



Legislative Assembly of Alberta

The 29th Legislature
First Session

Standing Committee
on
Families and Communities

Ministry of Education
Consideration of Main Estimates

Wednesday, November 4, 2015
3:30 p.m.

Transcript No. 29-1-5

**Legislative Assembly of Alberta
The 29th Legislature
First Session**

Standing Committee on Families and Communities

Sweet, Heather, Edmonton-Manning (ND), Chair
Smith, Mark W., Drayton Valley-Devon (W), Deputy Chair

Hinkley, Bruce, Wetaskiwin-Camrose (ND)
Jansen, Sandra, Calgary-North West (PC)
Littlewood, Jessica, Fort Saskatchewan-Vegreville (ND)
Luff, Robyn, Calgary-East (ND)
McPherson, Karen M., Calgary-Mackay-Nose Hill (ND)
Orr, Ronald, Lacombe-Ponoka (W)
Payne, Brandy, Calgary-Acadia (ND)
Pitt, Angela D., Airdrie (W)
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Also in Attendance

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Cyr, Scott J., Bonnyville-Cold Lake (W)
Drever, Deborah, Calgary-Bow (Ind)

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Standing Committee on Families and Communities

Participant

Ministry of Education
Hon. David Eggen, Minister

3:30 p.m.

Wednesday, November 4, 2015

[Ms Sweet in the chair]

Ministry of Education
Consideration of Main Estimates

The Chair: Good afternoon, everybody. I'm Heather Sweet, chair of the Committee on Families and Communities. I'd like to call the meeting to order.

The committee has under consideration the estimates for the Ministry of Education for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2016.

I'd ask that we go around the table and introduce ourselves for the record.

Mr. Minister, please introduce your staff as required.

Mr. Smith: Mark Smith, Drayton Valley-Devon.

Mr. Orr: Ron Orr, Lacombe-Ponoka.

Mrs. Pitt: Angela Pitt, Airdrie.

Mr. Cyr: Scott Cyr, MLA, Bonnyville-Cold Lake.

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

Ms Jansen: Sandra Jansen, Calgary-North West.

Mr. Eggen: David Eggen, Edmonton-Calder, and Minister of Education. I have quite a number of staff here: Brad Smith, Lorna Rosen, Michael Walter, Jeremy Nolais. I don't have a list of everybody, so as time moves on, I will give you a more comprehensive list of the staff I have here.

Thank you.

Ms Drever: Deborah Drever, Calgary-Bow.

Ms McPherson: Good afternoon. Karen McPherson, Calgary-Mackay-Nose Hill.

Mr. Shepherd: David Shepherd, Edmonton-Centre.

Mr. Westhead: Cameron Westhead, Banff-Cochrane.

Ms Luff: Robyn Luff, Calgary-East.

Ms Payne: Good afternoon. Brandy Payne, Calgary-Acadia.

Mr. Hinkley: Bruce Hinkley, Wetaskiwin-Camrose.

Mrs. Littlewood: Jessica Littlewood, MLA, Fort Saskatchewan-Vegreville.

The Chair: Thank you.

Please note that the microphones are operated by *Hansard*, and we'd ask that BlackBerrys, iPhones, et cetera, be turned off or set to silent or vibrate and not placed on the table as they will interfere with the audiofeed.

Before we proceed further, I have a few issues to address. First of all, I would like to remind everyone that although our meetings regarding the main estimates are structured differently from other committee meetings, the same consideration for decorum as far as matters of dress code, directing the flow of debate through the chair, and so forth, should be respected. If you have any questions about this, please consult the October 29, 2015, memo from the Speaker to all members of the Assembly.

Finally, I would like to address the matter of taking a brief recess near the midpoint of these main estimates meetings. As this matter

has been raised twice already, I have researched the matter myself and consulted with others on how to proceed. The practice used in the past has been for a break to be called while the meeting clock continues to run and that the break happens with the consensus of the committee. However, this year's members have expressed concern about the established practice, and there has been some variation in practice among the legislative policy committees. As you know, the start times and end times of these meetings are specific in the standing orders, which leaves us with two options. Option 1 is to meet as scheduled for three hours with no recess. The second option would be to have a brief recess near the midpoint of the meeting, with the consensus of the committee, but the meeting clock will continue to run. Is there any discussion on this issue?

If everybody would be comfortable with taking a break with the clock still running, we can do that. Any objections?

Mr. Smith: How long would the break be?

The Chair: Five minutes.

No objections? Thank you, everyone. We will proceed accordingly.

Speaking order and time. Hon. members, the standing orders set out the process for consideration of the main estimates. Before we proceed with consideration of the main estimates for the Ministry of Education, I would like to review briefly the standing orders governing the speaking rotation. As provided for in SO 59.01(6), the rotation is as follows. The minister or the member of Executive Council acting on the minister's behalf may make opening comments not to exceed 10 minutes. For the hour that follows, members of the Wildrose Official Opposition and the minister may speak. For the next 20 minutes the members of the third party, Progressive Conservative, if any, and the minister may speak. For the next 20 minutes the members of any other party represented in the Assembly or any independent members and the minister may speak. For the next 20 minutes private members of the government caucus, New Democrats, and the minister may speak. For the time remaining we will follow the same rotation just outlined to the extent possible; however, the speaking times are reduced to five minutes as set out in Standing Order 59.02(1)(c).

Members may speak more than once; however, speaking times for the first rotation are limited to 10 minutes at any one time. A minister and a member may combine their time for a total of 20 minutes. For the final rotation, with speaking times of five minutes, once again a minister and a member may combine their speaking time for a maximum total of 10 minutes. The speaking rotation is set out in the standing orders, and members wishing to participate must be present during the appropriate portion of the meeting. Members are asked to advise the chair at the beginning of their speech if they wish to combine their time with the minister's time.

If members have any questions regarding speaking times or the rotation, please feel free to send a note or speak directly with either the chair or committee clerk about the process.

Three hours have been scheduled to consider the estimates of the Ministry of Education.

Committee members, ministers, and other members who are not committee members may participate. Ministry officials may be present, and at the direction of the minister officials from the ministry may address the committee. Members' staff may be present and, space permitting, may sit at the table or behind their members along the committee room wall. Members have priority for seating at the table at all times.

If debate is exhausted prior to three hours, the ministry's estimates are deemed to have been considered for the time allotted in the schedule and we will adjourn. Otherwise, we will adjourn at 6:30 p.m. or shortly thereafter.

Points of order will be dealt with as they arise, and the clock will continue to run.

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

The vote on the estimates is deferred until consideration of all ministry estimates has concluded and will occur in Committee of Supply on November 23, 2015.

If there are amendments, an amendment to the estimates cannot seek to increase the amount of the estimates being considered, change the destination of a grant, or change the destination or purpose of a subsidy. An amendment may be proposed to reduce an estimate, but the amendment cannot propose to reduce the estimate by its full amount. The vote on amendments is deferred until Committee of Supply convenes on November 23, 2015. Amendments must be in writing and approved by Parliamentary Counsel prior to the meeting at which they are moved. Twenty copies of amendments must be provided at the meeting for committee members and staff, and the original must be provided to the committee clerk.

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

Mr. Eggen: Thank you, Chair, and thank you for being here today, everyone. It's a pleasure to be here to discuss the Education 2015 budget and main estimates. Joining me here this afternoon are members of my executive team, strategic services staff, and staff within my ministerial office as well. I do have a list here now, including Mr. Dean Lindquist, assistant deputy minister; Ms Pam Witte, acting executive director of student learning services operations; Mr. George Lee, director, budget and fiscal analysis branch; Ms Tamara Magnan, who's our director of communications for Education; Ms Laura Cameron, executive director for capital planning; as well as my chief of staff, Lisa Blanchette; Amy Nugent; and Jeremy Nolais.

I hope that Budget 2015 sends a clear message to those of you here in this room and to Albertans as a whole that we are not sacrificing public services like education even in tough economic times. We're keeping teachers in classrooms. We keep supporting our English language learners, students with special needs, and our First Nations, Métis, and Inuit students. Almost immediately after taking office, we announced that we would fund growth for every student, and we know that they're coming to our schools by the thousands. Last week's budget confirmed this direction towards providing stable and predictable funding this year and in those to come.

Education's consolidated operation expense is budgeted at \$7.6 billion for the 2015-16 fiscal year. In addition, Education's capital commitments equal \$1.3 billion, for a consolidated total of \$8.9 billion. In all, 98 per cent of all operating budget flows to our school authorities, who deliver education services to our students. For ease of comparison please note that the remaining figures that I will be presenting here today are nonconsolidated.

Through Budget 2015 \$6.6 billion will then go to school boards to support their operations. This support includes funding to honour the final year of the four-year teacher agreement with the Alberta Teachers' Association; two, to fund enrolment growth; and three, funding to provide various grants.

Now, I would like to provide some additional details on these various supports. After parents, teachers are the single most important contributor to student success. As such, we will be funding a 2 per cent increase in the average teacher compensation costs – that's \$84 million over the school year – to complete the final year of the framework agreement with teachers. Funding for

the 1 per cent lump payment to teachers in December 2015, \$40 million, is also provided.

3:40

Inclusive education. As I mentioned, our government has also reversed previously proposed cuts to various education grants. I will spend a few minutes outlining funding for several of these key grants. First, I want to state that we need to keep working with teachers and parents to get it right on supporting students with special needs. We need to ensure that school boards have the flexibility to support the unique needs of every school, classroom, and student. This is why Budget 2015 provides \$419 million for inclusive education.

Small class size initiative. Speaking of classrooms, we also honoured the commitment to the small class size initiative with an investment of \$277 million this year. We know that class sizes, good teachers, and happy and healthy communities are all key factors to an excellent education. We also know that funding provided this year will help to stabilize our classrooms this year and build on improving learning conditions inside our classrooms in the subsequent years ahead.

Student transportation. We also need to get our students to those schools, and they need to be safe when they are being transported, whether they're catching a bus on a busy metropolitan street or on a rural road in the countryside. We know that approximately 300,000 kindergarten to grade 12 students ride the bus to school province-wide. It's a huge undertaking, and boards need to be supported. Through Budget 2015 student transportation funding reaches \$291 million in 2015-16.

Maintenance of schools. We also need to maintain the schools that the students are travelling to. This year we will invest \$483 million for the plant operations and maintenance grant to support the day-to-day upkeep of school facilities as well as \$180 million to infrastructure maintenance and renewal. The funding of the latter category represents a 50 per cent increase over that that was allotted last year.

Capital. We also need to continue building new schools and performing major modernizations on existing facilities as our student population grows. As you know, we had to make difficult announcements a few weeks back to suggest that more than half the projects that we have will be delayed. I have called the Auditor General to investigate and provide recommendations for best practices moving forward, and certainly our ministry is working on mechanisms to monitor the progress of our schools. I went to cabinet earlier this fall to secure an additional \$350 million to keep school projects moving. Our commitment to getting schools built can be seen in this budget with a \$1.3 billion investment into school capital.

Our capital investment is not only directed to the construction of new schools and the modernization of existing schools as \$50 million will go to supporting the annual modular classroom program and the completion of other expansion and renewal projects. Another \$62 million will be to support the final costs on completed projects, the fallout from the 2013 Alberta flood, and maintenance of some P3 school projects that are still around. In total, capital investment will be approximately \$4.7 billion over the next five fiscal years.

First Nations. We will be moving ahead on the construction of two schools in Peerless Trout First Nation in line with a long-standing commitment to education for students living on reserves. We are investing \$9.3 million operationally to support development of education standards, curriculum, and other learning standards for First Nations students. These initiatives are a priority as we work to meet the objectives of the United Nations declaration on the rights

of indigenous peoples under the direction of our Premier. I should highlight, too, that the funding for this effort came from Education's existing budget. Just to be clear, as well, this funding is intended to enhance, not replace, federal education funding. I'm sure the federal government is listening right now to get that message.

Government commitments. I'd like to take a moment to briefly touch on education commitments made during the election and to reiterate that this government remains committed to all elements of our education platform. Given the current economic climate, it's important to prioritize, but we have laid the groundwork, for example, to reduce school fees. We are also collecting data on the fees charged by school boards and then looking for a fair and responsible way to reduce those costs. We know these fees are a burden to Alberta families.

We also know that a healthy student is a happy student, and that's why we have committed to a targeted school nutrition campaign, as I was speaking about in question period today. I believe that we can work hand in hand with many currently successful breakfast and lunch programs that are active in Alberta schools. As such, we have begun surveying school boards on what programs are existing, and we have also engaged our peers in the Health and Human Services ministries in hopes of taking a collaborative approach to improving student nutrition.

In closing, the work that I have outlined here today just barely cracks the surface of all that's going on in our K to 12 Education ministry. I am very proud of the commitment our government has made when it comes to students, teachers, and schools, and I'm very proud of all the work that our ministry has been doing now and throughout the years as well. I look forward to our conversation this afternoon, and I'd be pleased at this time to take your questions. I do ask that if you are making a specific reference to a page of our budget, if you can give us the page number, that will make everything move along a lot faster. I'm happy to take any questions that people might have. If not, then we're done.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister. That's probably the first time I haven't had to cut you off.

Mr. Eggen: Oh, yeah.

The Chair: We will now move over to our 60-minute rotation with the Official Opposition. Mr. Smith, I believe you're starting.

Mr. Smith: Thank you very much.

The Chair: Would you like to take the full 10 minutes, or would you like to share with the minister?

Mr. Smith: I think that we've talked a little bit about just sharing and going back and forth and having a conversation.

Mr. Eggen: Yeah. Whatever works for Mark.

The Chair: Please go ahead.

Mr. Smith: I'd just like to introduce Maureen Gough to everybody here. If she's hitting me on the back of the head for forgetting something or passing me a note or whatever, you'll know what she's doing and who she is, okay?

Mr. Eggen: For sure.

Mr. Smith: Thank you, Madam Chair, for letting us have this conversation, and yes, David, we are going to have the conversation, okay? I'd like to start the process off by just saying

that I agree with you that this is an important day, and it's an important part of this budgetary process. You know, I believe the Education budget is the second-largest item in government business, so it's got to be an important time. You know, when we think of the impact that this budget is going to have on Albertans and on the lives of students, it's a very important time to come together. We need to look at the budget's size and the scope of the deficit that could be coming in three or four years, and it's important to have that conversation today.

Being a rookie MLA, you may have to try to help me understand this budget and the allocations of the money that is being spread out. You mentioned that you just barely touched the surface, and as I've been going through this as shadow minister, you're absolutely right. This portfolio is just so large and so complex. I think that's one of the reasons why I'm looking forward to this afternoon. As we've been going through the budget estimates, we can see that so much of what they do in Education isn't necessarily reflected in a budget line or at least it's hard to find out where it's reflected in that budget line. So we need to have some of that conversation.

