



Legislative Assembly of Alberta

The 30th Legislature
Second Session

Standing Committee
on
Families and Communities

Ministry of Education
Consideration of Main Estimates

Wednesday, March 10, 2021
3:30 p.m.

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The 30th Legislature
Second Session**

Standing Committee on Families and Communities

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Standing Committee on Families and Communities

Participants

Ministry of Education

Hon. Adriana LaGrange, Minister

Jeff Willan, Assistant Deputy Minister, Strategic Services and Governance

3:30 p.m.

Wednesday, March 10, 2021

[Ms Goodridge in the chair]

Ministry of Education
Consideration of Main Estimates

The Chair: Good afternoon, everybody. I would like to call the meeting to order and welcome everybody. The committee has under consideration the estimates for the Ministry of Education for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2022.

I would ask that we go around the table and have members introduce themselves for the record. My name is Laila Goodridge, and I am the MLA for Fort McMurray-Lac La Biche and the chair of this committee. We will begin to my right.

Mr. Eggen: Thanks, Laila. My name is David Eggen. I'm the MLA for Edmonton-North West, and I'm the deputy chair on this occasion.

Thanks.

Mr. Horner: Good afternoon. Nate Horner, MLA, Drumheller-Stettler.

Ms Lovely: Good afternoon, everyone. MLA Jackie Lovely from the constituency of Camrose.

Ms Glasgo: Good afternoon. Michaela Glasgo, MLA, Brooks-Medicine Hat.

Mr. Smith: Good afternoon, everyone. Mark Smith, Drayton Valley-Devon.

Member Irwin: Good afternoon. Janis Irwin, Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood.

Ms Hoffman: Sarah Hoffman, Edmonton-Glenora.

The Chair: Now we will go to the members that are participating virtually. When I call your name, please introduce yourself for the record.

Brad Rutherford.

Mr. Rutherford: Good afternoon. Brad Rutherford, MLA, Leduc-Beaumont.

The Chair: Richard Gotfried.

Mr. Gotfried: Richard Gotfried, MLA, Calgary-Fish Creek.

The Chair: Mickey Amery.

Mr. Amery: Good afternoon, committee members. Mickey Amery, Calgary-Cross.

The Chair: Thank you.

Due to the current landscape we're all in, all ministry staff will be participating in the estimates debate virtually. We would ask ministry officials to please introduce themselves when they are called upon by the minister to speak.

Minister, can I have you introduce yourself?

Member LaGrange: Yes. Minister of Education, Adriana LaGrange, and the MLA for Red Deer-North.

The Chair: Fantastic. We did introduce all the ministry officials earlier this morning, and we will just ask that any ministry officials,

if they are called upon to speak, introduce themselves for the record before speaking.

I would like to note the following substitutions for the record: Mr. Eggen as deputy chair for MLA Lori Sigurdson, and Mr. Horner for Mr. Neudorf.

Before we begin, I would note that in accordance with the recommendations from the chief medical officer of health, attendees at today's meeting are advised to leave the appropriate distance between themselves and other meeting participants. In addition, as indicated in the February 25, 2021, memo from the hon. Speaker Cooper, I would remind everyone of committee room protocols in line with health guidelines, which require members to wear masks in committee rooms and while seated except when speaking, at which time they may choose not to wear a face covering.

A few housekeeping items to address before we turn to the business at hand. Please note that the microphones are operated by *Hansard* staff. Committee proceedings are being live streamed on the Internet and broadcast on Alberta Assembly TV. The audio- and videostream and transcripts of the meeting will be found and accessed via the Legislative Assembly website. Those participating virtually are asked to turn on their camera while speaking and please mute their microphone when not speaking. To be placed on the speakers list, virtual participants should e-mail or send a message in the group chat to the committee clerk, and members in the room are asked to please wave or otherwise signal their intention to the chair. I would ask that everyone please set your cellphones and any other devices to silent for the duration of today's meeting.

Hon. members, the standing orders set out the process for consideration of the main estimates. A total of six hours have been set out and scheduled for consideration of the estimates for the Ministry of Education. For the record I would note that the Standing Committee on Families and Communities has already completed three hours of debate in this respect. As we enter our fourth hour of debate, I will remind everyone that the speaking rotation for these meetings is provided for under Standing Order 59.01(6), and we are now at the point in the rotation where speaking times are limited to a maximum of five minutes for the member and the ministry. These speaking times may be combined for a maximum of 10 minutes. Please remember to advise the chair at the beginning of your rotation if you wish to combine your time with the minister's. One final note. Please remember that discussion should flow through the chair at all times regardless as to whether speaking times are combined. If members have any questions regarding speaking times or the rotation, please feel free to send an e-mail or message to the committee clerk about the process.

With the concurrence of the committee I will call a five-minute break near the midpoint of the meeting; however, the three-hour clock will continue to run. Does anyone have any opposition to holding a break?

When we adjourned on March 10, 2021, we were at nine minutes and 20-some-odd seconds into the exchange between Member Pancholi and the minister. I will now invite MLA Hoffman to complete the remaining 37 seconds in this rotation. Minister and member – sorry. Just quickly before we get started on that, hon. members, I'd like to offer clarification with regard to speaking times for members during main estimates. Once the maximum speaking time is reduced to five minutes at any one time – Standing Order 59.02(1)(c) – the time allotment is no longer considered a block. The member called upon at the appropriate point in the rotation may use up to five minutes at one time. The minister may then use up to five minutes in a response. However, if either the member or the minister chooses not to use the maximum five

minutes allotted to them, they cannot return to complete the balance of their five minutes. Once the member and the minister have had their time to speak, the chair will call upon a member in the next group for their five-minute speaking rotation.

I will ask Mr. Deol to introduce himself for the record.

Mr. Deol: Thank you. Jasvir Deol, MLA for Edmonton-Meadows.

The Chair: Thank you. With that, we will go to . . .

Ms Hoffman: Wait. Can I just clarify before – sorry. So it's different than how we conducted it this morning?

The Chair: Yes.

Ms Hoffman: It is five-minute blocks, essentially, you're saying?

The Chair: Right. And you can cede it to another member.

Ms Hoffman: Okay. But we have to speak for five consecutive minutes.

The Chair: Yep.

Ms Hoffman: Okay. For my 37 seconds, what I'm hoping to say, and I think it's even more pertinent now, is that we are here discussing the second-biggest line item in the government of Alberta's treasury. I had the honour of participating in Treasury Board and Finance and Health estimates both yesterday, and I have to say I was definitely appreciative of the tone and that fact that we did do back and forth because we were able to get clear questions. We were able to ask shorter questions and be less verbose in our lead-up to the actual question because we were able to get shorter answers. I think it would be beneficial to the people of Alberta if the minister were to consider following that tradition.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you.

With that, we now move on to the government caucus, and I believe we have Ms Lovely.

Ms Lovely: Well, thank you, Madam Chair. Minister – wow – what an exciting announcement you've made today. I was able to watch it on Facebook. I'm so glad that Camrose has a Catholic school design that's on the roster. That's very exciting. My community is thrilled. I've started hearing from people already.

On page 133 of the capital plan it states:

the 3-year capital plan supports funding of \$1.6 billion, including 14 projects for the construction of new schools, modernizations, and design work to support school building priorities.

Minister, my questions are: why is it important to invest in education infrastructure across the province for the next three years? Minister, would you be able to outline some of those 14 projects for the committee? And if you could, for my community, just define what design funding means so that they have a better understanding of what they can expect in the coming months?

Member LaGrange: Thank you, MLA Lovely. Those are great questions, and I'm so happy to be a part of the announcement today. It's always great news when we can provide new infrastructure and major modernization announcements. It is good news.

I'll just share with you what we have in existence right now. The Alberta government is protecting its investment and planning for the future by maintaining and enhancing our existing school infrastructure and building new schools. Critically important to continue to build new schools. Right now the capital plan includes \$2.1 billion – "b"; that's \$2.1 billion – over three years to maintain

existing schools, to work on previously announced projects, of which there are 61, expand the modular program, and support 14 new school projects as was announced today. Budget 2021 includes over a billion dollars in capital investment for education to continue to commit to fund school infrastructure, including \$777 million managed by Infrastructure to support the 61 projects that are currently under way in the province, so Education's ongoing modular program and also 14 new school projects. Some of the important infrastructure projects that Minister Panda and I were able to announce today were a new school for Calgary Catholic school division in Airdrie, which was the board's number one priority, and also Lethbridge received a new elementary school, and there was a new francophone school that went to Sherwood Park. I'll be happy to read the full list in a little while.

