of my head. You mentioned Western Canada high, and that's a very interesting one. We've got \$35 million that's been approved for the refurbishment of that school. It really begs the question, when you get into funding at that level, at what stage you should actually replace a school as opposed to refurbish it, particularly when it's in a location of very expensive land, almost in downtown Calgary. Where's the student population that it's serving now as compared to when it was built? Those are the types of things that we really ought to consider. When I talked about the value engineering process, that's the type of thing that really should be engaged in in terms of a value engineering process to see what you ought to accomplish.

A lot of modernization actually has been going on. Calgary has had six modernization projects. Edmonton has had 12 modernization projects. Strathcona composite has a major renovation/modernization project going on as we speak. It's not that there's not modernization happening. There's a significant amount of resources being put into modernizing those schools which still serve a very important part of the systems.

How many rural schools closed versus urban schools closed? I don't know if we have that kind of data at hand. If it's not too difficult to scare up, we can provide that to you.

One of the things you talked about is the financial strain on school boards. We have been so underfunding our school boards that since August 31, 2005, they had \$169 million in provincial accumulated operating surpluses; as of 2006 they had \$221 million; as of 2007,

\$324 million; and a 25 per cent increase in that to \$403 million by August 31, 2008. So I'm really sorry that we've been underfunding them to that level that they've been able to accumulate those operating surpluses. You have to of course look at why they have operating surpluses. I don't want to be pejorative to school boards. I think it's very prudent for school boards to manage their money well to make sure that they have a good reserve for difficult times and to save for particular projects. I assume that that's what they're doing. But they're hardly underfunded if they're in a position where they can save that kind of money out of their operating accounts.

I think we're in a good position as a province because we saved money and acted prudently and paid off debt, and school boards are in a good position because they've saved some money, too.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Minister. I will advise the committee that we are so close to having exhausted the time allotted for this item of business that I will spend the next moment thanking everyone for their participation this evening and to any out there who are tuned in to the audio broadcast.

Minister Hancock, thank you very much for your input and your exchange this evening and to your staff for the support here this evening. Also to our support staff, Ms Norton and others, and to the committee members: thank you all. I will advise you that we are scheduled to meet next on Tuesday, May 5, to consider the estimates of the Department of Housing and Urban Affairs.

**Mr. Hancock:** If I might just briefly, I would like to put on the record how much I appreciate the support and the good work of the departmental staff, not only those who are here but those who work every day for students in our province. It's a challenging job, particularly when resources are tight. I very much appreciate your thanking the staff who are here, and I'd like to thank through them all the rest of the staff.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Minister. Certainly an appropriate note to close on, so pursuant to Standing Order 59.01(2)(a) this meeting is adjourned.

Thank you.

[The committee adjourned at 9:30 p.m.]