As we look at how we're going to spend this money, we need to make sure that we're spending it wisely, that we know that with whatever monies we're spending – and we're spending and we're spending and we're spending – at some point in time that money is probably going to have to be paid back with interest, and it may not be available for future students and teachers and educational assistants if we don't do the job wisely here today. So thank you for this time.

We know that we face some issues in education, whether it's increased student population and the capital projects that you've already mentioned. I think we're also going to need to talk a little bit about the funding that we are having for the massive philosophical overhaul that we're facing in education this year and in the years to come and whether that money is being spent wisely on the multiple initiatives that are coming through Inspiring Education.

Lastly, I just want to mention that I'm very glad that you're sitting in your seat today and I'm sitting in mine. It's probably a whole lot easier to ask the questions than it is to be able to answer them when it's your first time through as an MLA. So I bow to your experience as a parliamentarian, and I'm looking forward to the time we're going to spend together today. Okay?

3:50

Mr. Eggen: Thanks. Great. You betcha.

Mr. Smith: Okay. I've got some questions that I just wanted to start with, sort of what I've called overview questions here. On page 87 of the 2015-2016 government estimates we see a summary of the costs. If we added up all those three categories – expenses, capital, and financial transactions – we get a grand total that's somewhere close to \$5.5 billion, a little more. But what I find unclear is that – again, you're going to have to help me out here a little bit – on the front page of the budget I read that you're spending \$5.5 billion, and then you referred to page 92 in the budget and to the amount of \$7.6 billion. Just so that we're clear here, may I ask you to clarify the difference between the two numbers? Which one did you want me to use? Like, should we be using the consolidated number of \$7.6 billion when we discuss the Education budget, or is it the \$5.5 billion?

Mr. Eggen: Thanks, Mark. You can use, I would suggest, the nonconsolidated numbers from page 87. I think that is the best place to go. If you include the consolidated numbers, that includes the monies that are coming from school boards as well – they have

some money that they generate – and then plus the tax that is included, the property tax that is paid. So when we do these public supply estimates, it's perhaps most relevant, of course, that we are talking about what we're going to be voting on for the budget in the next few weeks.

Mr. Smith: So that would be the \$5.5 billion?

Mr. Eggen: Right.

Mr. Smith: Okay. Thank you.

At the Alberta Urban Municipalities Association bear-pit session in September Finance Minister Ceci said that the ministries of Health, Education, Advanced Education, and Human Services had been given spending targets of no more than about 2 per cent growth. I think you referred to that earlier in your comments. As the province faces a major revenue hole because of low oil prices, I guess the question I've got is this. While the overall spending of your ministry increased, I think, when we did the numbers, about 1.5 per cent, I was surprised to see that the spending in your own office, line 1.1 of the budget, increased about . . .

Mr. Eggen: What page is that, Mark?

Mr. Smith: That would be page 88, line 1.1.

Mr. Eggen: Oh, yeah. Okay. Thank you.

Mr. Smith: We see that your minister's office has an increase of about 17.7 per cent. When almost every other operational budget line in here seems to be relatively stable, why did your office expenses increase so much?

Mr. Eggen: Thank you. Yeah. That's a good question. I think that on one level, certainly, we know that we had a rearrangement. We've of course changed the government, so our arrangement and organization for our political staff and so forth is different from the previous organization. We included our issues manager, who looks at emerging issues in Education and in Culture and Tourism as well, by the way, and added that FTE into our minister's office.

But I'm always quick to point out that, of course, we're running out of this office two ministries. Two individuals in my ministry are taking responsibility for two ministries, so what we will see very quickly, probably in the next few months, is a realization of savings because, of course, we're all doing the work of two ministries, including the minister himself, who is in fact doing the work of two ministries and just getting paid for one, which I'm okay with, you know. I'm okay with it.

Mr. Smith: Well, I'm not sure. I think I was at that budget estimate, and I believe that you had an increase in the Culture and Tourism budget for the minister's office as well.

Mr. Eggen: Yeah. They put the funding into both of them, and then we realize the savings over the course of the fiscal year. The ministries both built the budgets full on, and then we will see the savings probably in the next few months, when we refile the next budget, which, of course, is coming up as well. It is important, I think, as well to point out that our total program funding budget is flat, and we have seen a reduction from actuals in this budget as well, in that decrease of \$947 million. Obviously, we've been watching the numbers very carefully because we have to. You know, it's a difficult economic circumstance, so I stand behind our ministry budget. It's quite economical, and we will see even more savings in the coming months.

Mr. Smith: Okay. You say that you're going to see savings, and I guess we'll have to wait to see that.

Mr. Eggen: Yeah. That's right.

Mr. Smith: I guess the question that I always wonder – and it's something that was always hammered into me when I was in the classroom and in the schools – is: how does what you're doing actually translate into better services or help the students in the classroom? That's about as far away from the classroom, I think, in our budgetary process as you're going to get, that being the minister's office, so I guess I would just encourage you to consider that when you are spending that money, there are kids in the classroom that could probably use that money, too.

Mr. Eggen: Yes. We're watching it very closely. Of course, each choice and each bit of work that we do in that office disseminates down to classrooms quite quickly. You know, the interaction I have with classrooms, both individually and collectively, and each of the 61 school boards that I have met with give, I'd say, a considerable direct effect to the classroom, I believe.

You know, I'd just say that while we did fund for enrolment across the province – and enrolment is going up still in the province – we have made a \$15 million reduction in our department overall, which is quite considerable. That wasn't easy to do, but it was in the spirit of savings.

Mr. Smith: Well, I'm sure that both you and I can hearken back to the days when we were in the classroom and when the kids were maybe less than co-operative and we were wondering if the Ministry of Education spent the money well there or whether it should have been spent in the classroom.

But what I would like to do – and I'm not sure if I'm doing it correctly, Madam Chair – is table an amendment. Here's the original, and there are 20 copies there.

The Chair: Okay. Mr. Smith, if you could just read your amendment into the record for me, please.

Mr. Smith: Do you want me to wait until everybody gets a copy, or do you want me to start right away?

The Chair: You can start.

Mr. Smith: Okay.

The Chair: Yeah. Thank you.

Mr. Smith: Notice of amendment, 2015-16 main estimates, Ministry of Education. I move that

the 2015-16 main estimates of the Ministry of Education be reduced for the minister's office under reference 1.1 at page 88 by \$141,000 so that the amount to be voted at page 87 for expense is \$4,314,684,000.

Dated November 3, 2015, and signed by Mark Smith.

The Chair: Thank you so much.

We can continue now on to the next piece.

Mr. Smith: Okay. Thank you.

In the budget Minister Ceci announced a deficit of \$6.1 billion by the end of 2015-16 for an accumulated debt of around \$50 billion by 2019-2020. I know that you've been meeting with all of the school boards about a new negotiating model. Can you explain what you've been hearing from these major stakeholders and where your thinking is at with regard to a new negotiating model and how that will impact the budget?

Mr. Eggen: Yes. Thank you, Mark, for that question. Of course, we know that the majority of our funding that goes to education goes to the workers, that directly provide teaching and support staff and so forth, so it's very important for us to make sure, moving forward on collective bargaining, that we have a very clear way by which we can realize savings and to make sure that our budget is in keeping with the tough economic times that we are in right now. Right now, in 2015, we have the last year of the collective agreement that we've covered, which is a 2 per cent increase, and then the lump sum payment at the end of this month for the end of that last contract. We're in conversations with the Alberta School Boards Association as well, not just the individual boards, and also the ATA to try to figure out a balanced approach, and we're looking for some new relationship that, you know, hopefully can be leading to effective negotiation.

I certainly don't want to predetermine the outcome of those, but certainly we've been looking very closely to make sure that we are accounting and are very careful with every penny we have in both this ministry and in the public service in general.

4:00

Mr. Smith: Do you anticipate a model, say, something like Saskatchewan's, where there's bargaining for teachers' wages provincially with the government and then having a bargaining process for local issues with the school boards and the local ATA?

Mr. Eggen: Yeah. I mean, we've been looking at a number of different models. Along with myself going to each of the 61 boards, I also had a specialized team, that was gathering information from each of the boards, too, and from the ATA as well, and it's been very positive. People are all looking for ways by which we can save money and maintain the integrity of our education system across the province. I'm not going to presuppose what the outcome is going to be here, but I think that people are looking for ways by which we can bargain from a position of strength so that we're not caught with contracts that we can't afford, basically.

Mr. Smith: I understand that there's a balance there, and you've got to maintain a position of strength when you're bargaining. But I also realize that you're going to have to make some educated guesses as to the range of salaries that you can at least afford, from your perspective. I guess the question I've got is: what range of increases, if any, are you comfortable with or are you forecasting that you think you could afford within your budget? I realize that this is a negotiated process, but what do you think you can afford in the next two or three years?

Mr. Eggen: I mean, this is something that we all have to think about, right? We know that, considering the economy and the tough economic times right now, we have to be very, very careful to not let this get away from us, right? This budget, as it happens, you know, we're funding for enrolment growth, but it's also funding the end of the previous contract, that will be finished . . .

Mr. Smith: And that was at 2 per cent.

Mr. Eggen: Right. From there, for next year with that budget – I mean, I can't presuppose the numbers – I'm looking for something very, very careful and prudent and tight.

Mr. Smith: And tight. Something between zero and zero and zero?

Mr. Eggen: Yeah. Well, you know, the first rule of a negotiation is to ensure that you are showing – I mean, of course, everyone will be listening to what we're doing here today. You know, it's going

to be a tough negotiation that will reflect the economic realities of this province at this point.

Mr. Smith: Okay. Well, I understand that.

Mr. Eggen: And fair, of course, right? I mean, fair is fair, right? We're talking about . . .

Mr. Smith: As a teacher I understand the need to be fair.

Let me paint a picture – and I think it's an accurate one – of what the Minister of Education will be facing in 2020. The minister could still be financially pressed by a low price for oil. Alberta could have lost its triple-A credit rating, making borrowing more expensive, so that you've got \$1.5 billion to \$2 billion in interest payments a year. You'll have a \$50 billion debt, and the minister is going to be forced to look for efficiencies in Education in order to start balancing the government budget, that you've promised to balance by 2020. If Education is the second-largest budget, you must have given this some thought. Where is the minister going to find the efficiencies in Education to help balance the budget in 2020?

Mr. Eggen: Well, thanks for that, Mark. It's very important. None of us can, you know, guess what the future is going to be exactly, but you've got to be prudent. Starting even with this budget here, you can judge us on our actions. We made a significant reduction in the department, and we moved \$15 million down from there. As well, school board administration reduction is ongoing, which equates to \$30 million in savings for the government so far.

I think that we also know that the priority of Albertans is to make sure that we might make sacrifices in other areas to ensure quality education for all of our students from K to 12. That, I don't think, is negotiable. We can look for other ways by which we can do that from other places, but I know that the vast majority of Albertans want to ensure that we make the investment in our students and in our children. I know that you share that sentiment, too.

Mr. Smith: Well, we all understand that there are things that we have to do in Education, but I guess my fear – and we'll leave it at that – is that you're going to paint Education into a corner where regardless of the fact that you want to provide the services, you won't be able to afford to provide the services.

Having said that, now I need your help a little bit, Minister Eggen. Am I right in assuming that the budget line education property tax, found on page 97 – I'll give you a chance to find page 97. This is just for clarification for me. On page 97 there's the budget line there, education property tax.

Mr. Eggen: Yes. Gotcha.

Mr. Smith: Okay. That totals about \$2.3 billion. Correct?

Mr. Eggen: Yeah.

Mr. Smith: Okay. The \$2.3 billion: is that the same revenue stream generated by setting – does that come from the mill rate?

Mr. Eggen: Yes, sir. That's right.

Mr. Smith: How do you decide what percentage of the revenue generated by the municipal mill rate will go to Education, and what percentage is going to Education? Is that set by you?

Mr. Eggen: No. I mean, first of all, it's about 30 per cent or 33 per cent of our budget in total. Municipal Affairs sets that rate.

Mr. Smith: Am I right in understanding, then, that the percentage of the mill rate that goes to Education you just call the education property tax?

Mr. Eggen: Yes, that's correct.

Mr. Smith: Okay. It's just for clarification for me.

Mr. Eggen: Those are the shortest answers I've given to date.

Mr. Smith: Yes, they are. Actually, they were appreciated.

Okay. I'm going to be jumping all over the place here a little bit, so you'll just have to bear with me. Sometimes I'm ADD, and I just boom, boom, boom, boom, boom. I'm looking at budget line 2.5, class sizes.

Mr. Eggen: Yeah. No problem. Which page is that, Mark?

Mr. Smith: Page 88. The budget shows this amount increasing from 2014-15, the actual being \$268.077 million, to the estimate of \$277.46 million. That is an increase of about 3.35 per cent. Now, the annual report on page 14 states that \$2.2 billion has been invested in this initiative, the class size initiative, since its inception in 2004-2005. Now, on page 71 of the funding manual we read, "School jurisdictions have the flexibility to use this funding" – that is, the class size initiative funding – "to hire or retain teachers at any grade level based on local needs." The question that I have is this. How do you know that the funds from this budget line are actually used for small class sizes if they can put it into any grade level based on local needs?

Mr. Eggen: Well, the local boards, Mark, you know, determine their own class size levels. I think it's important to have some degree of flexibility. From your own experience in your constituency and in Drayton Valley – some of these smaller places need to have some flexibility in that regard because, of course, of the vagaries of what happens to a smaller school. I mean, class size is one factor that affects student outcomes for success, too, but we know that . . .

Mr. Smith: We don't talk about that.

Mr. Eggen: Yeah. I mean, we see school boards making these choices. Certainly, the overriding guidance that I give them is that they have to use the money for teachers, right? Really, there's not much in the way of that being . . .

Mr. Smith: Is it possible, then, for those funds to go into general operating revenue and be used completely at the discretion of the local school board?

Mr. Eggen: It's targeted for teachers. Like I say, that pretty much limits it. You know, we expect that our elected officials will make those decisions that will move it to the classrooms as much as possible. I mean, the small class size initiative funding is specifically for teachers, so that's pretty much where they have to go.

Mr. Smith: What measures are you taking to ensure that these funds are actually being used to do that? I mean, it's one thing to say: I expect them to be used for that. It's another thing to actually take measures to ensure it.