3:40

Government will also spend \$11.4 million on Lloydminster schools as capital grants. This is part of our Saskatchewan-Alberta charter agreement. So there is \$10.6 million for two Lloydminster projects and \$0.8 million dollars for the capital maintenance and renewal program. We are continuing to build much-needed schools in every corner of the province, and that's so very important because they're needed right across the province.

When we look at the actual capital list, you can see that there is a school in Fort Vermilion, and if you remember in the recent past, the school there was flooded. Although they did receive some funding from insurance, it wasn't enough to move to a new location. So it was felt that if we are actually going to build a new school in this area, we will take it away from the flood plain, which only makes sense, you would think. That new school will be going to full build, and it will be a K to 12 school.

The southern francophone education region will have a new K to 6 and 7 to 12 complex in south Calgary. The greater north central francophone region will get a replacement and expansion of l'école Claudette-et-Denis-Tardif school, which is the K to 12 school. The Red Deer Catholic separate school division it was announced two budgets ago, in 2019, a new middle school for design, and now it is going to full construction. The Calgary Roman Catholic separate school division will have an addition and modernization of the St. Martin de Porres high school, which is grades 8 to 12, and that was their number one on their capital list.

The Red Deer school division will have a modernization and addition for Hunting Hills high school, which is the 9 to 12 school. This particular school had major issues with its roof, that required mould mitigation, et cetera. There are a number of significant issues there, and it will actually add 200 additional spaces while ensuring that the health and safety issues are addressed. The Lethbridge school division will get a new elementary in west Lethbridge. It will be a K to 5. The Palliser school division has the replacement and reconfiguration of Kate Andrews high school.

Design only is for Peace River school division, the solution for Manning, which is the K to 12. The design for Horizon school division, which is the solution for Milk River and the Erle Rivers school. It's a K to 12. The Elk Island Catholic school division: a new high school in Camrose, the 9 to 12, which I know you're very happy about. The Grande Yellowhead school division solution for Evansburg and Wildwood is a K to 12. The Edmonton Catholic separate school division: a new high school in Castle Downs, Dunluce, which is a 10 to 12. The Montgomery school solution between Calgary public and the Foundations for the Future Charter Academy is going forward as well.

So many, many good things to report.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

With that, I believe we're going back to Ms Lovely – oh, no. Sorry. Ms Hoffman. Apologies.

Ms Hoffman: Yeah. Thank you. I have to say that I, too, want to talk about the capital plan and definitely don't feel that the introductory comments about there being schools for all parts of the province or all corners – I forget what the exact wording was – when public school parents in Edmonton definitely, I don't think, feel reflected in what was just announced earlier today. Last year the government did bring forward a commitment that there would be planning money for a desperately needed Edmonton high school for Edmonton public students. We know that we have seen how important it is to have physical distancing, especially during this time of a global public health pandemic. We've had schools far over capacity for far too long. The government last year seemed to acknowledge that with the planning money, they would be moving forward with construction. That definitely was what was said by folks from the Premier's office and others, that this was good news and that this was a step in the right direction. I agreed at that time because I assumed that the government, if you gave money for planning and you acknowledged that planning was desperately needed because schools are over capacity, was going to actually follow through and turn those plans into an actual building.

Again, we have seen in Edmonton public alone – I believe there are four schools, and I can provide the details later – where the majority of the students in those high schools are learning remotely right now instead of learning in person. I would attest that at least part of that, from what parents have told me, is because they're concerned about the lack of physical distancing when it comes to school safety right now. I appreciate that, even in our debate here today, the rooms that both of us are in are bigger than most high school classrooms. We have made concessions to ensure that we are distanced, that we are separated, and I, personally, from a health and safety perspective, appreciate that. It is so important that we follow the rules of the chief medical officer of health, and I think the same consideration should be given to students. And it isn't just for the period of the pandemic.

We know that these high schools are desperately needed for Edmonton public. The fact that they've been completely shut out of this capital plan I think is very disrespectful to public school parents, students, and to staff as well. I am confident that I am going to have a whole slew of messages when I return home tonight to check in on what I missed in response to today's announcements, because I've already received some on my personal phone just in the last sort of three hours, I think, since the announcement. I would say to Edmonton public parents, especially when it comes to the need for this high school, that the government appears to have written off Edmonton parents who choose public education. I guess the question on that would be: does the minister agree? And if she disagrees, what in this budget is actually going to address the desperate capital high school needs for a public school in Edmonton?

I also know that there are parents who desperately want a Catholic high school in southeast Edmonton. I see that there is one Catholic school that's been determined for north Edmonton. I know that that's been on their capital plan for quite some years, but I know that many south-side Catholic parents are going to be very disappointed in this budget as well. Again, I've heard from many of them over the last year that they feel that this government has neglected the needs of south Edmonton families who want to choose Catholic education. Edmonton public families city-wide, Edmonton Catholic families on the south side I would say don't align with the values that the minister espoused at the beginning. So what, too, does she say to those families?

Then, of course, I want to highlight the city of Calgary. I think it's pretty rich to put CBE in the news release as who's being paid for a school but the school is indeed being given to somebody else. It's like saying PCL or somebody else in your news release when the beneficiary of that board is the one that is receiving the school. To the students in CBE who need a Calgary school in the city of Calgary, I think that this announcement today is a slap in the face as well as the students from Calgary Catholic who reside within the city of Calgary. I know that there was a school that's governed by Calgary Catholic in Airdrie announced, but the city of Calgary, again, is not being respected. Catholic and public parents in the city of Calgary I think are definitely being served a disservice by this announcement today and the budget that it flows from.

Lastly, saying 14 new schools and then, when it's a mix of modernizations, buying out infrastructure that already exists, some planning money, I think that is also a disrespect to the folks that that language was projected to.

The Chair: Thank you.

Before we head to the minister, I'm just going to remind all members to make sure that all of your questions are flowing through the chair. We were getting close there, but I didn't want to interrupt.

With that, Minister, the floor is yours for five minutes of response.

Member LaGrange: Well, thank you for the questions. As the member opposite knows, obviously every school division puts forward a three-year capital plan, and they always put forth their first, second, and third, so requests number in the hundreds right across the province for new schools and modernizations. The new projects that were chosen were chosen very much because of the metrics that are in place. I would be happy to read the metrics. We look at health and safety, enrolment pressures, functionality and programming, and building conditions. I really just want to, for everyone's sake, really, go through the process that capital funding goes through.

3:50

Our government is committed to building new schools, as I've said, and modernizing new ones. Each year school jurisdictions submit their three-year capital plans to Alberta Ed. The department then reviews the school boards' capital plan submissions and develops a capital submission for government consideration. As part of this process, Alberta Education analyzes, evaluates, and prioritizes submissions and recommends the highest needs projects across the province. As I said earlier, the provincial priorities are determined using evaluation criteria that include and are related to the health and safety of students, enrolment pressures, functionality in programming, and building conditions. The evaluation criteria for each of these categories are applied to requests from all school jurisdictions, and each project is evaluated using these criteria to identify the level of need and the readiness for the project to proceed. Capital funding per student is not a criteria used to evaluate capital projects.

Capital priorities included in Calgary Catholic's most recent three-year capital plan have been carefully reviewed and considered during the development of Alberta Education's capital plan submission for Budget 2021 along with the capital requests. I know this is relevant because Calgary Catholic recently had a comparison of capital funding to other metros, and they really stressed that they felt that the previous government disproportionately favoured Edmonton in their funding decisions.

What I can say is that there are many schools in flight in Calgary and in Edmonton right now. In Calgary alone there are 10 projects

and in Edmonton there are 12 active projects going forward. Those are either new builds or major modernizations. In Calgary right now, just for comparison, in the last 10 years, from 2010 to 2020, the Calgary Catholic separate school division received 18 new projects, and the Calgary board of education received 38 new projects. The Catholic projects totalled \$387 million, and the Calgary public projects totalled \$923 million. In Edmonton the Edmonton Catholic separate school division in that same decade received 19 projects, totalling \$417 million, and the Edmonton public school division received 32 projects, totalling \$863 million. Of course, I do have a detailed breakdown of all of those projects. We'd be happy to share that and read that out to you.