Mr. Eggen: Right. Of course. That's a good point, Mark. You know, I often use that as a measuring stick for all the laws that we

produce in the Legislature and so forth. We as the ministry enforce it through auditing and checking. Specifically on this one, we just don't presume; we also . . .

4:10

Mr. Smith: Do you have any evidence to show us that that money is actually being used for class size? You say you take statistics.

Mr. Eggen: Sure. I can get you that.

Mr. Smith: If you can just get it to me.

Mr. Eggen: Yeah. We'll get it for you. You betcha. Any sort of thing over the next three hours that we look for specifically that needs some further documentation we'll table in the Legislature.

Mr. Smith: If you have it on hand, you can give it to me. If you don't have it on hand, then that's fine.

Mr. Eggen: I'm not sure. I might; I might not.

Mr. Smith: You can send it to me. That's fine. Trust me. I understand. It's a big budget, and you're not going to have everything at hand.

We know from research conducted here in Alberta through the Alberta initiative for school improvement, the AISI project, that it's not sufficient to reduce class sizes. It's not sufficient enough just to reduce class sizes. It's what you do with those students once you've got the smaller class. The provincial metadata analysis suggested that having smaller classes allowed teachers to try new teaching and assessment strategies – okay? – and to individualize and to personalize their teaching with that smaller class. But it wasn't just the smaller class size; it was the teachers changing their teaching practices and their assessment practices. So instructional strategies are the focus and really need to be the focus of the effectiveness of this initiative.

Can you describe how the decreased class sizes funded by this budget line have actually led to increased student learning? Have you got a measurement? Have you got something that you can show us that will show that the smaller class sizes have actually resulted in increased student learning?

Mr. Eggen: That's an excellent question, Mark, for sure. You know, this budget has an additional \$44 million for this year growing to \$75 million. Then, like you said, with the increasing complexity of classrooms we need to make sure that we are improving the classroom circumstance and class size for all students. You know, we measure and are looking for ways by which to do so, and we certainly carry on through each of those things . . .

Mr. Smith: Well, you see, I just remember that as a teacher it's one thing to spend money on a program; it's another to make sure that it's efficiently used. When we're looking at a budget that could by 2020 be billions of dollars in debt, we need to make sure that every penny we're spending is actually having an effect. Can you use the performance measurements from the PAT and the diploma exam results or accountability pillar surveys to demonstrate this, how this funding has increased student learning? Is there any way that you can use those kinds of measures to show us that this money is being well spent?

Mr. Eggen: Well, I think, first and foremost, like I said before, we expect and monitor boards to ensure that they are using the class size funding investment to hire and to retain teachers. Further to that, I mean, school jurisdictions definitely can make those choices to ensure that they get the best impact from that investment in the

small class size initiative. We encourage focus on kindergarten to grade 3, where we get the biggest return from those students in the early years of learning. Certainly, there's a range of ways by which we can assess the success of that. Of course, you have a formula where you have an increasing complexity of classes, with students with different needs, then, of course, the results that we get from, like you say, PATs or SLAs and diploma exams, too. So, yeah, we can take that in its totality.

Mr. Smith: I know that was a tough question.

Mr. Eggen: Yeah, it is, but it's a good one, a very good one.

Mr. Smith: I guess what I would encourage you to do is maybe, if you could, again, go back, take a look at the performance measures that you have at your fingertips, and see if you could bring those back to us so that we could actually start to see as Albertans and have confidence that the money you're spending is actually being used wisely.

Mr. Eggen: Sure. I think, you know, that it's to a good point. When we look at our provincial achievement results, which we just received last month, we can see trends over time, right? But the first thing that we always have to remember is that we are based on the whole idea that we provide that strong, high-quality education to everybody, and then we make adjustments over time to see where that public money can be spent the best. We know that, for example, when we look at PATs from different grade levels, there's been at least a three-year dip in grade 6 mathematics scores, right? So we know that on a targeted basis we have to apply some practical adjustments to that, which could include money as well.

Mr. Smith: I guess what I'm looking at is saying: okay; we've seen that dip, but based on the small class size initiative, is that a result? I mean, to see a dip in the marks from a class size initiative would be very discouraging. Or is that a result of something else that's in education? It's a very complex thing, and we understand that. If you could give us some information that would guide us, that would be helpful.

Mr. Eggen: That's a very fair question.

Mr. Smith: I'd like to go on to this question. As I've said, I empathize with anybody that's got to try to deal with this huge portfolio. It's very difficult to tell if this funding for class sizes is available to independent schools. On pages 14 and 15 of the funding manual we read in the allocation criteria that "tiers 2 and 3 CEUs include class size funding and, therefore, only apply to school jurisdictions and not to accredited funded private schools." I guess the question I've got is: does that mean that this funding allocation for small class sizes is not available to independent schools?

Mr. Eggen: Yes, sir. You're correct on that.

Mr. Smith: Okay. Can you explain why? I mean, if it's important for kids within the public school system and within the separate school system, why wouldn't it also be important for students in the independent school system?

Mr. Eggen: Well, I guess there are a number of factors at play there, Mark, the first of which being, of course, that there are different categories of private schools that serve different functions. I mean, you have private schools that provide quite targeted special needs, and then you have private schools for maybe specialty programs or for religious types of schools. Then you have other ones that have expensive tuition and so forth, and they're sort of

their own category. Part of it is that private schools raise revenue from other sources, so while we give a certain level of funding to them, we also have to recognize that private schools do choose which students they accept and so forth. Usually a lot of private school models are built around the idea that people are making choices and paying extra tuition or raising money from other sources in order to create smaller class sizes.

Mr. Smith: Okay. Thank you. I think I'm catching the drift here: because they're privately funded.

I'm going to look at line 2.4 in the budget estimates, transportation.

Mr. Eggen: Which page is that, Mark?

Mr. Smith: That would be on page 88. You've met with all the school boards, and you must have heard the same things that I did when I was meeting with many of them, that there are concerns around transportation. You talked about it in your introductory comments. You know, for rural school boards I've heard that sometimes the decision comes down to either keeping a school open for a small number of kids or closing it and busing the students to a larger centre. Either decision comes at a cost to the families and to this department. For these school boards I've heard that they would like to see a reinstatement of the fuel subsidy, which would provide a very important support for their transportation. Does the \$4.2 million increase in the transportation budget that you've got there include a reinstatement of the fuel subsidy at all?

Mr. Eggen: No, but it does reflect the increase in enrolment. We have built it based on that. As you heard from your visits – and I did, too – the fuel subsidy was something that people were looking for as well. I certainly entertain that discussion, but this increase is just based on enrolment growth right now.

Mr. Smith: Okay. Now I'm going to have to take a look at the budget here. Small school initiatives: where are they in here? If you didn't increase the fuel subsidy for transportation, did you increase the equity of opportunity funding?

Mr. Eggen: Yes, we did. And we did increase the transportation as well to meet enrolment.

Mr. Smith: How much was your increase in the equity of opportunity?

Mr. Eggen: The equity of opportunity was an increase based on enrolment as well, and that is a 1.5 per cent increase.

4:20

Mr. Smith: Really, the reality is that neither of those increases is really going to either deal with keeping schools in rural areas open or with the transportation problems that they've got. You've just dealt with the enrolment issue.

Mr. Eggen: Yes. That's right. I mean, you know, it does move in the right direction. What I found quite astounding is that in many school boards that I met with, that otherwise had downward trends in their enrolment over the last five years, they were holding steady or even had some modest increases over this year. We're seeing that increase there, which is good for the viability of smaller schools and smaller school boards as well. I'm not trying to suggest that there isn't an issue around transportation.

Mr. Smith: It's a concern, yeah.

Mr. Eggen: I mean, I heard it loud and clear. You know, we're in an interesting circumstance here where we can make modifications for our budget, not just waiting a whole 365 days. We have another one coming up in March.

Mr. Smith: I would highly encourage you to, because of the two, you know, you've got to deal with it one way or the other.

Mr. Eggen: Yes.

Mr. Smith: Okay. Co-operative transportation funding – that's on page 41 of the funding manual – has provided a great incentive for school boards to fill up buses with students from other jurisdictions. However, in 2007 this funding option was disallowed for independent schools. Before we get into that, how many school districts had been taking advantage of this funding, the co-operative transportation funding?

Mr. Eggen: It's quite popular. I was really heartened to see how fast and how deep the co-operation between separate and public school boards is for transportation across the province. Currently 41 out of 61 boards are doing it, and I think a lot more are looking at moving on this as well. Of course, it started with the rural. Some of them run 7,000- or 10,000-kilometre routes.

Mr. Smith: It's just awful, yeah.

Mr. Eggen: You know, it's like running a Greyhound bus company every day. But I'm starting to see more suburban boards taking advantage of co-operation.

Mr. Smith: Well, I think an encouragement in that area with the last 20 or so would really look at some efficiencies in there, and I encourage you to do that.

Mr. Eggen: Yeah. I sent that message loud and clear when I was visiting all the boards.

You know, further to that, I'm looking for good examples of other forms of co-operation between the boards in regard to even physical structures and/or other programming efficiencies by sharing resources.

Mr. Smith: Okay. Well, before we go on to that issue, there's one more question I've got on transportation, and that is just this. In 2007 this funding option was disallowed for independent schools. They had it, and then it was taken away. The current funding manual is silent on provisions for independent schools. Will the minister clarify: is co-operative transportation funding available to independent school authorities?

Mr. Eggen: No.

Mr. Smith: Okay. Why is that? Is it back to the same thing, that they get money from other sources, so you expect them to cover it themselves?

Mr. Eggen: Yeah. I mean, it's that and, you know, sort of the stand-alone nature of a private school, I think, right? It's less of a school system but, rather, a single school.

Mr. Smith: Well, I don't know. I guess that from my perspective and, I think, probably from yours as a former teacher, if the students are standing on the side of the road and the bus is passing right by them, I'm not quite sure I understand why they can't be picked up and dropped off at the school. I'd like you to consider that.

Mr. Eggen: I mean, as it happens, you know, the private schools don't get funding for transportation at all.

Mr. Smith: Yeah. Okay. Well, let's go to that equity of opportunity, line 2.6. There are three categories of funding under equity of opportunity. There's the per-student funding, there's the density, and then there's the distance allocation. How is the full equity of opportunity funding divided between these three categories? Like, is it one-third, one-third, one-third, or does one category get more than the other?

Mr. Eggen: Okay. So 50 per cent for enrolment and then 50 per cent based on density – sorry; not density although we do provide some sense of density; perhaps I'm experiencing some density of my own here – distance factors, half and half there, Mark.

Mr. Smith: So it's at 25 per cent, then, for density and 25 per cent for distance?

Mr. Eggen: Yes, sir.

Mr. Smith: Okay. On page 34 of the funding manual we read that independent schools are not eligible for the density or the distance allocation, but I believe they are funded for the per-student allocation. Can the minister explain the rationale for providing funding to independent schools under the per-student allocation but not for the density or distance allocation?

Mr. Eggen: I guess, you know, it's again that comment I made about any given private school not being a system as such but an individual, stand-alone site. I think that's the differentiation there for that difference. Whether they're getting that per-student funding is sort of based on that overarching relationship that we have, Mark, with private schools, which is the 60 per cent or 70 per cent funding ratio.

Mr. Smith: I guess that just as a shadow minister of Education and a teacher I look at this for kids, and I'm wondering why kids can't just be funded as kids.

Mr. Eggen: Right. Right.

Mr. Smith: Anyhow, let's move on. I have 20 minutes? Thank you. Boy, I'd better get going here. I have got lots of questions for you.

Mr. Eggen: Super.

Mr. Smith: As I've been meeting with the provincial stakeholders across the province, I've heard that some receive funding from Alberta Education. I'm wondering: do the College of Alberta School Superintendents, the Alberta School Boards Association, the Alberta School Councils' Association, and the Public School Boards' Association all receive public funds?

Mr. Eggen: Yes, they do.

Mr. Smith: On which budget line would we see that? If we were looking at that, where would we go to find it?

Mr. Eggen: Okay. Can we just chase that down for you?

Mr. Smith: Sure. Absolutely. Yeah. Like I said, I'm trying to understand this budget. This is my first time through.

Mr. Eggen: Okay. That's great. It's page 88, line item 2.7. That captures their funding collectively but not individually, but we could break it down further for you if you'd like, to see where the ASBA and the CASS and so forth . . .

Mr. Smith: Sure. If you could get those figures, not right now but at some point in time, that would be fine.

Mr. Eggen: I'd be interested in seeing those, too.

Mr. Smith: Now, in addition to the funding that's at 2.7 from the provincial government, some of these organizations also receive income through membership dues, where individual school boards make the decision to set aside some of their money from administrative funds to go to a stakeholder, like, to pick one, say, the PSBAA. Is that how it works? Do I understand that correctly?

Mr. Eggen: Yeah, I think that's how it works.

Mr. Smith: So these stakeholders ultimately are funded using provincial money and taxpayers' money?

Mr. Eggen: Well, a lot of it's, really, taxpayer money, isn't it? Of course, if the board is paying their dues – I mean, they generate some of their own funds. I would suggest that line 2.7. on page 88 is a way by which it provides some foundational support for each of these individual groups, and then people buy memberships as part of the group as well. It's all in an operating subpiece, line 2.7, and then, you know, the dues that they pay.

Mr. Smith: Okay. I want to take this down a path here, then, really just to basically try to help the government a little bit, I think. The other day I received a motion that was passed by the PSBAA stating that the member school boards of the PSBAA have agreed to requisition funds from each member school board to create a litigation fund and to present a constitutional litigation challenge to the creation of a new separate school by the Catholic school district in Lac La Biche, Alberta.

Mr. Eggen: Thank you for that.

Mr. Smith: Had you heard of this? Did you know anything about this litigation fund?

Mr. Eggen: No.

Mr. Smith: Okay. I hadn't either until this came across my desk.

Mr. Eggen: Interesting, yeah. That is helpful, Mark. Thank you.

Mr. Smith: Now, I guess the question is this. Did any of the staff know?

4:30

Mr. Eggen: I certainly knew about the Lakeland Catholic developing, but I wasn't aware of this other.

Mr. Smith: You weren't aware of the motion that they passed from PSBAA?

Mr. Eggen: No, no.

Mr. Smith: Okay. Is this a proper use, do you think, of provincial funds by a major educational stakeholder?

Mr. Eggen: I'll check into it. It's very interesting. Thank you for pointing that out.

Mr. Smith: I think we need to go a little deeper here because, you know, these are taxpayers' dollars, and they are coming out of this budget and coming out of budgets from before, from previous years. Should taxpayers' dollars be used to challenge the constitutional rights of Albertan families and students to an

educational option funded by the government of Alberta? Is that a proper use of educational funds?