When we look at determining projects, as I said, they go through that very detailed process that the department follows, and we've really taken the politics out of these determinations and are really ensuring that the school builds are the ones that are most required and most needed following those metrics of health and safety, enrolment pressure, functionality in programing, and building conditions.

When I look at all of the great announcements we made today, it certainly reflects the needs that were relevant and prevalent in those areas. No one can deny that, as I said earlier, Fort Vermilion went through a very tragic event, terrible flooding that really required that school to be relocated. For the insurance dollars to say, "Yes, we'll pay you, but you have to rebuild in the same location," it just did not make sense to us. Why would we throw good money after bad? Why wouldn't we take this opportunity to move that school? I'm sure you agree with me that this was a necessity, that we actually do move that school off the flood plain so that it no longer has to suffer.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister. I appreciate that and am glad to hear that Fort Vermilion is getting to move its school outside of a flood plain. I'm very well aware of flood plains at this point.

With that, we will go back to Ms Lovely.

Ms Lovely: Thank you, Madam Chair. Minister, I'm still on cloud nine after hearing the announcement. I'm sorry; I'm just going to go on about that for a little while. The previous government had made a promise of a Catholic school, and it didn't proceed with the design stage, which you just announced today. That's why my community is so very excited about this.

I wanted to ask you – you know, this process is not something that I'm familiar with – is there opportunity for student input, to be able to give their thoughts and ideas on what they would like to see in the school? Is that a component? I do have a student advisory panel that I meet with monthly, and that's probably one of the questions that I anticipate they're going to be bringing forward, so I'd like to be able to answer that for them and share that good news with the community as well.

Going back to page 133 of the capital plan, it outlines that 14 new schools will be created within this budget. From 2013 to 2019, when previous governments were in power, many new schools have gone to the greater Edmonton area. I'll just pause and say that it's been quite a few years since we've had a new school in Camrose, but you made the announcement – actually, the Premier came to Camrose and made the announcement last year that we were getting a new school. I'm proud to say that that construction has already started happening. It's very exciting. That's with the public school system – Battle River school division has that school happening – so it's very now balanced and fair that the Catholic school is being able to expand. I've been to that school, and they are at over a hundred per cent capacity. They utilize every square inch of that

building, so they are absolutely thrilled that this announcement has been made today.

For Budget 2021, what was the criteria used to select schools and ensure that schools were picked based on need and not politics? You had talked about that before, but if you could clarify a bit more for me.

Still on page 133 of the capital budget, Minister, it states that of the \$1.6 billion, \$140 million is provided for the province's modular classroom program in Budget 2021, an increase of \$60 million in 2021-22, which allows for the strategic placement of modular classrooms. If you could clarify for me, Minister, about the modular classrooms. I've been out to Sedgewick and Killam. I've visited all the schools. Just so I'm clear, modulars: are they the ones that are movable? I'm just wondering. Some of the parents have asked me: "Why build a modular? Why not just build a school that's going to be the proper capacity to fit all the students and address that need?" If you could answer that question for me, that would be most helpful. Then, Minister, can you elaborate on what the modular classroom program is and how these modular classrooms will help students across the province?

It's my understanding that these modulars can be moved to a different school if the school suddenly has a decrease in capacity or, you know, children graduate. Then you move that modular to another school. It just makes sense to move that extra piece around. But that's my thinking. I don't know if I'm correct about this, because education is not my background, but it is something that people do ask me about. If you could clarify those things for me, I would be very grateful.

Then, also, if we could get – I know you can't say for sure – some sense of when construction would start, that would be great.

I think I'm at the end of my time, Madam Chair. I have one minute left? Okay. Sorry. We didn't have the instructions for the finger.

I'm going to carry on with just a few more questions here. I want to know, Minister: what is the life expectancy of a modular? If you could clarify that. How are they moved? If there needs to be a modular that's moved from one place to the other, does it stay within the school division, or does it move between school divisions? Does it move between systems? Can it move between a Catholic system and, say, for instance, in my community, the Battle River school division? I just want to have a very clear understanding of how the modulars work within our community.

Going back to design, could I just get a better sense of how the design process will happen and who will be able to provide input for that?

The Chair: Thank you, Ms Lovely.

Now on to the minister for five minutes of response.

4:00

Member LaGrange: Well, thank you so much. Great questions, and I'm happy to answer them. Design stage, first and foremost, is really setting the trigger that we are going to move into, you know, the next stage of being able to move forward on a new build or a major modernization. Oftentimes there isn't enough work already pre-done in terms of the location, the geological site, the permits. There are a number of things that have to happen before you actually move to full build. Triggering a design stage is particularly for very complex school builds. Typically high schools are more intricate. If there's a campus set-up, that is also more intricate. There are a number of factors that work into that, choosing a design stage. But it, really, is the first step in moving towards a full build. It is very, very important.

I apologize to MLA Hoffman that I missed answering a portion of her question. I can confirm that the south high school for Edmonton public was indeed fully funded in the 2020 budget, the previous budget.

Now moving on, I'm going to go to modulars next, because I do want to call in my officials to really walk you through the gated process that we have in terms of choosing construction. They deal with that on a day-to-day basis, and then they provide the recommendations forward. It is very, very involved. On the modular side we have, again, as I said earlier, \$140 million over three years; \$90 million this year alone. It typically is about \$25 million, but we have increased that to \$90 million so that we can address more of the needs. Typically we get about 400 requests a year.

The way it works is that many of our new schools are built with a core school that is able to be expanded as the community grows. Obviously, new communities: as they add more households, there are more children, they're younger ages, and they attend that school. But oftentimes as the community ages, it starts to shrink, and there are fewer students attending, so it makes more sense to build a core school and add more classrooms as necessary. Then, consequently, also as that community shrinks, they're able to remove those classrooms and move them.

As you said, they are movable. Oftentimes they were called portables because we do move them from site to site where they're most needed. The life expectancy of the average modular – and I have to tell you that they have advanced so much in the last decade to two decades. They are very complex buildings. Most often you wouldn't even recognize that they're not part of the original school build. They have a life expectancy of about 25 to 30 years, and they can be moved. They are often moved between schools within a school division and sometimes even between school divisions. They typically cost about \$250,000 per modular, including the move, but again, you know, that is dependent on what the size is and where it's moving to, et cetera. School divisions really value having modulars and being able to access those modulars because it does really increase the capacity of their schools without having to go to a full build, particularly when there have only been incremental increases, light incremental increases, year over year.

When we get to the actual determination of a capital build, as I said earlier, there's the three-year capital plan that every school division goes through. They provide it to the ministry. I would like to call on Paul Lamoureux to come forward and/or Jeff Willan, whoever is going to come forward, to explain how that gated process works.

If you could just introduce yourself, please. I do believe, Jeff, you have to come to the main microphones. Sorry. There's only one other live microphone, which is this one.

The Chair: There are about 30 seconds.

Mr. Willan: Jeff Willan, assistant deputy minister of strategic services and governance in Alberta Education. There are actually 10 gates with respect to the gated approval process that the capital planning submissions go through before they end up being approved for funding by the government of Alberta. Before those gates start, there is that presubmission phase. This is often where the work between the department and . . .

The Chair: Apologies. We weren't fast enough getting to the mic, I guess.

With that, we go back to the Official Opposition. Ms Hoffman has the floor.

Ms Hoffman: Thank you very much, Madam Chair. Through you, I will ask all of my questions as they relate, again, in this round to capital. I believe that the minister said that, you know, she's turning a new path in this budget and that announcements will be based on objective criteria. I believe that they have always had a manual that was objective criteria. I'd say that a significant piece of that has been highlighted. I know that the minister talked through the examples for Calgary – 18 schools for the Catholic board; Edmonton, 19; Calgary public, 38; Edmonton public, 32 – during the timelines that she used. So when she was talking about things being unfair or disproportionate, I would say that that's proportionate to the number of residents who identify as being part of each of those jurisdictions.

The other piece, of course, that many people have found highly offensive under former Conservative governments – and I fear that those will be some of the messages I hear tonight – are that our big cities are being disadvantaged and taken for granted under this government. One question would be: is the minister implying that her previous two capital plans were politically motivated and that that's changing with her new one? Because that's sort of what I heard at the beginning. That'll be one point.

The second point is: doesn't the minister feel it's disingenuous to say that it's a Calgary public school when it's indeed a charter school that's being built in Calgary in her news release? Thirdly, I appreciate that you highlighted an Edmonton public southeast school, but I also was asking about Edmonton Catholic. I've heard from many Edmonton Catholic parents, and the specific question I had about southeast Edmonton was around parents wanting to be able to choose, within the city that they live in and ideally a reasonable ride time, a school that isn't overcrowded, a school that's safe, and a school that is able to offer the programming they want from the school authority that they identify with.

It's that time of year right now where parents contact me saying that they've been denied entry to a public school in their neighbourhood because both of the parents are Catholic. I know that that's incredibly difficult for many, many families when they want to choose a school that's closest to their home. The same happens in the inverse often, too, where parents who don't identify as Catholic won't have their child admitted to the Catholic school that's in the neighbourhood because that's the way the legislation is written. If we are to follow the spirit of the legislation, I would say that it would be incumbent upon us and you especially, through you, Madam Chair, to the minister, to ensure that you are building for the choices that parents want to make.

I will say, as somebody who's been in Edmonton now for over 20 years, that parents feel very strongly and are very supportive of the choices that are available to them. Primarily parents in Edmonton choose public and Catholic education. I think they deserve to have the ability to make both of those choices in our city, because the legislation requires that if the parents are of one particular faith, that's where their children will go. If they aren't of that particular faith, then they go to the public system. I think that to say, even through the titling of bills, that this government supports school choice when it appears that through today's announcement certain options are being pushed on communities more than others is, I would say, disrespectful to the parents who feel slighted by today's announcement.

I know that there are absolutely benefits for having portables. We've had to ask for them many times when I was on Edmonton public, and I imagine the minister had to ask for them when she was on Red Deer Catholic's board. But always it's best to be able to have an appropriately sized school for the neighbourhood that you're in and to be able to meet the needs of the local community and the catchment zone. While portables are necessary, I think

many parents would find it frustrating to see that there is more money for portables in this announcement today than there is for schools in Calgary. We've seen how full attendance lists are, and I'd be happy for the minister to talk about capacity and which schools have exceeded capacity in Calgary, because the last time I pulled it, I think that we had several in both the public and the Catholic boards within the city of Calgary and again not one announcement to help address or alleviate any of that pressure and stress that families are feeling. So to say that the politics have been taken out when most people that have reached out to me so far have said that they feel the politics are heightened . . .

4:10

The Chair: Thank you.

Now we move on to the minister for five minutes of reply.

Member LaGrange: Thank you for those questions. I'm very happy to reply to these questions. In fact, I'll start, by prefacing, by saying that when I first became Minister of Education, there was a narrative out there that decisions were made on politics, and I felt very strongly that we needed to correct that narrative, so we have through this gated process. We've really tightened it up. I really would like to provide Jeff the opportunity to discuss how we've been able to tighten that up so that we are making decisions on need and on the metrics that I've already indicated of health and safety, enrolment pressure, functionality in programming, and building conditions.

I'm so glad to hear that the member opposite really feels strongly about choice in education, that she's supportive of the excellent choices that we have in Alberta. We have a long, proud history of successful choice in education, so we do have public, Catholic, francophone, we have charter schools, we have independent schools, and we also have home-schooling. That choice needs to be supported, and we have committed to supporting it over the years. We made announcements over the last number of years for both Edmonton public, Edmonton Catholic, Calgary Catholic, and Calgary public as well as all of the other school divisions on an as per needed basis. Of course, you know, that was all done objectively through the gated process. I'm going to turn it over to Jeff to explain that gated process in full.

Mr. Willan: Again, Jeff Willan, assistant deputy minister of strategic services and governance within Alberta Education. Thank you, Minister, for the opportunity to respond. I will pick back up at the beginning of the gated process.

The Chair: Excuse me. Could I just ask you to remove your mask? It's really hard to hear you in here. There we go.

Mr. Willan: Sorry about that.

So there are 10 gates. Before the gated process begins, there is a presubmission phase. At this phase this is where the department has officials that are working closely with school divisions across the province to work on what their priority needs are. As the minister alluded to earlier, school boards submit a three-year capital plan. In the construction of that capital plan there is ongoing work throughout the year with Alberta Education department officials. There is considerable work back and forth that goes over with respect to the need, the prioritization that the board may feel with respect to what their capital needs are, whether they are something that's related to – as the minister has already pointed out, it could be health related, it could be in relation to building condition, and it may also be related to enrolment pressures, things like that. There is a lot of dialogue between the department and the school board before a school board, in fact, submits a board-chair-signed

submission to the department for consideration in the annual three-year capital planning process.

That then gets us to phase 1, which is where we're doing the data gathering and review. So as 61 school divisions submit their capital plan requests, the department then begins to evaluate those ones that are prioritized by the boards. As the minister also alluded to, often they have them ranked from 1 perhaps down to 3, maybe 5, 7, 10, depending on their preference.

Within the department now there is a lot of analysis to ensure that the submission is complete. We need to ensure that we understand what the enrolment – that's in the enrolment pressure one. What are the enrolment pressures related to the need for additional space? That might be because it's a new neighbourhood that's going up, so what are the census projections for populating that community? It may also be looking at: where are the feeder schools? When we're talking about high schools, one of the things we're often looking for is: what are the feeder schools looking like with respect to their population that may then be feeding into this proposed high school solution that a school division may be bringing forward?

At this stage we will go through that and ensure that all of the submissions are complete, and then it goes into a further review within the department. So gates 2 and 3 speak to evaluation. When we're doing evaluation, we're looking again at a certain level of completeness and then, of course, whether or not the sector evaluation and the analytics and metrics we require – we look at if the need for a capital project has been met. We look through those things for the next two gates within the department.

As we progress through that, then we go on to what we call the scoring gate, and that scoring metric looks at things like – again, we weigh building condition, health and safety . . .

The Chair: Fantastic. Thank you so much for that fulsome response.

With that, we will move over to MLA Horner.

Mr. Horner: Thank you, Madam Chair. Thank you, Minister, and your staff. I wasn't in the first round of estimates in Education, but it's a pleasure to be here for the afternoon on such an important ministry. I'll try to continue with MLA Lovely's excitement over a new school. I'm excited for it. I've met some of those people, and they're very deserving.

I just wanted to make a comment before I ask you some questions also on the capital plan. You know, in ridings like mine, where there's not a lot of enrolment pressure, you still see the excitement over the need. I don't think it's helpful to say that a replacement school or a modernization isn't quite as exciting or as important because for those communities I can tell you that it's just like a new school, whether it's because there's straw sticking out of the walls for insulation or mould. The build is happening because of the objective metrics you outlined. I know my community is still very excited over the Morrin school, that was announced in 2019.

I believe, if I recall the number right, there are 63 schools being built across the province in various stages, and I know I have two that were announced previously by the former government. I'm very proud of those schools as well.

An Hon. Member: Delia.

Mr. Horner: Provost and Delia. Yes.

I'm glad that we've continued with those builds because they are very necessary and important as well.

If I could, in the capital plan on page 136 it's obvious that there's an increase of \$133 million. I just wondered if you could dive into that and explain what that's going to mean for your ministry and for

the school authorities across the province, how that will change the scale and scope of what they're able to do.

I then would also like to break into something that areas like mine probably do know a little more about than new schools: infrastructure maintenance and renewal. On page 137 of the capital plan I would say that we see that you plan to spend an increase of \$119 million on school facilities. That would be on top of the \$250 million that you would have front-loaded to school authorities this last spring. I also wonder if you could comment on that, Minister, on just what sorts of things school authorities will be able to build with these dollars, how it will help them keep them up. I know, in speaking to my councillors and superintendents, you know, that there's never a shortage of the HVAC systems, the leaky roofs, the crumbling foundations. It seems like there's no shortage of places for those dollars to go. Just wondering if you could comment on those two things on page 136 and 137 of the capital plan.

Thank you, Minister.

There's some time left. I'll cede my time to Brad Rutherford to fill it with another question before flipping to you, Minister, if that's okay.

Member LaGrange: Thank you.

The Chair: Mr. Rutherford, you have a minute and 30 seconds.