Mr. Eggen: Certainly, I'll look into it. I mean, these are, after all, democratically elected school boards, so that's kind of . . .

Mr. Smith: No. They're not democratically elected school boards. Well, the PSBAA is not a democratically elected school board.

Mr. Eggen: Yeah, they are. So, you know, that's part of it. They make these decisions based on their positions as trustees on the boards and so forth, I mean, so that's one thing. But thank you for pointing out that other element that I wasn't aware of. I'll certainly check into it.

Mr. Smith: Well, I'm going to take one more shot at this because I think that it's absolutely critical. This government holds the power of the purse. You make the budget, and you to a large degree decide the winners or losers in Education funding. You know, for instance, we have already determined today that you do not fund independent schools the same way that you fund public or separate schools.

Mr. Eggen: That's right.

Mr. Smith: And you have stated that when you're reviewing the Education Act, for instance, you're going to review it to make sure that it adheres to NDP values. So I guess my question is: would NDP values support the use of public taxpayer dollars being used to fund a court challenge that may deny the right of Albertans to educational choice?

Mr. Eggen: I certainly will check into that. I mean, it's news to me. You know, I find it a little bit out of the ordinary. Let's put it that way. So I will certainly check it out and see where we're at. Appreciate that.

The Chair: Member, I just want to remind you that we need to stay focused on budgets and estimates.

Mr. Smith: This is budgets.

The Chair: Specific to the document that actually has estimate lines, please.

Mr. Smith: I'm sorry, Madam Chair, but we've already said that 2.7, education system support, is the budget line that we're talking about.

The Chair: Okay.

Mr. Eggen: Fair enough. That's good analysis.

Mr. Smith: Thank you very much. Well, like I said, I wanted to bring that out. I believe you will look into it, and I believe we will have a fulsome discussion about this. I know that we all around this table want to make sure that all the kids and all the students in this province have access to educational choice. Okay. Thank you.

Let's move on, then. Let's go to my favourite topic, Inspiring Education, and see if we can talk about that for a little bit.

Mr. Eggen: Sure.

Mr. Smith: Okay. In the meetings that I've had with stakeholders across the province since being elected in May, I've heard about very serious disconnects between the philosophy and the application of Inspiring Education in the classroom. Now, there seems to be a dislocation between the department and the school boards, between

the school boards and the schools. This is an incredibly massive thing that we're doing in Alberta, probably the largest change in philosophy and direction that this system of education has ever gone through in the history of this province. It's massive in its scope. Honestly, I think that, quite naturally, there are some positive things in it, but there is also a great deal of confusion around: what do the three Es mean? What are they supposed to look like? How do we apply this? Yet when I look at the budget, nowhere do we see any of the eight initiatives of Inspiring Education with a budget line.

Now, it's a massive undertaking that we're taking, so I guess my first question that I've got for you is – I'm making the assumption that the funding for all of the initiatives and the pieces of Inspiring Education fall into a line item. Is that line item basic education programs, line 4, on page 88? If I'm going to try to look at these initiatives, where am I going to find them in the budget?

Mr. Eggen: Well, yeah. I mean, you make a very good point there, Mark. Certainly, you don't have an Inspiring Education line item here because, of course, since May we have changed the government and this initiative for the previous government is something that – you know, we look at some of the best practices that came from it, but it's not something that I'm carrying around in a bag in its totality by any means.

Mr. Smith: No. But we're spending a significant amount of money on these initiatives, and I'm assuming that they're coming out of the Education budget. Is that correct?

Mr. Eggen: Well, Inspiring Education in itself has no budget.

Mr. Smith: So where is the money that you're getting, then, for the initiatives? Like, we have a curriculum redesign initiative. Where is the money for the curriculum redesign initiative coming from?

Mr. Eggen: Oh, well, we certainly have a curriculum . . .

Mr. Smith: That's one of the eight initiatives of Inspiring Education.

Mr. Eggen: Yeah. I mean, we always produce curriculum as part of the – one of the strengths that I think the ministry has is how we've developed a curricular unit that uses teachers in the field and also uses long experience in the ministry. Certainly, we have a curriculum budget, and it's quite a good one, right?

Mr. Smith: Where is it found? What budget line is it?

Mr. Eggen: Budget line? We'll just find that for you. Line 4.1. There you go.

Mr. Smith: It is 4.1?

Mr. Eggen: It's 4.1. So it's \$61 million. There it is.

Mr. Smith: So that was the nature of my question. I mean, I know that these initiatives from Inspiring Education are getting money from somewhere. We just weren't sure where in the budget it was coming from. So if it's coming from 4.1 and if it switches to another budget line, would you please make me aware of what budget line it is.

Mr. Eggen: Just to be clear, Mark, I mean, that \$61 million is for curriculum development, which we will carry on, but it's not an Inspiring Education budget, right? That's an important differentiation.

Mr. Smith: Well, the curriculum . . .

Mr. Eggen: I mean, the Inspiring Ed, whatever the previous government was doing with that, they developed that over the last few years, you know, but we will carry on with the . . .

Mr. Smith: Okay. So it's a \$61 million budget for designing and redesigning curriculum. Is that what you just said?

Mr. Eggen: I mean, the actual element that goes to redesign is \$12 million.

Mr. Smith: It's \$12 million. Okay. Good. Thank you.

Of that \$12 million how much has the Alberta government spent on revisions because that curriculum redesign covers revising provincial curriculum, which includes program studies, assessments, learning and teaching resources. Can you break that down a little bit for us, too?

Mr. Eggen: Sure. I can probably do that for you. I won't be able to do it right this second, but I think these guys will . . .

Mr. Smith: You know what? Rather than getting lost in the numbers, could we just have you bring that to us? Just table that, and just bring it to us. I'd like to be able to see some of those numbers at some point in time.

Mr. Eggen: Sure. Yeah. I mean, there's a little . . .

Mr. Smith: I mean, there's no sense in fumbling around trying to find . . .

Mr. Eggen: No, no. I've got it here. I mean, the implementation of curriculum development and for information technology as well results in a total cost of \$16 million. The cost of curriculum development in its totality in English and French for programs of study is about \$12 million this year. We can break it out a little bit for you as well.

In curriculum also: the \$61 million, the larger number, includes math curriculum and the FNMI initiative that we are currently undertaking as well.

Mr. Smith: Okay. You've got this initiative called curriculum redesign. Is it on budget, and what's the timeline for it?

Mr. Eggen: Well, I think that the budget that we've put forward to it, you know, is an annualized number. It's a fairly consistent number over the last couple of years. As you follow through with your finger over the next couple of years, you can see it's fairly constant as well.

Mr. Smith: Well, if you could give us the numbers from the past and what you project going into the future, it would be helpful.

Mr. Eggen: Sure. Yeah. We could probably do that, you know, get a sense of the last couple of years.

4:40

Mr. Smith: Good. Thank you very much.

According to the Inspiring Education website partners participating in curriculum development prototyping represent over 30 school authorities across the province, including public, separate, private, charter, francophone authorities, First Nation schools as well as postsecondary, businesses, industry, First Nations, Métis, and it goes on. Yet only four school jurisdictions are actually listed as prototyping partners: Black Gold, Edmonton public, Edmonton Catholic, and Calgary board of education. How much funding was provided to the four school boards that

participated in the curriculum development prototyping project, and where is the funding found in the budget?

Mr. Eggen: It's the same line that we had.

Mr. Smith: Okay. It's the same line. But how much was provided for each of those four school boards? Again, if you want, you can just get back to me with those numbers.

Mr. Eggen: Yeah. Let me check on that for you.

Mr. Smith: Okay. Fine. If we're going to have to spend lots of time just looking them up, what we'll just do is – just make sure that you can get them to me. Okay?

Mr. Eggen: Yeah. Absolutely.

Mr. Smith: The last curriculum redesign update on the Alberta Education website was from June 2014. What's happened since then? Where is the curriculum redesign at in the implementation process?

Mr. Eggen: Well, I mean, the curriculum design is an ongoing process, so it doesn't stop, by any means, in 2014.

Mr. Smith: Well, I know that when we were looking at this, at one point in time there was this expectation that we were going to take the entire Alberta curriculum from 2014 to 2016 and redesign it to reflect the inquiry process and Inspiring Education. I guess that I'm asking if that process is still in place, if that's what you're planning on doing with curriculum?

Mr. Eggen: Well, no. We are working with the different prototypes for some changes in curriculum. Certainly, I look for best practices from any number of different sources, and as I said, with the change in government we're looking at, you know, a normal sort of process of curriculum development.

Mr. Smith: Well, you must have some idea of the timeline of when you're going to implement a change.

Mr. Eggen: Yeah. I mean, there are different ones. I know that the art program has come due for revision. You know, we're always working with mathematics and literacy and language arts and so forth. So it's an engagement process and a prototyping process that usually goes over a two- or three-year period, I guess.

Mr. Smith: If you could give me an idea, again, of the timeline on that and where it's going?

Mr. Eggen: Yeah. I mean, it's all part of a very normal sort of evolution of curriculum that I saw both as a teacher then and now as the minister. It's not like they're taking the whole thing and putting it up on blocks and, you know . . .

Mr. Smith: No. I realize that. I mean, I realize that you're not going to throw out the whole curriculum.

Mr. Eggen: No. Not at all.

Mr. Smith: But what you are doing, as I've said, is a philosophical change in the direction education is going, and I'd like to know how the curriculum rewriting is going in that direction.

Mr. Eggen: Yeah. I don't know. I mean, to characterize it as a philosophical change: I don't think so. I mean, as part of a new government and the minister responsible for direction I've made it very clear that we focus on literacy and numeracy and problem-

solving skills to ensure that students are well equipped with the basic tools that they can use for the rest of their lives. So, yeah, that's pretty much where I'm at.

Mr. Smith: Okay. Well, let's move on in another direction, then.

Mr. Eggen: Yeah. I think you've got the wrong government.

Mr. Smith: Well, I guess we'll find out.

Through the provincial resource strategy for K to 12 education the ministry conducted 43 sessions with 850 stakeholders to address digital supports for student learning. How much did all of that cost? What were the results of the consultation? And how has student learning benefited from these consultations? I mean, that's a lot of people to meet with and a lot of sessions to have. So what was the budget, and how much did it cost, and what were the results?

Mr. Eggen: I would be happy to share that information with you.

Mr. Smith: Absolutely. Let's table it.

Mr. Eggen: Yeah. That's something that we can definitely get to you.

Mr. Smith: Okay. Good enough.

Under the curriculum redesign there is something called curriculum development and management application. What is it?

Mr. Eggen: I'm sorry. I blanked out there. Can you say it again, please?

Mr. Smith: Yeah. I blanked out when I read it, too.

Mr. Eggen: No, no. I literally didn't hear you. Could you say that again, please?

Mr. Smith: Under curriculum redesign there was something called the curriculum development and management application. What is that? Maybe somebody can help us.

Mr. Eggen: Sure. Where did you see that?

Mr. Smith: It was on the website.

Mr. Eggen: Oh, it's on a website. Oh, okay. Yeah. So it's not here. All right. I mean, I think, if I remember anything about it all, it's like some kind of application for teachers to use, but that's as far as I can go. I'll find it. I don't have the website put onto paper here today, so that's . . .

Mr. Smith: I'd like to know what the costs are to develop the CDMA and where it is found in the budget. Is the CDMA now functional, and if it is, how is it impacting students?

Mr. Eggen: Okay.

Mr. Smith: Thank you.

Mr. Eggen: That sounds very good, too.

Mr. Smith: Okay. How much time have we got there, Madam Chair?

The Chair: One minute and 10 seconds.

Mr. Smith: One minute and 10 seconds. Okay. Well, we're not going to get through this topic in one minute and 10 seconds. I think I've put you through the ringer there, Mr. Eggen, and you've been very generous with your time and with your answers with me.

Mr. Eggen: Sure. I've got a bit more on that CDMA application. It's to support the work of staff in design, development, and deployment of the provincial curriculum K to 12. It talks about program of study, provincial assessment. You know, it aggregates the components of the curriculum; that helps to assist teachers in a variety of different learning techniques and experiences, that they can use in the classroom as they choose as professionals. The team is working across the province to try to mix with teachers on the ground as much as possible. From 2012 to 2015 the CDMA cost about \$4.1 million, and then we have \$2.1 million targeted for 2015-16.

The Chair: Minister, your time is up.

Mr. Eggen: There you go.

The Chair: It is. Good timing on this one.

Mr. Eggen: Yes. Thank you. Everything's good.

The Chair: We'll move on now to the 20 minutes for the third-party opposition. Ms Jansen, would you like to go back and forth?

Ms Jansen: Back and forth, please. Thank you.

The Chair: Please go ahead.

Ms Jansen: Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Minister Eggen, for your time. I want to start by just asking a couple of quick questions on expenses. One of the expenses I was looking at here was the funding to address projected growth in enrolment. In the October budget it's decreased from what was projected in the March budget. I'm just wondering where you got the information on a decrease in enrolment and what that constitutes.

Mr. Eggen: Yes. Good. That's a very astute observation. Basically, what happened was that they went from 1.9 to 1.5 per cent as a projection. This was a choice based on the uncertain economic circumstances that we, obviously, saw developing. The storm cloud started to develop more than a year ago. Now, as I said, we will finalize our enrolment numbers by the end of November. That's the normal procedure, that the school boards do so and have the list by November 30, and then we make the adjustments necessary to ensure that we fund enrolment to the level it is. So there is a vagary that we – I mean, this is my first time doing this, obviously, but they can have a 1 per cent or so variance there that we will fund.

Ms Jansen: Also in here we have \$119 million for additional supports to address the increased complexity of Alberta classrooms. Can you give me a sense of the feedback that led you to determine that amount of money?

Mr. Eggen: Well, yes. I mean, globally we know and anecdotally we know that in classrooms around the province, especially in urban areas – more than two-thirds of our students are in urban schools – there are more second-language learners. The program of inclusion has necessitated more complex classroom circumstances. In some rural or urban areas in proximity to large reserves there's the added complexity of classrooms there. So based on that, formulaically these very wise people surrounding me made a projection for that number.

4:50

Ms Jansen: So your measurables, then, for how that money is spent would be what?

Mr. Eggen: I certainly will get that to you, how they did arrive at that, but, I mean, as I say, globally we know that we receive feedback from teachers and school boards quite strongly that the composition of classrooms – the complexity is increasing for sure, and certainly certain policies, such as the inclusion policy, have made it blatantly obvious that we need to, you know, put our money where our mouths are. If we are choosing to include, which is an important, I think, educational and societal choice to make, then we have to make some payment to it. The boards are ultimately building that policy as well, but we watch them closely and interact with them closely because they are following some of the initiatives that originate from our ministry.