Mr. Rutherford: Sure. Thank you, MLA Horner. I appreciate as well today, Minister, the announcement of new schools and design funding. I was the beneficiary, out in this riding of Leduc-Beaumont, not that long ago of funding for a new high school in Leduc and a francophone school in Beaumont for K to 12, which has been long sought after for the community here in Beaumont. They had taken quite a bit of time to run me through the day-to-day at their school of Saint-Vital. I remember, Minister, we had a couple of meetings on it where we went over the need. I was very appreciative of getting the school as well out in my riding.

You had made some comments earlier around the curriculum. I really appreciated that you spoke about the inclusion of First Nation, Métis, and Inuit history and education in the new curriculum. I think that that's quite important. It wasn't that long ago that one of my constituents, Dawn Miller, had invited me to a blanket exercise in Leduc, and Dawn has been a great resource for everything education . . .

4:20

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Rutherford.

Member LaGrange: Great. Thank you for all those great questions. Just let me start by making myself clear, and I'm sorry if MLA Hoffman was confused by my words. We have used the gated, objective process since I have become Minister of Education, just to clarify that, in case there was any further confusion.

As MLA Horner did indicate, schools are community hubs, particularly in rural communities. You cannot underestimate the value of a school in a rural community. It really gathers everyone together. It's the meeting place. It is often multipurposed for other usages. Oftentimes there are other events, whether it's 4-H or whatever, that utilize some of the space. The gymnasium is often in constant use. It's very important to have good-quality schools in our rural communities.

Unfortunately, over the years many of our rural schools, of course, the older ones in particular, have deteriorated and have become health and safety issues. When I toured across the province, I was able to go to the four corners of the province and see that there were many needs and many demands in this area, that there were schools that were really in rough shape, and that we needed to do

something about it. Certainly, going through the process, that gated process that was earlier mentioned, was very valuable in addressing those.

The one question in terms of the \$133 million of capital on page 136: we are, again, really looking at investing and planning for the future, maintaining and enhancing our existing schools, and building new schools. It's so critical that we continue to do this, and we're committed to doing this to the tune of \$2.1 billion spread out over three years. These projects create construction jobs in the communities that are built. Those construction workers stay in hotels, they eat in our restaurants, and they spend money in those communities. They are economic hubs when those schools are being built, so it's very, very important that we remember that as well. Also, contractors hire local workers in these communities, and that's also a bonus for those communities as they continue to see that infrastructure being built. Oftentimes it's just a nice shot in the arm for those communities to really have that ability to once again gather in their school. School divisions have long, proud histories, and I know most people recognize that schools in Alberta have been around for over 170 years, so many, many things to celebrate.

Page 137 was also mentioned, the spending of \$119 million on infrastructure maintenance and renewal projects in 2021, which was on top of the \$250 million in accelerated IMR funding. This was in the midst of the pandemic. We provided school divisions with \$250 million to accelerate hundreds of much-needed upgrades to schools and create thousands of jobs. The program was structured as an accelerated program where we brought forward dollars from future years so that they could be spent now, when they were needed the most.

This was great news for the staff and students, who have benefited from healthy and safe learning environments as many projects moved forward earlier than they would have otherwise. I know that many schools took this opportunity to drive COVID-related projects such as HVAC and ventilation system upgrades. They also looked at boiler upgrades. They did replacements of sinks and door openings to make them remoteless. These were all very beneficial, especially when we were in a pandemic.

This funding envelope is important, no matter when we provide it. Investment in maintenance and renewal of school infrastructure ensures healthy and comfortable learning environments for our students. This work extends the useful life of existing school buildings and reduces the need for replacement in the future. I had many school divisions tell me that this actually made an impact on their insurance as well because these schools were now in a better safety position – they were able to get better rates in some instances – as well as not having to wait that extended period of time to address much-needed issues. Funding invested in maintaining schools directly impacts their lifespan and maintains their long-term value.

When you mentioned the First Nations, Métis, and Inuit students, you know, that is one of our key areas that we are looking at to ensure that our First Nations, Métis, and Inuit students . . .

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

With that, we go back to the NDP caucus and Ms Hoffman.

Ms Hoffman: Thank you very much, Madam Chair. I definitely will want to talk about capital again a little bit later, or I'm sure some of my colleagues will, but at this point I'm going to take a few minutes to talk about curriculum as it does relate to business plan key objective 1.1, implementing new curriculum, including a validation process with volunteer school authorities to gather feedback.

I think that for anyone who's been involved in education when there's been a curriculum update of even a smaller scale – I remember that when I was training to be a teacher, that was when math had just been updated, and even then we knew that there were significant costs related to the rollout of a new curriculum. Of course, resources are one thing people often think about, textbooks and other tools that directly align being a large upfront cost, but also I would assert that adequate professional development and support for our educational experts needs to be a priority if we want to ensure that we get curriculum rollout done properly.

I understand that it is voluntary for this first year, voluntary in terms of the – not everyone needs to sign on for all of it, even by school authority, right? I think there's going to be some flexibility on that. It would be helpful if the minister could elaborate on that. But there will be upfront costs – there always are – and especially with something of this scale. K to 4 is a substantial period of a child's educational experience.

I was part of some education consultations that we did recently on this or budget consultations in general, actually. It felt like education consultations because there were a lot of people who came to ask education questions. They care deeply about ensuring that we get the K to 12 system properly supported so that we can see success for all students. Barb and Dave specifically asked me about the lack of support when it came to implementation for curriculum. Dave worked in the education system and supported other curriculum rollouts in the past, and he said that in his experience there was always a dedicated line item to ensure that it was done in a way that was supported and systematic and that it wasn't just have schools versus have-not schools, that we need to make sure that we keep universality as one of the drivers in our public education system.

There doesn't appear to be any increased investment when it comes to the rollout of curriculum in this budget or the out-years either, so we want to make sure, again, that we're not asking schools that are already going to see 20,000 more students, that are already going to see more than 2,000 fewer educational staff there to support them, whether it's certificated or noncertificated – is the minister asking school authorities to continue to do more without giving them adequate funding to actually support them on the implementation of this, or is the minister hoping that magically Google Docs can create a curriculum and implement the resources and supports properly across the province? I don't think that that is a fair ask to put on our school staff.

The minister has probably heard from teachers who've been, as they like to refer to it, June tired since about the third week of September. This has been an exhausting year. Schools are continuing to see requirements around isolation and other pressures that add to the anxiety and stress that staff, students, and families experienced this year. Asking teaching staff to give up time that they're going to need over the summer to be able to recover and focus and hone their own skills, to learn a new curriculum and acquire additional content to be able support the implementation of that curriculum: I think that is too much to ask right now for our educational staff who are working in schools. I think that the government really needs to step up and put some focus and priority on making sure, through you, Madam Chair, that our school staff are getting the adequate support to be able to implement and support the new curriculum as it moves forward.

4:30

Barb and Dave asked that question. I promised them that I would ask it on their behalf. Many others have asked similar questions, but they specifically were very passionate about this. I believe that they're both retired at this point, but their question was essentially:

how are we possibly going to do this effectively with no new money? Professional development, resources – assessment supports is another one – textbooks: it all costs money. I know that assessment is something that the minister has been prioritizing in this budget, but we need far more than provincial achievement tests to assess the effectiveness of curriculum of this scale.

Thank you.

The Chair: Perfect. You've got seven seconds left, so that's wonderful.

We will go to the minister for five minutes of reply.

Member LaGrange: Great. Thank you so much for those questions. You're absolutely right: curriculum is integral to the education system. That is why – and we absolutely realize the significance of being in a pandemic and that there have been many pressures on schools, teachers, administrators, and the whole system and really want to acknowledge the tremendous, tremendous work they've been doing and continue to do.

I have heard from many teachers that are actually excited about piloting the new curriculum, and that's why we felt very strongly that we needed to make it voluntary, that those who are feeling the pressure, that it would be too much, do not need to put their names forward. But certainly for those that are excited and able to and wanting to, they would indeed have the opportunity to pilot either the whole curriculum or a subject or a grade. Certainly, that flexibility is something that we heard the system was very appreciative of, and we will look, when we are able to put the curriculum out publicly, to find out who is able and willing to move that forward in the validation stage.

You are absolutely correct that professional development and resources are all critical to the curriculum, and I have committed all along that we want this curriculum to be successful and that it will require resources and professional development. The other commitment that I've made is that we will provide those resources, we will provide that professional development, but it will not come out of classroom funding. It will not come out of the funding that is allotted to school divisions. It will be coming out of my budget, and I will expand upon that once we release the curriculum in the near future.