Ms Jansen: When you say, "interact with them closely," this is one of the things, you know, I found – I remember when my daughter was younger and I went into the classroom to volunteer, and certainly in a classroom with 30, 35 kids you had a couple of children who, say, had ADD or ADHD or some other issue. The teachers did have quite a job on their hands trying to make sure that they were able to give attention to the other 30 kids in the class, but 90 per cent of their attention seemed to go to those two kids that had specific, overarching issues. I'm wondering. When you talk about ESL and you talk about inclusion in that piece, are you talking specifically, then, that some of this money, some of this \$119 million is going to teacher supports in the classroom, for instance more teachers' aides? Is that what they can look forward to in the schools?

Mr. Eggen: Well, yes. Again, globally, our choice to restore the funding to meet enrolment back in June, when I first became the minister, resulted in 150 new support staff being hired but, way more than that, 800 support staff positions being retained. Of course, you might recall that one of the choices that the previous minister made was that you don't lay off teachers as a result, so there were 800 support staff positions that were kind of teetering on the precipice. I mean, you know, like I said, the school boards make those choices about where they should go. For that restoration of funding we made it loud and clear that it goes to the classrooms. As I say, the importance of support staff and the value of support staff, I think, at this juncture, with our inclusion trend and evolution of public education, has never been more obvious in Education.

Ms Jansen: Now, your governance and system administration decrease, from \$247 million, that was in the March budget, to \$246 million: that's a decrease of \$1 million. What efficiencies did you find?

Mr. Eggen: Which one was that again, Sandra? I'm sorry.

Ms Jansen: The governance and system administration: a decrease from \$247 million, that was in the March budget, to \$246 million in the October budget.

Mr. Eggen: Okay. Do you have a page number?

Ms Jansen: I didn't put the page in my notes, but we'll have a look for it. It's page 16 of the fiscal plan.

Mr. Eggen: Okay. Thanks. You know, the number is based on what school boards choose to spend on administration based on their overall allotment, that they're given from us. It's more of a reflection of how school boards have chosen to spend the money, with some direction and probably some advice to try to reduce. I mean, that's a general thing that I think public institutions do

anyway; they cut their administration. That kind of reflects choices that the boards make.

Ms Jansen: Then, on the other hand, the operating and maintaining schools line item grew from \$597 million – that was the March budget – to \$611 million in October. That’s an increase of about \$14 million. With that increase what controls do you have in place to determine where that money is spent and how it’s accounted for?

Mr. Eggen: Well, there are some envelopes that do determine how those monies are spent. I certainly can get you a breakdown of the provisions that we attach to each of those monies. Offhand, certainly, I know that we create envelopes where boards are obliged to spend on their structures and so forth and transport and so forth, but, I mean, they do have a fair bit of flexibility to make choices. You know, something I kind of heard loud and clear when I went around to talk to the 61 boards here the last few weeks is the degree to which they are able to make targeted choices around what they see happening on the ground for their students. They feel like they could be more effective in that way, so I’ve been exploring that now with my department to see what we can do.

Of course, the other side of the coin, that we see sometimes in the news, is that some boards end up with these reserves, that sometimes can get quite large. Quite frankly, to be very honest with you, I’m just kind of trying to evaluate between the two. I think that if we can give a long-term sense – two, three, or four years – of where funding will be for public education, then I think that boards might tend to be less likely to put more money into their reserves because they know where it’s going to come from.

Ms Jansen: Well, that’s a good question. Let’s talk about the reserves for a minute because, certainly, I know that it’s been the subject of much discussion in the past, and there is talk about some boards who are holding significant amounts of money in reserves. What was the conversation – and I don’t know the names of those boards offhand. For some of the boards holding the largest numbers in reserves: have you had a specific conversation about that?

Mr. Eggen: Yes. Certainly, we took all of the recommendations from the Auditor General and are acting on each of those recommendations. When I sat down with four boards at a time over the last few weeks, you know, I had their reserve number right there in front of me. Everybody has their own reasons for doing so, and I certainly was interested in hearing of some of the initiatives that they do. Again, if we could apply perhaps a standard of how much money people should have in relation to the size of their board and the size of their overall budget . . .

Ms Jansen: Are you willing to do that? Are you willing to actually say, you know: “Here’s the percentage of funds you should have in reserve. We don’t believe you should go beyond that?”

Mr. Eggen: Yeah. I mean, I wouldn’t preclude any – all options are on the table, as they say, right? Quite frankly, I think that some businesses use a 45- or a 60-day model for reserve funds for emergencies and so forth. There are lots of models that we can see in both the institutional and the business worlds that we could take some version of to analyze how much reserve money a school board should have.

Most of them are tight, like the big ones. If you make a simple formula of students and overall budget, a lot of them run very lean, the big metro boards. Again, I always enter this conversation and others in regard to school boards respecting their democratic right to create policy for their jurisdiction, to which they’re responsible.

I really want to keep that message clear to each of our 61 boards because, you know, they got voted in to do that job.

Ms Jansen: Well, let’s talk about policy for a minute. In the business plan, page 34, under desired outcomes, you talk about: “Every student is successful.” Obviously, that’s a great desired outcome. Everybody wants that for education. I want to relate it specifically to an area that doesn’t have a budget line item, but clearly it’s going to have to come from somewhere. That’s a conversation that, you know, I think, you and I have had in the past and is of special interest to me, and that is comprehensive sexual health education. There’s been a lot of discussion about that recently, what that needs to look like, and certainly we’ve heard a lot of feedback from around the province from folks who are saying: we certainly have not democratized the ability for every student in the province to get comprehensive sexual health education.

5:00

First of all, where, potentially, would we find that in the budget? If that’s something that clearly is going to have a price tag attached to it, where would we look for that in this picture? Are you planning for it? Are you looking at an amount of money in your head and thinking, you know: where might we fit that in?

Mr. Eggen: This is a very good point, Sandra. Certainly, the department in itself has a high degree of professionalism and flexibility in its capacity to meet new initiatives that, let’s say, a new government might want to bring forward, you know, the FNMI initiative that we have been moving on, and certainly the previous government was, too. They are professional and dexterous enough to move resources within our department to do so.

Certainly, we know that in the evolution of curriculum and program of studies that sexual health and sexual education in the broadest way is not just a responsibility that we have, but it’s something that wants further attention. We can see the results, of course, all the time, and I think it’s part of our duty to provide a proper democratic education for everyone. I mean, we are using the ministry to reflect on this. It’s an extension of it, but it’s not dissimilar to the discussions around LGBTQ issues and GSAs. I don’t like to use acronyms, but these all seem to be, you know, the transgender issue again. We know that proper education around these issues is as important as creating the laws, right?

Ms Jansen: You know, when we talk about comprehensive sexual health education, a lot of educators that I’ve talked to are looking for two key components, LGBTQ identities and consent. If you talk specifically about the area of consent, you can take consent and you can actually add it to the curriculum, not just sexual health but certainly to the curriculum right through grades 1 to 12, and have that conversation. It does involve resources. You need resources. You need to find some place in the budget. What part of the budget might that come from?

Mr. Eggen: I would say on a curricular basis that we would look through our ministry, but of course in regard to operating expenses we have our education system support that we run, so you could find that on page 88, line 2.7. As I say, we have a mechanism by which we can do so, and as we ramp up, let’s say – because, of course, the GSA issue is not just the imposition of compelling schools that have more students who are making a choice to have GSAs, but it’s also an educative opportunity – right? – that we have for all of our teachers and for the general public as well that can bear some very productive outcomes, we believe. So 2.7, you can see it there.

I mean, operating support in other ways, of course, is just line 2, which is the monies that we provide for schools where they make those choices about how they will choose to spend. But, you know, in regard to GSAs, for example, we've reached out to the Alberta Teachers' Association as well because it's part of their, I think, responsibility to educate their teachers to ensure they understand what's required and where our expectations from the department and from our society at large would be.

Ms Jansen: A lot of these programs do require something in terms of support. Curriculum development costs money.

Mr. Eggen: Yes, it does.

Ms Jansen: So you're saying that you actually have the ability, if you wanted to, in the next year to introduce changes to the curriculum, additions, you know, something in the sexual health area, something in the LGBTQ GSA piece. You actually would have funds now if school boards said to you: look, we're going to need some money to be able to get this done, with that support.

For instance, if a school board – you know, there's a lot to think about here. We don't want school boards, as we've seen in the past, to come up with a patchwork quilt of their own specific ideas of what a policy should look like. You know, Edmonton Catholic springs to mind right off the bat. You have the ability, then, within Education to look at a fund and say: "Wait a minute. We can make this really easy for everybody. We can come up with some kind of a framework. We know we have some boards in the province that are doing it right. We have the ability to help you here. Here is the idea of a framework, and it's not going to cost you a lot of money. It's something you're going to be able to implement."

Mr. Eggen: Yeah. I mean, that's a good message to send, right? We make our positions, and we don't expect them to – school boards have capacity to pay for developments. Certainly, the School Act gives policy development responsibilities over to them, but that also doesn't preclude us from our overarching responsibility to make sure that we not just impose, let's say, a policy on GSAs but to actually be supportive and to know that the ministry is there to help as well. So, yeah, when you have any given initiative, like on sexual health, we know that we need to build up our capacity through curriculum and through economy of scale. Of course, it's easier and better in some ways to do that centrally, right?

Ms Jansen: So if you had a group that, for instance, had come up with a proposal for a GSA co-ordinator for the province and they were turned down for that money if they asked in a different area, you might, potentially, be able to find money in Education to pay for something like that?

Mr. Eggen: Well, there's certainly lots of things we can entertain, for sure. We look for ways by which, you know, school boards – I mean, it's important to follow the integrity of the process. I think it's very important. You can see, if you've followed my actions over the last number of months and weeks in regard to GSAs and so forth, transgender policy, that we want the school boards to go through an organic process by which they produce something that is going to work, right?

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Mr. Eggen: Oh, I've got to stop.

The Chair: You've run out of time.

Mr. Eggen: We can come back later. Thank you for your questions.

The Chair: We have hit the halfway point. If you would like to take a five-minute break, the clock will continue to run, and we will come back for our next 20-minute rotation with our independent members.

Thank you.

[The committee adjourned from 5:07 p.m. to 5:13 p.m.]

The Chair: Okay. We'll return to the record if everybody could please sit down.

We will now be moving on to our 20 minutes with our independent member, Ms Drever. Ms Drever, would you like to go back and forth, or would you like 10 minutes?

Ms Drever: Back and forth, please.

The Chair: Minister, you're in agreement?

Mr. Eggen: Yeah. Whatever works for the member.

The Chair: Ms Drever, go ahead.

Ms Drever: Thank you, Madam Chair. Just a few questions to the minister. In my riding of Calgary-Bow we have seen an increase in the population as the city of Calgary continues to grow, which has resulted in an increase in student population. I was glad to see this government's commitment to fund enrolment growth. Perhaps the minister could explain the impact on Alberta schools had this government not followed through on this commitment.

Mr. Eggen: Thanks, Deborah. Certainly, you have an interesting community that you represent there, with lots of young families and schools going through a new generation of young families moving into Bowness – right? – which is very encouraging. Lots of students are second-language English learners and so forth.

I mean, when we first were elected and were looking at the Education budget, we realized that the freezing of enrolment was out of keeping with the reality on the ground. We have a very young population and lots and lots of kids between zero and four years old that are just coming through. You know, when we build these new schools, they fill up straightaway, with portables to boot, right? So the restoration of funding for enrolment was absolutely essential. Like I said before, perhaps the most shocking number – I didn't even get this number until recently – was that 800 support staff positions were on the knife's edge if we didn't do what we did in regard to the restoration of funding. I kind of knew intuitively the gravity of the situation when we made that announcement, but I just keep on learning more about it.

Again, school boards have managed to hire 380 new teachers that we can see so far – I'm expecting that there are going to be more – and another 150 extra support staff as well, which is great.

Ms Drever: Okay. Thank you.

Could you speak to the modernization projects within the current school system? There are many schools in older communities that are starting to need some repairs and upgrades. How does this budget support those schools?

Mr. Eggen: Well, you know, we have an interesting circumstance again. Your neighbourhood is a good example. It has a lot of schools that were built between 30 and 50 years ago. If you don't make an investment in your assets, be it your own home or whatever, then, of course, they can deteriorate to the point where they're passed repair. I mean, we recognize that there's a big

infrastructure deficit out there, but at least we've set a direction. In regard to the infrastructure maintenance and renewal line you'll see in our budget that there is a 50 per cent increase for this year. So it sends the right message, I think.

You have the Bowness high school?

Ms Drever: Yes.

Mr. Eggen: They are going through both a renovation and an upgrade to increase their CTS facilities – right? – career and technology studies facilities. That's a perfect example of how that's shaking out on the ground and reflected at large across the province.

Ms Drever: Exactly. I appreciate that.

What sort of funding will be available to support English language learning students, exceptional needs students, and First Nations, Métis, and Inuit students?

Mr. Eggen: First of all, you know, the restoration of funding included the grants to ELL students and First Nations, Métis, and Inuit students as well. Of course, as you heard from our earlier estimates discussions with Mark and Sandra, we have a \$419 million inclusive ed budget, which was increased by \$11 million. About \$86 million of that goes to English language learner students, which, as I said before, you probably see a great deal of in your own constituency, and then we're investing \$74.8 million in First Nations education, too. Actually, it's way more than that. Anyway, I'll get back to you on that one. That's not a correct number. Sorry about that.

Ms Drever: No. That's fine.

Okay. Given the government's expressed commitment to First Nations, Métis, and Inuit people and that in this business plan desired outcome 2 states, "The achievement gap between First Nations, Metis and Inuit students and all other students is eliminated," can you please speak to how this is being supported through this budget?

Mr. Eggen: Yeah. Sorry. That last number I gave you was a product of dyslexia, clearly. It was supposed to be \$47 million for FNMI funding.

Let me just get my thoughts together for a second here. Yes, the FNMI grant is about \$1,178 per eligible student. That's a self-identification process. Then we're trying to build on-reserve co-operation as well because we are seeing that, clearly, students on federal reserves – there's a discrepancy in the numbers we're getting. You know, Northland school division is a perfect example of where we need to invest the most to create more equity for FNMI students. We're getting low attendance there, and the suspension of the board of trustees is a symbol, I think, of just the state of affairs in the Northland school division.