Again, going back to the development of the curriculum, you know, I'm happy to say that the new provincial K to 12 curriculum went through a very extensive process of drafting and refining. As I said earlier, we had to align the new ministerial order on student learning, and then we had to revise the guide to education, and then it has gone through many, many stages. Through every stage that it has gone through, it has continued to be further refined and has come out a stronger curriculum. In December 2020 the K to 6 curriculum working group reviewed the draft of the curriculum. The group was composed of current teachers who, based on their knowledge and discipline, knowledge of their particular discipline, subject matter knowledge, classroom perspective, were able to provide us additional feedback that has gone into making this K to 6 draft even better.

As I indicated earlier today – and I believe I've answered this several times – we also had the deans of education and some of their faculty staff provide feedback. This has been such a great process to ensure that when we do have this draft, that will be going public shortly, it is the best possible draft. But we know it is not finished. We know that it has to go to that validation stage. When the teacher in the classroom has the curriculum and is able to implement it, they will be able to tell us about content load. They will be able to tell us a number of things, and we will be able to further refine it. I know the public is going to want to weigh in, and I hope they do. I

hope every single citizen of Alberta who wants to has an opportunity to see it. It will be made public. It will be on our website. I encourage them to look at it and give us their feedback so that we can make it even better.

The final version of the draft K to 6 curriculum that will be implemented across the province won't be finalized until 2022. There's so much time for everyone to provide their valuable feedback. We'll take that, and we will make it even better. In 2022 I anticipate that we will have the best curriculum possible to put before our students. As I said earlier, I anticipate through the validation phase that there will be approximately 10 per cent of schools participating, and I really do look forward to hearing their comments. We are committed to making this a successful implementation. That will take resources, it will take professional development, and we are going to do that. I've committed to it . . .

The Chair: Thank you, Minister. I appreciate that response.

With that, we'll go back to the government caucus, and I believe we have Mr. Rutherford.

Mr. Rutherford: Thank you, Chair. I'm glad, Minister, that you started going over how the curriculum was developed. I found that it was an in-depth process, with the steps that were going to be taken clearly laid out on the alberta.ca website, so I thought that that was quite open and transparent. Although some people won't treat the draft as such, I'm glad to hear that feedback will still be coming in from parents and teachers and all sources and that that's going to be taken seriously as well. As I was finishing my last comments in the last block, I was talking about how much I appreciated that there was an inclusion of First Nation, Métis, and Inuit education and the importance of that, because I can see in outcome 2 in your key objectives a number of items listed out that touch on that as well, so I'm looking forward to seeing the content within the curriculum.

Over the last year, year and a half, especially around the pandemic and since I've been elected, I've tried to build a good relationship with the superintendents, the chairs, and trustees in my riding. Some of the feedback that I get from them is coming into this question. I know it was touched on earlier, but I just wanted to make sure that we've got a full and fulsome answer around it. That's going to be around page 102 of the fiscal plan, around the weighted moving average. On page 102 it discusses the WMA and the use of a new funding assurance model. I'm just wondering if you could outline really clearly the changes in the new funding assurance model.

Second, given that this, of course, was an unprecedented year, with much lower enrolment than usual, how did the implementation of the weighted moving average affect school authorities? I had questions early on from school boards and other folks and stakeholders about that, the moving average, on how it was going to be treated in the upcoming year and how it was going to affect funding. I hope that you can elaborate on that and just really give a concise picture of what they can expect.

With that, Madam Chair, I will turn it over to the next member to ask a question as well before we get an answer back from the minister.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Rutherford.

I see Mr. Smith.

Mr. Smith: Thank you, Madam Chair. Through you to the minister, I want to thank the minister for being here this afternoon. I was looking around – you can't really see us here in the conference room this afternoon – and I'm looking at the hon. Member for Edmonton-Calder, the hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood, yourself, and myself, and we all have extensive education

backgrounds. I was just thinking that, boy, this almost sounds to me like it's a staff meeting. Here we have our commander-in-chief outlining for us where we're going to go in the upcoming school year. It just sort of takes me back a little bit to my 30 years as a teacher, and I've appreciated that.

I want to spend some time talking a little bit about the weighted moving average. I know that it's a relatively new formula. We've had, I think, just about a year under our belts with it now. The feedback that I'm getting on it from my school boards and from principals and from superintendents has been relatively positive. You know, as a rural MLA I know that many of the rural school boards across this province have struggled with maintaining their populations, and that weighted moving average tends to allow them to sort of weigh out the pain of declining population.

4:40

But I don't really want to focus on that right now. I want to focus on and I want to draw your attention to page 102 of your fiscal plan, where you talk about the weighted moving average. We know that not all school divisions and not all schools across this province have had declining enrolment. As a matter of fact, for some, they've actually seen their enrolments grow, sometimes significantly. I can think of one of the small, independent schools that has seen their . . .

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Smith.

With that, we will go to Minister LaGrange for five minutes of response.

Member LaGrange: Thank you. Again, wonderful questions. I think I'll go back to MLA – it's been a long day – Rutherford. I apologize. I really feel I want to expand on – I didn't quite get a chance to speak to our key strategies that we're using to support our First Nations, Metis, and Inuit students, so I want to give you examples of some of the things that we're doing to really support our students in this area.

We are establishing collaborative partnerships with the First Nations and Métis communities. We are supporting school authorities to build relationships and engage with First Nations, Métis, and Inuit parents and families. It's critical to get the families involved. We are developing culturally relevant learning resources and program supports. We are creating a curriculum that has a strong focus on Canadian history, including issues related to histories, cultures, and the contributions of indigenous peoples in Alberta and in Canada.

We're increasing the number of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit professionals within our education workforce. That's also critical so that First Nations, Métis, and Inuit students can have role models to look up to. We're providing supports to First Nations education authorities to establish additional programs and supports such as teacher professional development and student wellness programming. We're providing professional learning in First Nations, Métis, and Inuit education to ensure that all students, teachers, and school leaders learn about First Nations, Métis, and Inuit perspectives and experiences, treaties, and the history and legacy of residential schools, another critical aspect that you will see prevalent in our curriculum.

We're providing assurance for First Nations, Métis, and Inuit education funding, including support for provincial school authorities and engaging with the communities, planning, performance measures, and reporting. We're collecting and analyzing research and data on First Nations, Métis, and Inuit education to support evidence-based policy and program decisions. We are leading the development and implementation of data sharing and agreements with the First Nations education authorities.

I could go on and on, because it is really critical that we address the needs of First Nations students.

When you look at the weighted moving average, I appreciate all of the questions that were gathered. When we were going around the province on our very extensive engagement looking at the funding model, we certainly heard from school divisions, and I know many of the members there today would have heard this over and over again. What school authorities were looking for was sustainable, predictable funding. As both members that asked questions indicated, I draw your attention back to the fiscal plan. On page 103 of the fiscal plan, when you look at the student enrolment growth, a historical perspective, a 15-year perspective, you can see that while enrolment and inflation grew, the operational expenses grew exponentially more.

That was something that was not sustainable, so what we did here was to develop a model that would give that sustainable, predictable funding, that would even out the highs and the lows of enrolment growth and enrolment decline, and that's certainly what is achieved in the new model. We have committed, as you indicated, MLA Smith, that this is the first year of the model. We have been committed to refining it, and we have been doing that. We listen to the partners, we hear their concerns when they have concerns, we appreciate the constructive feedback, and then we adjust.

Under the funding model, the new funding model, it frees up resources by reducing red tape and administrative costs while giving school boards the autonomy and the flexibility to invest in classrooms based on student need. Apart from the cap on system administration none of the grants in the new model are targeted, so school authorities have maximum flexibility to allocate their resources to best meet the needs of their students. It's an efficient and sustainable funding model for K to 12 education, which ensures all schools in Alberta have adequate resources to deliver programs in an equitable way. The previous funding model wasn't flexible enough to contain costs and involved too much administration. As I said earlier, it was just not sustainable. This predictable funding model allows authorities to do better long-term planning by making more informed budget decisions well ahead of the start of the school year, and that was also something very critical. I've said it over . . .

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

With that, we go to Member Irwin.

Member Irwin: Thank you, Chair. I'd like to pick up on where my colleague the Member for Edmonton-Glenora left off, and, you know, I just want to echo my concerns. The fact that you've not allocated additional funds for curriculum implementation has me quite concerned that students all across the province will have less access to critical resources. I know from my time working at Alberta Education and from the large volumes of research that I went through in that role, some of the key elements needed for successful curriculum implementation are resources and professional development.