5:20

We're trying as well to build curriculum that will help to educate the entire population around First Nations, Métis, and Inuit living in Alberta, and we intend to have a curriculum development reflected right from K to 12 in that regard. You know, it's sometimes surprising, when you think about your own education and my own – perhaps yours was better – the dearth of knowledge we have about First Nations culture and the history of residential schools and so forth. Now is a perfect moment in history for us to rectify that problem for the next generation of students.

Ms Drever: I couldn't agree more.

In the same year your department put in place a \$15 million cut while also creating the new FNMI division. How is the department able to do this, and what has this division been working on?

Mr. Eggen: Well, we have to be demonstrably efficient in difficult economic times. You know, we recognize that and put it on the table to cut \$15 million from the ministry. I do that with great reluctance because I know what a dextrous and high-functioning ministry I do have. We make those choices as we will. Mark mentioned that we want to try to make sure we have demonstrable moves to the classroom, and that's fair. We have the \$10.3 million from the teacher quality excellence initiative and other savings to focus on and put back into the education service that we want to provide. We did have to slow down some initiatives and engagement activities and some discretionary grants to the tune of about 2 and a half million dollars, and then the department's administration budget was cut again by \$2.1 million.

I mean, that's part of what you have to do as well to reflect economic circumstances. But also the overriding circumstance that we all must reflect is the very strong desire to make sure that we fund public education to the very best of our ability, even make sacrifices in other areas, because, of course, for the children that we have under our charge, it's very temporal in nature that they get the best education at each stage of development that they possibly can, and that can't be compromised by widespread cuts. I used to be a teacher – well, I still am a teacher – and I saw the effects of arbitrary and wanton cuts back in 1993, that took more than a decade for education to recover from, if it ever has, and I refuse to be responsible for that sort of decision-making.

Ms Drever: Right. What discussions have you had with stakeholders about the direction of your government and specifically your funding direction?

Mr. Eggen: Well, you know, it's a constant process. I'm meeting with parent groups and student groups and all the 61 school boards, the Alberta Teachers' Association as well. I'm heading down to meet with the superintendents tomorrow morning. I'm going to head there tonight, actually, and meet with them and come back miraculously again for session. It's a constant process by which you meet and get layers of input back from the field. I'm very interested in the direction of youth engagement these days with high school students and young adults around education, and I certainly want to reach out more and provide more opportunity for that. I'd like to have more interaction with individuals – they don't have to be young – studying to become teachers as well. I think that there's a valuable source of information there, too, that I look forward to meeting.

I mean, this is all part of the budget process – right? – to make sure that we're spending public dollars that are in keeping with the immediate needs that we see on the ground based on the interactions we have with the Alberta public.

Ms Drever: In the business plan under Desired Outcome One: Every student is successful, priority initiative 1.2 states: "Develop and implement online Student Learning Assessments and Diploma Examinations to improve responsiveness to students' needs." Does the ministry have a budget line specific to this initiative, and can you speak to the vision behind this?

Mr. Eggen: While I speak to the vision, people will furiously flip through their binders to look for the line item for you.

I mean, the opening vision and statement that every student is successful is absolutely not negotiable, you know. We can measure that level of success in a number of different ways, not the least of which, I think, is school completion rates, right? You know, we've all been to school, public school for most of us, and we know that there's a certain crucial time where we can lose a section of our student population through being alienated or education not

meeting their needs or perhaps their capacity and abilities are not in keeping with the grade level they might be at in a certain subject area even. So we just really want to focus on that, I think. That's my own personal point of emphasis as well, to increase school completion rates across the province to the very highest standard in Canada. I think that we can do that.

How we accomplish those goals is based on the totality of this budget, I would suggest, but also focusing monies on every aspect, which includes, of course, establishing provincial standards and processes. I mean, a big part of this job in the ministry is that we set the standard of what a grade 12 education is. You know, we sign the certificates at the end of the day, right? We make sure that we're spending the money on the very top quality. The evolution of assessment here, I've come to realize, is very strong. You know, our diploma exam and standardized exam production and levels are something to emulate across Canada and across North America even, which is great.

You know, as a teacher I always looked between the function and the usefulness of standardized testing that gives you a yardstick and a point in time for any given student, so then you can help build the individual learning needs of that student. Then, of course, the recognition of the professionalism and the choices that a teacher can make to make sure that that curriculum and that individual learning strategy is right for that kid: who better than the teacher on the ground who is actually in front of that student. I mean, there's that tension that always exists between standardized testing and individual professionalism. A teacher has to make choices. I recognize that, and I'm constantly making adjustments to ensure that that tension is at least creative and productive.

You know, we had, for example, the grade 3 SLA testing that we made adjustments on this last go-round here in September, October. I made a choice to send a message of goodwill to school boards and teachers as well that, yeah, it's something they can choose to do. I ended up getting about a 98 per cent, 97 per cent uptake on it. So, yeah, people chose to take that thing, but I also recognized the integrity of their professionalism as school boards to make that choice.

Ms Drever: Right. The theme of this budget seems to be restoring funding. Can you please expand on this and give details of how this budget restores funding to education in Alberta?

Mr. Eggen: Well, it's sort of an extension. I mean, the Education budget is not unique, but it certainly has its own path, that we began when we chose to restore funding back in June for enrolment growth. This budget is kind of an extension of that same theme, where you see the budget moving through. It's kind of hold the line, but it's hold the line with the provision to meet the increased enrolment that we will see probably at the end of November when we get the actuals for our total enrolment.

5:30

I mean, this is a normal practice that has been employed by this ministry for many, many years, and it allows us to get the numbers from the end of September and then some of the shifting that goes on over the next 60 days after that. I think Brad has tracked some of that and mentioned the other day that there are some 3,000 variances that are out there, you know, where kids are landing in places, maybe moving from one school to another and so forth. At that point in time, at the end of November, is when we can nail that number down. So, yeah, if you can give this budget a title and a marquee, it's that it restores funding for enrolment and maintains the integrity and strength of our K to 12 education system. It was not easy to write either, by any means. It's not easy to defend, but it's working.

Thank you.

Ms Drever: Great. That's all of my questions.

The Chair: You're done with your time, Ms Drever?

Ms Drever: Yes.

The Chair: Thank you so much.

We'll now move on to the government caucus for 20 minutes. Ms Luff, would you like to go back and forth, or would you like to do 10 minutes?

Ms Luff: Back and forth is good.

The Chair: Please go ahead.

Ms Luff: If that's okay with the minister, of course.

Mr. Eggen: Yeah. Whatever works for you, Robyn. It's great to have you here.

Ms Luff: Yeah. No problem. It's good to be here.

A lot of the questions that I had have been covered in one way or another, but I think we can, you know, look at them a little bit more in depth. I really do think that everyone sitting around this table tonight can agree that education is very important, and it's, I would argue, maybe the most important thing that we do as a government because creating quality students and a quality education for everybody is going to result in a better province for us in the long run, right? We're trying to get people who are critical thinkers and co-operators and who have an entrepreneurial spirit. These are things that we're driving for in education in Alberta.

I am not the only teacher around this table tonight. I know that there are a few of us here and also parents, so lots of engaged stakeholders, and it's wonderful that we're all here together to really work at making sure that education in Alberta is the best that it can really be.

One of the main reasons that I ran for office was because, being a teacher, I was constantly seeing cuts to the education system. As has been mentioned, one of the first things that often gets cut is educational assistants, so we end up without those extra ESL supports in our classroom and without those extra EAs in our classroom, who are helping with our kids who have been coded and who have ADD, like Ms Jansen was mentioning. So it's really encouraging, I think, to see that we've really restored funding for growth and making sure that we have those important supports for teachers in our classrooms.

My first few questions really have to do with just funding for growth, but I think a lot of them have been answered already. Maybe you can just clarify for me to make sure that I have the numbers correct.

Mr. Eggen: Sure. I mean, perhaps some of the interesting aspects of the restoration of funding to meet growth – you know, you can look and see where that has happened in different places; for example, the CBE, which you were working for. I think they've hired an additional 114 teachers and 79 support staff in addition to the probably several hundred support staff jobs that were saved by this choice that we made. Calgary Catholic hired, specifically, 40 diverse-learning teachers – right? – which is a reflection of the incredible diversity in that school board, in that city. Edmonton public is very similar and Edmonton Catholic, too. Not to be emphasizing just those four boards, but if you add them up, they represent more than half of all the students that are in the province. So that's interesting, for sure.

If you look at this budget now, the larger budget, numberwise you have basically a restoration of funding of about 3 per cent if

you want to look at it globally and then maybe about – what? – a 0.5 per cent or a 0.7 per cent top-up over that, something like that. That is kind of the larger number. Again, everything gets thrown around so easily here, but we're talking about an \$8.2 billion expenditure here, in totality, between operating and capital, so it's something that we have to take with a great deal of gravity. I think it's a reflection of the care that we take to make sure that we educate our kids and build the facilities we need for the next generation, too.

Ms Luff: Yeah. Absolutely. Thanks very much.

Some of my questions had been around, you know, the total number of new teachers that were able to be hired, and I believe you said that was 380, so those numbers for the Calgary boards in particular I appreciate because that's where I worked. I was in the Calgary board.

Mr. Eggen: Yeah. You see, Calgary is a perfect case in point of seeing where some of that localized growth is taking place and where the shifts in migration and growth are happening in this province in general. In southwest Calgary there are, like, eight schools being built. It's just amazing. This is the largest school infrastructure build in the history of the province by far, and it just doesn't seem to have any sign of stopping.

It's good in a way. I mean, we're in these uncertain economic circumstances, for sure, and everybody is really nervous about that, you know. You're looking at probably one of the most nervous people about that, but at the same time we have to still maintain and build the public infrastructure that we need to meet the needs of our population. That's the bottom line, really.

Ms Luff: Yeah. Absolutely.

If we're talking about new schools – and I think I'd be remiss if we didn't ask questions about new schools because, as you mentioned, there's a huge amount of growth in terms of Calgary. When I was teaching, we kept getting extra rooms taken away because of lack of space. You know, we lost our science lab, we lost our art room, and we lost our computer lab. I know that students all across Calgary are having to go to class in less than ideal conditions that are perhaps not exactly classrooms.

Obviously, we need these schools as soon as possible, and our commitment to build them is great. However, recently, unfortunately, you had to make some announcements that schools were going to be opening later than expected. What exactly are we doing to make sure that these schools get built as quickly as possible for our kids?

Mr. Eggen: Yeah. I've sort of taken a multipronged approach to this. You know, there are so many projects out there. First of all, we asked the Auditor General to look at a systems analysis so that we can improve the way by which we put projected completion dates out. We're getting ahead of that as well in the ministry, to look for monthly reporting through the school boards and the contractors and so forth to just have a much more fluid way by which we can watch the progress of each of these 200 projects.

As well, I'm working much more closely with the school boards. The big school boards take on the projects themselves, and then Infrastructure takes responsibility for some of the other ones. I mean, we'll always see the vagaries of contracting and project building. You know, you run into all kinds of unforeseen circumstances – in Two Hills they hit an artesian well there and maybe didn't choose the best site, and then you've got to make that choice on whether to move and cut your losses or not – like methane gas in other places and so forth. I mean, the lists and the completion dates that we have put up now are much better, and we try to keep people posted in a transparent way moving forward.

Then, of course, I've deputized all of you as well to get out there and watch those projects as they develop.

Mr. Smith: Is that me, too?

Mr. Eggen: Yeah. You've all been deputized, every single one of you, you know, to just get out on the sites and see what's going on, right?

The end result is going to be fantastic. I mean, these are not just schools, but they're community hubs for, you know, developing our towns and cities. It'll be a legacy that you can look at for the rest of your lives and be proud that you were a part of that.

Ms Luff: Yeah. Absolutely.

It's good to hear that the schools will be getting built because we definitely need them in a lot of communities. I know a lot of people have been getting phone calls as to when those schools are coming. To hear that there's a clear, transparent plan for getting that done is really good.

5:40

Mr. Eggen: Yeah. The most important thing, of course, is that we have forwarded the money. There's sort of a five-year plan. Then we moved some of the money, \$350 million, into the front end of it so that we could ensure more rapid progress. So, yeah, the pieces are in place.

Ms Luff: Yeah. Great. I mean, in terms of just fiscal responsibility, again – and some other people have touched on this already – because we are dealing with a ministry where 98 per cent of the funding flows through to school boards and a lot of these boards do have together \$450 million in reserve funding, what are you and your staff doing to just make sure that we have accountability around the use of these reserves?

Mr. Eggen: It's a good question. Again, I want to send a clear message to school boards. It's not like there's a raid at dawn on their school board reserves – right? – but at the same time, number one, everyone needs to take a hard look at the fact that we're putting a three-year plan in to see where their operational funding will come from and how and how much. It might reduce that tension around people's tendency to sock away more money because they're not sure what's going to happen in the next six months, later, that kind of thing. Security might lead people to be less likely to do that.

Also, we have the Auditor General's recommendations – I am accepting all of them – so school boards need to apply that matrix onto their circumstance. Some school boards have very, very modest reserves, and others' are larger, for sure. You know, there are different reasons for that. I think we have to look at the totality of our budgets and the totality of our initiatives as well and factor those into the level at which a reserve fund should be operating. Of course, we have the school fee initiative as well. We're committed to reducing school fees and so forth. It's not just as simple as asking for the keys to the account and hoovering it out, because we have no intention of doing that.

Ms Luff: Yeah. Actually, that's sort of a good segue. You're reading my mind in advance of my questions a little bit.

Mr. Eggen: If I only could.

Mr. Smith: You don't say. Wow.

Ms Luff: So there you go.

Ms Payne: It's that teacher harmony.

Ms Luff: Yeah. That's it. It's just that we're all really in sync.

Mr. Smith: Why am I on the outside looking in?

Ms Luff: We'll get you in.

Mr. Eggen: We'll get you in. Don't you worry about that.

Ms Luff: Talking a little bit about the platform commitments, when I was door-knocking during the election I certainly spoke to a lot of Albertans, to many people in my riding of Calgary-East, and they responded really positively when we were talking about some of those initiatives, including both school lunch initiatives and, particularly, reduced school fees. In Calgary school fees, I know, can be a bit of a touchy subject and can cause sometimes an undue amount of drain on family budgeting. The Calgary board of education school fees run \$137 per kid in junior high and \$152 in senior high whereas in Calgary Catholic it's only \$35. So there's sometimes a lot of variation between the school boards. Our commitment to reducing school fees, I understand, is a little bit more tricky than perhaps we had initially considered.

Can you detail maybe a little bit of the work? I got to hear some of that from school board trustees at the Education Act forum the other day. There was some understanding. I got to learn a little bit more about how school fees work and how they're structured, but perhaps you could detail a little bit of the work you're doing that will allow us to reduce those school fees looking forward.

Mr. Eggen: Yes. Thank you for that. We know that the current landscape of school fees is really not even at all. Perhaps, in a way, our previous discussions around the reserves that different boards have is a reflection of that same uneven landscape, where some boards went out of their way to not charge school fees at all even while others may have gone in a different direction for different reasons, of course.

The first task that I had at hand – and I moved straight away on it – was to get an accounting of all the school fees that all the school boards are charging for all the things that they charge for. So we are just working with that information now, you know, and digging down to some specificity in regard to that because it just used to be quite vague. As a parent and as a teacher as well and then, of course, as a government minister I think that our school fees are excessive in the province of Alberta, and we've let the whole thing get away from us over the years.

That being said, I am gathering that information together with my very capable ministry and looking for a way by which we can reduce school fees in the next short while. I mean, obviously, the natural cycle of education is that we have the September-to-September sort of thing – right? – so I wasn't able to do that this September, but we've got lots of time to make sure we plan ahead and have a comprehensive and coherent school fee reduction scheme available to us here soon.

Ms Luff: Yeah. That's good to hear.

Mr. Eggen: It is happening.

Ms Luff: For sure, some of my constituents have been on me about that a little bit at the beginning of September.

Mr. Eggen: Sure. Well, I mean, people have their kids in close proximity to each other, so, you know, if you have two kids in high school, it can really add up. It goes against not just practical efficiencies for funding public education, but it goes against the whole notion of public education, really. Certainly, it troubles me a great deal, and we intend to do something about it.

Ms Luff: There was a very fulsome discussion at the education forum the other day on just what they get used for. You know, what is a school fee? What counts as something that needs to be charged or something that might be considered extra versus something that is more necessary?

Mr. Eggen: I bet. Yeah.

Ms Luff: There was definitely some talk around the enhanced reporting, that you just mentioned, in terms of how you're getting people to inform you about what the school fees are actually going towards. Is there any detail about that that you've been receiving so far, about what the enhanced reporting is showing, where those school fees are going?

Mr. Eggen: Sure. I mean, there are some self-evident areas. Transportation is always a big expense, and then some of these fees, some of the ones that kind of stand out as places where we might be able to go to find reductions or efficiencies, are around obligatory texts or, you know, materials that you need to complete the course – right? – like a workbook or something like that. You know, it seems self-evident that that is getting in the way of a practical execution of that course and then the idea of public education in general, right? So those are some of the areas at hand. When we kind of work it through, we will be happy to share the results once we get it together. Yeah.

Ms Luff: Yeah. I mean, one of the things, I think, that came out is that something that we need – and it's maybe more of a suggestion – is just a really clear definition of what a school fee actually is. Is that something that you're looking at?

Mr. Eggen: Yes. I think it's very important, obviously. Yeah, for sure. I mean, otherwise, how do we differentiate or not have this sort of backsliding into some combination of private and public schooling as well? You know, some schools, with the community that they're in, have lots of capacity to do lots of fundraising, so the inequality that is created through that stands out. For all of those reasons, we must rationalize the school fee situation here in the province of Alberta.

Ms Luff: Uh-huh. Yeah. I think we're all pretty committed to making sure that education is a little bit more equitable and fair and evenly accessed, for sure, because there's definitely – I mean, schools in my riding in Calgary-East often don't have that access to the parental fundraising that some other schools have, so because of that they experience a lack of extracurriculars and things like that, which is really unfortunate.

Just talking about some of the other areas that were in our platform, we talked also about – and this is something, again, that could benefit particularly kids in areas such as mine, that are maybe a little lower income. As you know, we included a school lunch program, and again that was as fees. You talked a little bit about this in question period today, so maybe you can detail where we're at in terms of the school lunch program. Is it something that we're planning on introducing across the board, or is it something that we're looking at targeting to specific areas that might need it more?

5:50

Mr. Eggen: Yes, very much so. You know, we've been gathering information in a way not dissimilar to the way we approach school fees, to see where there are nutrition programs that are currently on offer. Shortly I will be sending out a letter to school boards to go through that process, like I say, in a similar way to school fees. We recognize that you want to get the biggest return for your

investment in all public items but certainly in school nutrition, so I'm sort of envisioning a targeted approach to look for places where we would see the most benefit in regard to a school nutrition program. I mean, we certainly see the results anecdotally in the schools that I have in my own constituency, across the city, and in Calgary, too. I would like to pursue it in that same rational manner.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

We will now be moving into our 10-minute cycles. My understanding is that Mr. Cooper will be asking questions on behalf of the Official Opposition.

Mr. Cooper: That's correct. I'll also be sharing the remainder of my time with Mr. Smith.

The Chair: Would you like to go back and forth?

Mr. Cooper: I would love to if the minister is fine.

Mr. Eggen: Yeah. Absolutely. You're welcome to.

Mr. Cooper: Thank you, Chair. Minister, staff, public, I appreciate your attendance here this evening. I have a very brief line of questioning for you, all around two issues that are of some significant concern in the constituency of Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills. We see both the Chinook's Edge school division as well as the Golden Hills school division doing some very innovative things in terms of engaging learners, creating learner pathways, and overall success when it comes to completion rates and things of that nature. I'm going to be referring predominantly today to page 34: desired outcomes, priority initiatives, performance measures under development, and performance indicators.

Mr. Eggen: Is that the business plan? Sorry.

Mr. Cooper: Yeah.

Mr. Eggen: Okay. That's fine. Thanks.

Mr. Cooper: Priority initiative 1.4: "Expand opportunities that create personalized, student-centred approaches to help students be successful in learning." The reason why I think that I'm going to be asking the majority of the questions around this priority is that much of the discussion that I would like to have with you this evening is around dual credit and RAP, both programs I didn't see named anywhere in the budget or in the business plan. It's my assumption that 1.4 is a bit of a catch-all that would include both of those programs.

Mr. Eggen: Yes.

Mr. Cooper: A number of years ago, as you will be familiar with, the department put into motion a task force on dual credit.

Mr. Eggen: Yes.

Mr. Cooper: In 2010, I think, was the initial seminar, dual course seminar, which got some stakeholders together. They had a chat about it. In 2012 the previous government put together a three-year strategy on dual credit. In 2016 the funding for dual credit came to an end. I guess we'll start with – I didn't see a line item in the budget for dual credit. Is there a commitment amongst the department and you, sir, to continue to fund or move forward with dual-credit courses?

Mr. Eggen: Thanks, Mr. Cooper. It's a program, first, just generally, that I'm very excited about. Perhaps Olds-Didsbury-

Three Hills is a perfect example to use to generalize the benefits of the program. Olds College has been a leader in dual-credit orientation. I believe they even moved the high school over to a close proximity to the college, so you have this almost seamless sort of interaction going on there. The dual-credit program has demonstrable advantages for school retention, for students to be more likely to complete their diploma, complete grade 12. It also increases . . .

Mr. Cooper: I'm going to share some time with Mr. Smith.

Mr. Eggen: Oh, yeah. Sure. Okay. I'll cut to the chase.

Mr. Cooper: I guess, at the end of the day, do . . .

Mr. Eggen: Yes, we do. You betcha. This Education budget has a \$5.037 million contribution to the dual-credit strategy for 2015. Yes, it does.

Mr. Cooper: Okay. Just recently at Olds College, actually, on the 29th of October they held a seminar with a wide swath of stakeholders, including 75 participants, 45 organizations representing industry. Ministry officials from Advanced Ed and Human Services both attended the seminar, including members of the Dual Credit Steering Committee. I understand that there was an invitation to the department, to both yourself as well as to department officials, but no one from the department attended that seminar. Do you know why that would have been? I guess my concern is: here's a great opportunity; you say that you're supporting the program, but the actions are . . .

Mr. Eggen: I mean, certainly, yes, we have chased down, you know – I've met with the steering committee, and again I will be meeting the gentleman from the superintendents' association, who is one of the chairs. Again, we've had very good conversations about this and our commitment, not just the ministry's participation over the years but this new government's interest in, if anything, expanding the program. Again, I won't go on too long, but you can see the obvious advantages as described in Olds . . .

Mr. Cooper: Yeah. I would be more than happy to send you the postseminar information-sharing link to the website, where all of that's available.

Mr. Eggen: Yeah. You betcha.

Mr. Cooper: You know, ultimately, I spoke to a number of folks in that area that were fairly disappointed that no one from the department – like, not just you but literally no one from the department – came to talk about something we're going to spend five million bucks on and, as you referred to, has all those great educational outcomes.

The last thing that I briefly want to speak to is loosely around funding models for schools, particularly when it comes to rural schools who are being very innovative, who are finding ways to engage students in a way that makes them more effective both in the classroom and out of the classroom. It has to do with funding models for those schools. Many of them utilize RAP programs, dual-credit courses to engage their students, but that does come with some reward in terms of activity-type-based funding for those schools. Is there any discussion amongst the department or yourself or your officials to reassess any of the funding models that would potentially have a negative impact on smaller rural schools who rely on activity-based funding?

Mr. Eggen: Certainly. Again, with our commitment from the ministry, that I inherited, and then the interest we have in developing more dual-credit partnerships with colleges around the province, from Fairview to Keyano to, you know, Red Deer, which has got a very good one, to Olds, of course, we are definitely interested in doing so. There are demonstrable benefits as well. I mean, you know, we do have other rural initiatives that look to . . .

Mr. Cooper: But at this time there is no desire to change the funding model, that would have a negative impact on rural schools, as in going to straight block funding for those schools?

Mr. Eggen: Oh, no, not at all. Quite the opposite. Yeah.

Mr. Cooper: Okay. Perfect. Wonderful. Thank you.

I will cede the rest of my time to Mr. Smith, whatever's remaining.

Mr. Eggen: Okay. Thanks.

Mr. Smith: How much time have we got?

The Chair: Two minutes, 24 seconds.

Mr. Smith: Two minutes, 24 seconds.

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Smith.

Mr. Smith: Okay. Well, I guess, thank you for being willing to take my questions again.

Good questions there, Nathan.

There is a part of the program that I could absolutely support, this whole dual-credit program. I think it's a unique idea, and I'm really glad to see the ministry moving in that direction. I want to spend at least a couple of seconds here on the Education Act. We know that it's undergoing a review and a regulatory review along with that, and you've been holding consultations with the other education community stakeholders from across the province. I sure wish I'd been invited to that. Maybe keep it in the back of your mind. I would sure have appreciated an invite to something like that.

I'm wondering, though. We know that the Education Act is extending the age of access from 19 to 21, I believe. Is that not correct?

6:00

Mr. Eggen: Yeah. It would, yeah.

Mr. Smith: Okay. Have you costed out any of the ideas, in particular the extending of the age from 19 to 21? Do we know what that's going to cost school boards as we contemplate that?

Mr. Eggen: Yes. We have done some work on it. I mean, as these guys flip – categorically, we would know that the main cost would be around students with special needs or with disabilities, who would be more likely to stay longer because, of course, they establish that relationship and the supports that they require for whatever particular special needs they have. In a way it might prove to be a considerable benefit for those students especially. Categorically, I mean, you probably think as a teacher, myself the same, you know, of ways by which we can increase completion rates for grade 12 students. I would like to use all the tools that I have available, so I certainly like the idea. Again, my only reservation was about funding and so forth. We've done some projection, and if we moved on it from '16-17, we're thinking it would cost about \$12 million, the next year after that, \$20.4 million. The next one . . .

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Mr. Eggen: I'm going to stop because she's . . .

Mr. Smith: She's mean sometimes, isn't she?

Mr. Eggen: Yeah. No. She's doing her job, man.

The Chair: We can just turn the mike off.

Moving on to the third-party opposition. Ms Jansen, 10 minutes back and forth?

Ms Jansen: Yes, please.

The Chair: Please go ahead.

Ms Jansen: Minister Eggen, I'm wondering if we can talk a little bit about desired outcome 3 in the business plan, Alberta has quality teaching and school leadership. I remember as part of the excellence in teaching panel that we had an opportunity to have a lot of discussion about what constitutes excellence in teaching. There were some really good conversations, much of it lost at the end of that panel in a discussion about teacher discipline, which was really a shame because the majority of the conversations that we had were around: what constitutes a great experience in the classroom, and what do we need to do to help teachers thrive?

You talk here about developing and overseeing the application of standards for teacher and school leadership professionals. There was a lot of conversation, I think, at the table around what we need to do to help teachers achieve excellence in the classroom, and maybe there were different streams, perhaps, that we could look at: you know, what do we need to help administrators thrive versus what do we need to help educators thrive and what those two different pictures look like or whether they're all part of one picture. I'm assuming it's a discussion you've had within your ministry.

Mr. Eggen: Yes. Thanks, Sandra, for that. Part of, I believe, teaching excellence – or we could call it educator excellence – is to have developing mentorship and standards as well for administrators, too, right? Often in my 20-year teaching career you'd have some excellent teacher but maybe not such an excellent principal or vice versa, too. So as we look for the best aspects of the teaching excellence process that you were a part of, I'm certainly interested in pursuing further our capacity to develop supports and education and, again, standards for administration, including senior administration, too.

Again, I'm just pulling the thread of, you know, the restoration of the integrity of Northland school division – right? – which I believe in part requires training and nurturing of principals and senior administration from those communities. If we extend out from that notion, of course, then we should be applying that best practice to all communities across the province. I was in discussion about that just very recently, talking about an excellence-in-administration aspect to our education.

Ms Jansen: Have you heard any feedback from teachers where they talk about – well, it seems like when a teacher is thriving in a classroom and doing really well, the next step seems to be to go into administration.

Mr. Eggen: Yeah. That's right.

Ms Jansen: So we're losing some of the best teachers in the classroom. They end up in administration, where they don't have that connection. I think back to my daughter's favourite teacher in grade 4, and it was just the most amazing connection to see when

finally she had a teacher that she absolutely connected with, who encouraged her love of reading, who brought up these great concepts. She was excited to go in every day. The next year she was in administration. It broke my heart because she finally had someone she connected with.

Is it something that we have to look at in terms of: are teachers making that jump because of pay? Are they making that jump because it changes their schedule and their lifestyle? What do we need to do to make the job of being an excellent teacher in the classroom the pinnacle of what they should be aiming for?

Mr. Eggen: Yeah. That's very insightful, Sandra. You know, part of a coherent mentorship program for excellence in teaching, in my view, is that you have some recognition and supports for master teachers or some facsimile of that where a teacher with demonstrable experience and excellence in the classroom can be serving to mentor young teachers or others in their school and even in other schools as well.