You know – mark my words – without any additional funding for these two areas, there will not be successful implementation. How are you exactly planning to address this? You cannot simply expect school boards that are facing already tight budgets to absorb these costs, and if you are, it is students who will suffer. I noticed you did mention a few minutes ago that the money is going to come from somewhere, so I would like some clarity on that. Where is that? You know, if it's not in the budget this year, which we don't see that it is, then does that mean that implementation is therefore delayed? I would like some clarity on that.

Relevant to implementation, page 31 of your business plan is something that's been top of mind for me and that I've raised in the

Legislature a couple of times, and that's the pending closure of the Alberta Distance Learning Centre, the ADLC, at the end of this year. We know that the ADLC has been providing high-quality resources and learning opportunities to students all across this province for over a hundred years, in fact, and students in all areas of Alberta will be impacted. As we know, rural and remote schools and boards in particular very much rely on ADLC supports. I would just love to hear from you. What is your plan to fill the large gaps that will be left when ADLC closes when there doesn't appear to be any additional funding allocated? I'd really like to hear your thoughts on that. I know a number of folks have reached out to myself and my colleague from Edmonton-Glenora on that.

I'd like to shift gears to page 29 of your business plan, where it notes that "the ministry charts the course for the education system and oversees the administration of safe, caring and inclusive education programs and services." Now, what's intriguing to me and to my colleagues is that the terms "safe" and "caring" appear here once, but they do not appear anywhere else. We know from previous business plans, in fact, even your own business plan last year, that there were performance metrics tied to safe, caring, and healthy learning environments. I did pick up on the fact that you even mentioned safe and caring environments earlier in your comments. Given that, you know, why isn't this a priority for measurement? Why have those metrics been removed? I have to wonder: how can you possibly assure schools, staff, and, most importantly, students that there will be safe and caring learning environments for them if you have no way of tracking and no way of measuring it?

4:50

We can talk specifically about supports for students to make this tangible. As an example, we know that Bill 8 has had a chilling effect, the Bill 8 introduced in 2019. It's had a chilling effect on students and staff, not just those who identify as members of the LGBTQ2S-plus community but allies as well. I have to tell you, Minister, over the last number of months but even recently, I've had conversations with students and staff from all parts of this province who don't feel safe at school right now, don't feel like there's an opportunity to be themselves. From staff, through the chair, respectfully, who've experienced barriers in trying to set up gay-straight alliances and queer-straight alliances in their schools as well as for staff gay-straight alliances. You know, I wonder the message that this sends to those students and to the greater community when you've removed references to safe and caring.

I have to give another example: racialized students. Racism, we know, is on the rise across our province. Racialized students report high levels of bullying in our schools, again, at a time when we should be providing greater supports for students and ensuring that we're offering safe, antiracist school environments. What is the message that your ministry is sending to those students?

Again, I'm really looking forward to hearing your answers on curriculum implementation, on the ADLC as well as on safe and caring schools.

The Chair: Thank you. I will just give a quick reminder to make sure that we try and tie our questions to the estimates that are at hand, so either a line in the budget or a business plan. With that, I will pass it over to the minister for five minutes of response, and then we will be going to five minutes of question.

Member LaGrange: Thank you. I do believe I've addressed the curriculum development over and over again, but I'm happy to again inform you that when I release the curriculum, when it goes to the public here in the near future, that details on the funding will

be made clear. But suffice to know that it is not coming out of school board funds or school division funds, that it will not come out of the classroom, and that we are committed to having a successful implementation process involving both resources and professional development.

With that, I'll move to ADLC. The Alberta distance learning was something that at one point was the only system for providing online supports for students. When we went around the province – and there was a very thorough engagement across the province of all school authorities and education partners – to talk about the new funding model, we heard very loudly, very clearly that there were over 30 school divisions – I believe it was 32 at the time, and I know that number has increased even more in the pandemic – that were providing online programming. They felt that they were being disadvantaged in comparison to ADLC in terms of the funding, so they felt very much that there were alternatives.

We spoke about choice and the value of choice and that school students should have that choice. They were very clear that we needed to change the model because there were so many providing online programming to students and distance learning to students. Of course, through the pandemic many more school divisions have stepped up and provided distance learning through necessity to their students, and if they were not capable or did not have the capacity, they had partnered with other school divisions to provide that to their students.

For the ADLC: we felt very strongly that we wanted to give them the opportunity to transition to that particular school division who oversaw the ADLC, so we provided two years of funding for that school division. They made the choice to only accept the one year of additional funding and to cease operations in this upcoming '21-22 year. So that was the decision that was made by that board in particular.

When we talk about safe and caring schools and programs, absolutely it is critical that our schools do follow that metric of safe and caring. As I had indicated earlier, in the business plan we were restricted to only being able to provide X number of space, metrics, but we will have full metrics online very, very shortly, including all of the items that Member Irwin has indicated. I really want to say that, you know, boards have policies in place, and they are very robust policies. It is under the Education Act that they have to have safe and caring school policies. They have to have antibullying policies. They're very diligent about ensuring that those policies are followed. Inclusion groups are also mentioned in our Education Act and, again, that they are followed. There are steps to follow.

We see that – I wish that I had a copy of it here, but I know that you can find it online on our website – on the accountability pillar results. The accountability pillar results are surveys that are done across the whole education system. The last survey results that were done show that we've actually increased significantly. We've gone into the blue on the safe and caring, and those are metrics, surveys done with teachers, with students, and with parents. I just got the numbers. Currently, we're at 89.4 per cent. The previous year was 89 per cent. Those of you who follow these metrics know that any small per cent increase is really significant. That was 264,000 respondents. Parents, teachers, and students all feel that we are in an excellent position in terms of our safe and caring school policies, but from my perspective, until that number is 100 per cent, it's not good enough. We're always going to strive to get 100 per cent of students, parents, and teachers feeling that all our schools are safe and caring environments.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

With that, we will have a quick five-minute break. I see that the time is 4:57, so we will come back at 5:03 on the dot.

[The committee adjourned from 4:57 p.m. to 5:03 p.m.]

The Chair: Fantastic. It is 5:03. With that, we are returning from our break.

We are going next to MLA Smith. Sorry.

Mr. Smith: Thank you, Madam Chair. You know, we're hitting the home stretch here, Minister. What is it? An hour and a half left out of the six-hour time limit that we've got. One of the other members mentioned earlier that there's June tired. I don't know what you want to call it right now, but buckle up, grab a cup of coffee, and let's get at it again, okay?

We started talking before, in the last round that we had, about the weighted moving average. Generally I've heard some really, really good things about the weighted moving average, especially for the school divisions that have tended to see a shrinking population, especially in the rural areas. But I want to focus a little bit of our time today on school divisions that have seen some growth and how that weighted moving average is going to impact them. Basically, the question that I'm going to be asking, although I want to elaborate on it a little bit, is: how will the weighted moving average address the scenario of a rising school board population? That's the question that I want you to consider, and it's related to page 102 of your fiscal plan.

I want to set the stage for this question by talking a little bit about some of the independent schools that have contacted me and have seen their populations grow, you know, not hugely but by 10, 20, 25 students. When you're a small independent school, those 20 or 25 students can make a huge difference in your hiring and in how you're going to roll out the school year and how you're going to meet your students' needs. I want you to consider talking a little bit about how that weighted moving average is going to impact the smaller schools, because we know that the larger school boards – you know, an increase of even several hundred students can sometimes just get washed out in the largeness of all of the students that they have, but for a small school board that's not the way it works. That increase can significantly impact them, and that weighted moving average is going to significantly impact them like it wouldn't for one of the big four metro boards. I guess: could you spend some time today talking to us about how the weighted moving average will address the scenario of a school board that's growing?

I'd like you to consider – and this is a question that I don't really understand myself very clearly. Would that be affecting home-school authorities as well? I know that there are a significant number of home-school authorities that in this COVID era, as parents have been choosing to have education delivered as more of a Zoom and computer-driven exercise – will that affect the weighted moving average? Will it affect your home-school authorities that have seen significant growth in their schools' populations? I don't know if that's stretching this. You might have to explain for us a little bit how that weighted moving average works and how it would impact not – I know that there's a formula in there somewhere that talks about the percentage of how great the percentage is for growth in those school boards and how that will affect it.