I learned something very interesting with some of the boards that picked up this high school redesign initiative, where they have a more collaborative opportunity for teachers to be working together and focusing in on, perhaps, even individual lessons or units that one teacher is better at than another. I heard some really interesting collaboration around that, too.

I mean, yeah, perhaps you're right. A more formal recognition of master teachers as part of the education process for teachers in general might be a good idea. You know, it's a part of professional development so that we don't presume that this is just for student teachers, but it's for professionals . . .

Ms Jansen: Sorry. Chair, how much time do I have left?

The Chair: Four minutes.

Ms Jansen: Four minutes. Okay.
Sorry.

Mr. Eggen: Okay. I'll stop talking.

It's an interesting one. I mean, this is something that's very interesting, I think, to all of us.

Ms Jansen: Yeah. Well, I think that it was such a great part of the discussion we had. I worry that we had so many great educators around the table; I don't want that discussion to be lost because there were some great points made.

Mr. Eggen: No. Point taken.

Ms Jansen: I want to touch on another thing, too, and that is that when you're having that discussion about, say, let's take inquiry-based learning, for example. I heard some frustrated parents in my constituency who were not happy that their kids were not connecting to this curriculum. Are teachers being given enough opportunity to teach the way they're comfortable teaching, or are they feeling that they're having to implement a curriculum that they're not a hundred per cent comfortable with? What are you hearing about that, and is that something that is perhaps driving teachers away? If they're not comfortable with the teaching experience, then kids are certainly not going to be happy with the learning experience.

Mr. Eggen: Yeah. That's a very good point again. You know, doing the sort of unravelling of the controversy around inquiry-based learning over these last number of years, I'm starting to learn some of those things, for sure. When something is imposed, perhaps people feel like they're compelled to make a big switch when they,

of course, are probably experienced master teachers that have a lot of experience in ensuring that the kids come out with solid numeracy and critical thinking skills. I mean, the key is to maybe – again, it's not all or nothing, you know; it's not, like, "Let's go back to basics" or "Full steam ahead" in some other learning initiative – just have a more sensitive approach to the implementation of new initiatives based on our capacity to give teachers more choices about tools to ensure the best learning outcomes for all their students, right? So instead of saying, "Okay; it's inquiry based; here we go; you've got to get on this boat now," perhaps, you know, we need to be more sensitive to the professionalism of teachers to make choices that are best for their students.

6:10

Ms Jansen: Are you hearing at all from administrators that offering up that choice to teachers is either going to cost them financially or potentially in man-hours?

Mr. Eggen: No, I don't think so. I mean, obviously, some boards, with the high school redesign initiative in some areas, you know, made choices about it. It's more of an administrative orientation. For example, we were trying to hunt down the inquiry-based learning line item. That work and so forth, to the degree that there was money spent on it, was done years ago, right? It's a question about us making choices that have demonstrable learning outcome benefits, right? We know that enhancing the classroom experience through class size initiatives and so forth over time pays dividends, and we know to certain degrees that periodic professional development for teachers pays demonstrable returns, too.

Ms Jansen: Is it realistic to expect a teacher to be able to incorporate two different learning styles in a classroom if you have kids who are more comfortable with the basics and kids that are more comfortable with the whole inquiry-based learning?

Mr. Eggen: Yes, I believe that you can have elements of both. I mean, when you're working with a class, first, you have to have a manageable size of a class so that you can work with individual needs to some degree. It's not as though you have to go whole hog on either one or the other. You know, for example, an inquiry-based model, to the extent that we want to even use that word, quite frankly, is very useful for teaching investigative processes to enhance critical thinking skills for students and that degree of independence that I see in places like St. Joe's high school or Bishop Carroll in Calgary. It's just a wonderful outcome that you get based on that individual pursuit of learning, right?

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Moving on to our independent. Ms Drever, do you have questions?

Ms Drever: Yes.

The Chair: And you'll be going back and forth as well?

Ms Drever: Yes.

The Chair: Please go ahead.

Mr. Eggen: I don't want to anymore. Just joking.

Ms Drever: Okay. Thank you. In the business plan, priority initiative 4.2 states: "Foster welcoming, caring, respectful and safe learning environments." Can you expand on the plans for this and how it is supported in the budget, please?

Mr. Eggen: Okay. If you could just give me a minute if you don't mind.

Ms Drever: No problem. Page 37 in the business plan.

Mr. Eggen: Page 37. Okay. Which one was it again? Sorry.

Ms Drever: Initiative 4.2.

Mr. Eggen: Fostering welcoming, caring, and safe learning environments.

Ms Drever: Yes.

Mr. Eggen: Well, I mean, these are sort of a general principle. Of course, you can enact that by spending money but also through policy as well. You know, perhaps a good example of an ongoing process that we're doing is in regard to the implementation of both Bill 10, GSAs, and then antibullying issues as well. We work as a department to support schools in using the School Act in how they create a GSA and then work in concert with school boards that, of course, have that policy responsibility. But then the third element is that we work with the law – right? – which is the School Act, and then even other forms of criminal law that enter into the processes.

Looking at the evolution of this, it's quite remarkable, and I'm very proud of all legislators. I was in the House and part of the process when the GSA process hit the Legislature last year. People started to realize that it was an idea whose time has come, to create safe and caring environments for students and to create a supportive environment that provides not just the immediate safety that you might think about, you know, with the police or with the teacher protecting you, but the safety in educating the teachers and the parents and the students to know that we are all equal regardless of our sexual orientation or our gender or the socioeconomic circumstances that you come from, right? That's where true safety is employed.

The GSA and the implementation of Bill 10 is a perfect case in point but still a work in progress, let me tell you. It's going to be part of a lot of energy and time that my ministry will be employing here over the next weeks and months, but the educative benefits are enormous.

Ms Drever: Yeah. I'm really happy to hear that because in visiting schools in my constituency, GSAs are a big priority, and it's been quite successful.

Mr. Eggen: It's very successful. It has a remarkable transformative capacity – right? – not just to, as I say, provide safe places for GLBTQ students but to educate in the widest possible way the general population on notions of equality and respect. You know, you can see it going on outside of schools, too, and it's satisfying for me not just as a teacher but, obviously, as a person who believes strongly in a sense of equality and social justice.

Ms Drever: Yeah. Okay. Current school constructions are based on promises made as early as 2012, and since that time there are neighbourhoods that have grown and are in need of schools such as Valley Ridge in my constituency. The current plan to build new schools is much needed but needs to take into account the current growth in some Calgary suburban areas. What is the ministry's plan or your plan to keep up with some of Calgary's fastest growing neighbourhoods?

Mr. Eggen: Yeah. It's certainly obvious – abundantly obvious – in these suburban areas in all of our cities. Red Deer has exceeded 100,000 people now, and Grande Prairie continues to grow at an

unbelievable rate. We know that even as we build some of these schools – I mean, it's a bit of a history lesson, but there was a gap where we weren't building schools to meet the growth and population for quite a long time, right? Then suddenly, as that delay became more acute, you know, we end up with a circumstance like I described before: the largest school build, one of the largest infrastructure builds in the history of Alberta. So even when the schools are planned and built, they're often full or over capacity the day we open the door.

Another initiative that we are pursuing even more aggressively here now is to increase our modular-unit building capacity and our portable-unit building capacity so that we can move, you know, both of those types of units to places of immediate need faster. I know that's maybe not the ideal planning kind of circumstance, but it certainly is needed. I've been to schools like Grande Prairie's where there were more portables than there were conventional classrooms on the school site. That's just kind of the nature of our demographic here right now. I mean, the advantage is that the modular school model of building gives you the capacity to expand considerably and then retract considerably as well as the neighbourhood matures, so I kind of like the idea. But the intensity of growth right now is red hot.

Ms Drever: It's rapidly growing.

Mr. Eggen: Yes, it is.

Ms Drever: Okay. Initiative 3.1 says: "Develop and oversee the application of standards for teacher and social leadership professionals." We're just looking for the page number for you.

Mr. Eggen: Yeah, if you don't mind. It helps us a lot.

Ms Drever: No problem. It's page 36.

Mr. Eggen: Okay. Thank you.

Ms Drever: What metrics are in place to measure this? What initiatives are being established for collaboration with school boards to align assessment tools? Also, what funding is in place in the budget to support this?

6:20

Mr. Eggen: Well, it's very important that – you know, part of our reason for existence is to provide standards for curriculum and outcomes and standards of achievement for students and then standards for both teaching and for leadership, too, right? We have an ongoing priority to do so. I mean, I think it probably grows and waxes and wanes with the overall teacher and administrative population that we are overseeing. I see that I'm going to have to get back to you on that, to give you a number that might correspond with that. Certainly, I mean, it's kind of one of our core responsibilities that probably changes based on overall student and teacher population.

Ms Drever: Right. Okay. On page 36, priority 3.3, it says: "Support teachers and system leaders to integrate technology effectively into the learning environment, as outlined in the Learning and Technology Policy Framework." What plans are in place to accomplish this?

Mr. Eggen: Well, we do have a number of different places where we provide technology supports to teachers and to schools and to students. You know, we have sort of an increased load on our capacity to provide digital services to schools, especially in rural areas. There was the evolution of the SuperNet – right? – which is

high-speed Internet capacity to communities that didn't have it before. You know, we do provide some supports for that at that level.

Certainly, the professional development for individual teachers is probably mostly decided on by individual schools and/or school boards. You know, we've undergone quite a rapid evolution in how digital technology has been incorporated into teaching, but I want to emphasize again, though, that that's not just an unregulated direction of education in this province. We know that some of the most effective learning has very little to do with digital technology and more with conversations like we're having here right now. [A timer sounded]

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Mr. Eggen: It's amazing.

The Chair: That was good timing again.

Mr. Eggen: Thank you.

The Chair: You're welcome.

Moving on to our government caucus. Ms Payne, I believe you're going to be asking questions back and forth.

Ms Payne: I will – thank you – assuming that the minister is amenable to that.

Mr. Eggen: Oh, please.

Ms Payne: I have some questions with respect to First Nations education. I know that's something that we touched on briefly, but given the achievement gap that exists between First Nations, Métis, and Inuit students and other students in our province, I think this is an area that deserves a little bit more conversation. We know that First Nations, Métis, and Inuit students have lower overall performance rates on tests and lower high school graduation rates.

I sit on the Public Accounts Committee, and we recently heard about the attendance concerns around the Northland school division, where, of the division's 2,700 students, 900 have chronic attendance problems. That's 900 students who are attending school less than 20 per cent of the scheduled time, and those students, of course, because of that, are at risk of whether or not they'll complete high school. Given that we also know that the CEO of the United Way of Calgary has recently said that each nongraduate in our system costs our government \$16,000 annually between increased access to social assistance programs, increased access to health care, increased crime, and lost tax revenue, if we assume an average lifespan, we're looking at a million dollars per person who doesn't graduate. So I think we can agree that beyond the human and personal cost to those students there are also very real concerns for our government.

I'm wondering if the minister could comment a little bit more on ways that we're working on narrowing that achievement gap for First Nations, Métis, and Inuit students, as is committed to in the performance measures document, desired outcome 2: we would like to eliminate the achievement gap.

Mr. Eggen: Yeah. That's a very well-phrased question. You know, if I can use Northland as a case in point, if we are going to increase and turn some of these unacceptable attendance and school completion numbers around, you have to aim for the place where you are seeing the greatest challenge. For example, in August I was signing a letter of intent with the Kee Tas Kee Now Tribal Council to look for ways by which we can have partnerships between their tribal councils along with Lubicon Lake, Loon River Cree,

Whitefish Lake, Woodland Cree, and, of course, Peerless Trout, where we're helping to build a school, too, to outline opportunities for partnerships as equals. I mean, I think if we can look for an overarching problem with very poor outcomes from FNMI students, it's a very strong remnant of the colonial past, that we had imposed on these different groups over a long period of time. So if we begin by starting conversations as equal partners, then I think that's a great way to start.

Again, you know, in regard to the Northland school division school board, its suspension for more than five and a half years, obviously a great place to start is the restoration of democracy to that school division to send a clear message that we're working as equal partners, just like the rest of the province operates. I mean, those are just two really good examples.

I apologize, Brandy, but we're just running short of time, and I've got one thing that I do need to get onto the record, you know, in regard to the Public School Boards' Association of Alberta. We did communicate, number one, that Alberta Education does not provide any dollars directly to PSBAA, but the member boards do pay fees. That's an important thing to say. The second thing, which is even more important, is that their first vice-president, Rick Massini, said that the PSBAA is committed to providing quality public education, that the association is not engaged in any litigation to stop Catholic education, and they are not engaged in any litigation at all. So they wanted to make sure that they got that message across.

You know, I have to balance a lot of different groups and so forth, not to mention some 650,000 students, that I'm responsible for. It's very important that we have a spirit of co-operation and defuse animosity at every juncture. I know the circumstance in Lac La Biche is one of those places that I am responsible for to try to defuse tensions and come to an amicable agreement. So it's important not to heighten some of these things and ramp them up for political reasons. We made a point of calling PSBAA just to get clarification on that. I think that's probably a useful thing to get on the record here tonight.

Thanks. Sorry for taking your time. You can go ahead.

Ms Payne: I think I have time for one more question.

Mr. Eggen: Yeah, you sure do. Absolutely.

Ms Payne: I'll be quick. You kind of touched on it when you mentioned the colonial past. I think, you know, it's important that we address the history of residential schools via our curriculum so that all Alberta students are aware of the history. We talked a little bit earlier today about how, of course, curricula adjustments can impact the budget. I'm just curious to hear some of the initiatives around that, around addressing residential schools in the curricula.

Mr. Eggen: Yeah. Good question. The truth and reconciliation committee's work is a moment in time for Alberta and for Canadian history not just to begin some process of healing but also as an educative moment – once again, I always look for those as a teacher – to infuse our curriculum with a better understanding of First Nation, Métis, and Inuit culture across the province generally and then specifically so that people know about the residential school history in the broadest possible way. You know, I certainly can think back: did I fail to receive that education when I was in public school? I consider it a responsibility of the gravest sort to ensure that succeeding generations have a thorough and productive and organic education about residential schools.

Ms Payne: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

I apologize for the interruption, but I must advise the committee that the time allotted for this item of business has concluded.

I would like to remind committee members that our meeting tomorrow, that was scheduled for the Ministry of Seniors, has been rescheduled to November 18 from 3:30 p.m. to 6:30 p.m., so our

next meeting will be on Monday, November 16, for the Ministry of Health, from 7 p.m. to 10 p.m.

Thank you so much.

[The committee adjourned at 6:30 p.m.]