If you could address those for myself and for the people of Alberta, I think it would bring some clarity to a situation, because some of these school boards are reaching out to us as MLAs, and they are coming to us and saying: "How is that impacting us? We're not sure we understand. You know, it's only been one year that we've had the weighted moving average." Some questions along that line as we sort of work our way into an understanding of how that goes are pretty understandable, but it's something that I think we need to address.

Lastly, again, how will the weighted moving average address the scenario of a school authority's or a school board's rising population? Thank you, Minister.

Member LaGrange: Thank you. Great questions and, certainly, you know, something that we considered. More often than not, when you're in a rural community, it is a declining enrolment that they're dealing with or shrinking enrolment. The whole factor around the weighted moving average in the funding formula is that it evens out the bumps, as I said earlier. For those that are shrinking or declining, it will soften the blow in terms of the number of students. Before, when it was on a per-student basis, actually, if you had even one or two students leave, it was significant, particularly for smaller school authorities, whereas now, when one or two students leave, those are evened out because it's spread over three years. I can go into exactly how that is determined.

I did want to address, before I forget, the home-school question that you did ask. Home-school parents and school authorities are funded on a per-student basis because they only do receive \$1,700 per student. Now, that is an increase in the new funding model from \$1,650 to \$1,700 per student: \$850 is to the parents, and \$850 goes to the supervising board. A weighted moving average on this amount, which is considerably less than when a student is in the school system, a brick-and-mortar school, is certainly something where we did not want to disadvantage those parents, so we actually did increase it marginally, from \$1,650 to \$1,700. That is not affected by the weighted moving average.

5:10

The results that we've seen on the weighted moving average approach are particularly evident through COVID-19 as many school boards did experience significant decreases in enrolment, especially in the nonmandatory programming of prekindergarten and kindergarten programs. As I said earlier, when I indicated the numbers and the fact that we're still continuing to fund all school divisions, because that's very, very important, that they have those funds available, I also indicated that in Budget 2021 we're going to provide \$130 million in provincial mitigation funding, which will allow our school authorities to support that safe learning environment for all of our students.

You did ask about those that are seeing growth. Again, where you see growth, particularly if it's just a small number of students, that bump is evened out because we are taking the previous year, the current year, and the projected year. Again I just want to draw your attention to the fact that because of COVID we felt very strongly that no school division would be penalized in this current year, nor will they be penalized in the next year.

I think that if I move forward, I would probably just like to share how the weighted moving average is actually determined. Give me just a moment to grab the correct sheet here. The way that the weighted moving average works is – the current funding model did replace the old funding model, as I've said before. The way it works is that under the current funding model, nearly every major education system grant is calculated using the weighted moving average. The way it works is that they would use the current school year, that would be weighted at a 20 per cent factor. The estimate of the – sorry. The previous school year is weighted at 20 per cent, the current year is weighted at 30 per cent, and the projection is weighted at 50 per cent.

The projected funding enrolment count will be determined based on Alberta Education's calculations and input from school authorities. The school authorities themselves are the ones that are giving us their projections. Of course, we have seen that in the 2019-2020 year – and then there were actual numbers. Yet in the

projections for 2020-21, school divisions, in fact, can sometimes err on the side of caution. In the 2019-2020 year there was a total student head count of 711,843, and in the 2020-21 projection count, they projected 730,030 students. So that's quite a difference, approximately a 19,000-student difference . . .

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Now we're going to go to Ms Hoffman.

Ms Hoffman: Thanks very much, Madam Chair. I just want to ask two things that relate back to curriculum again. I know the minister wants to give details later, but we're here to debate the budget today. Consistent with key objective 1.1, implement new curriculum, we're here to debate the business plan and the budget. Where is that in the budget? The minister said in her budget – I don't think the minister's office budget is enough to actually implement the curriculum, so where in the budget, for the people of Alberta, for the Ministry of Education is the money to implement curriculum? I appreciate that the minister wants to hold off on sharing that information, but this is the time and place to share information about the budget and how we're going to deliver on the key objectives in the business plan.

Secondly, the minister has mentioned many times, through you, Madam Chair, that professors, deans of education have given feedback on the draft curriculum in December. I understand that. Will the minister table in this House that feedback? Will she also provide the feedback from the educator groups as well? Many of them had lots to say about this, and I think it's only fair, again, if 1.1 is about implementing new curriculum – and the minister has touted that feedback was received – that that feedback be given to the people of Alberta. This isn't just the minister's business plan; this is the business plan for the education system, and all Albertans are shareholders and stakeholders in that work and deserve to have transparency on it.

I cede the remainder of my time to my colleague Mr. Eggen.

The Chair: Mr. Eggen.

Mr. Eggen: Thank you, Chair, and thank you to the Member for Edmonton-Glenora. I think that Albertans in general, Alberta families specifically with students in grade school, teachers, school boards are all very interested in pinning down when we're going to see this new curriculum rollout.

There was a curriculum that was built and put in place for 2019. That curriculum included the augmentation of basic math skills, development of literacy, identifying skills and competencies that went between the grades so that we could help to move kids from one developmental level to another in a much more sophisticated way through all different subject areas and grade levels. There was provision for financial literacy; First Nations, Métis, and Inuit study through all different grade levels; and a very strong focus as well on learning about different cultures and antiracism.

Let's say that you had a student from 2019 that was in grade 3. With these delays that we've seen thus far, that student would not be benefiting from new curriculum development in each of these subject areas when that person is in junior high, that same student missing all of those development levels along the way and missing on making sure that those basic skills were augmented and developed with new curriculum.

So when we look at this budget here today and I hear that the minister wants to bring forward some new curriculum development into the school system but there's no money to support it, then I think all of us are asking a very pointed question here today: what is the plan? What's the plan for developing and rolling out new curriculum in the province of Alberta right now, in this next fiscal year? If there's

not money for it, then it's not going to happen. If there's another year's delay, again, that same student that would have benefited in grade 3 in 2019 from developing math skills literacy; financial literacy; antiracism, First Nation, Métis, and Inuit knowledge; developing skills and competencies – all of that has been lost on a generation of kids. I don't think it's fair that we have to wait another year, and if we're now waiting another year, you must make sure you're supporting it in this budget. Where's that money to support the implementation of a new curriculum in this year's budget?

The Chair: Fantastic.

With that, we'll go the minister for five minutes of answers.

Member LaGrange: Five minutes of answers. Sure. Thank you so much. I've said it over and over again but am happy to repeat it, you know, that I have indicated that we, myself and our government, are very committed to a successful rollout. We know it will require resources in special development and supports and that those dollars will not come out of the classroom. They are in my budget, and I will be happy to make that fully transparent when I make the announcement on the new curriculum in the near future.

When I look at the fact that we have been extremely, extremely transparent – I've been provided copies of what we have on our web page, and you can go to our web page and see that we have an overview. You can go to the Curriculum Advisory Panel input, see what that input was and who were the advisers. We've just been so transparent, and we believe in continuing to be transparent and will continue, as further steps move forward, to provide that transparency to the whole public.

Step 2 is engagement; step 3 was the new ministerial order on student learning; step 4, the guiding framework update; step 5, the drafting; step 6, the piloting in the classroom; step 7, the implementation and next steps. Under each of those we have the projected dates, we have the individuals who are involved, and we have those documents that are hyperlinked that you can go to. It goes through all of the essentials that we have put in there, our focuses, what we've heard in general senses, and what areas we are focusing on. It is very comprehensive. It's all online. I welcome all of you to have a look at it. We'll continue to update it as more and more becomes available. When the new curriculum is out, I am expecting every single one of you to have an in-depth look at it and that we will have a robust conversation on it.

5:20

Just to highlight some of the pieces that have been mentioned in terms of diversity and antiracism and indigenous perspectives, I want to assure you that the new curriculum will reflect the diversity, the cultural perspectives, and the history of all Albertans. It will be aligned with the ministerial order on student learning that was announced in 2020. The ministerial order sets out the vision to guide education, update the curriculum, and strengthen the K to 12 system. There is emphasis on essential knowledge, civic virtues, and outcomes students need to succeed in school and throughout all of their life. The ministerial order also provides outcomes for learning to strengthen inclusion and ensure that Alberta students see themselves, their families, and their communities reflected in the curriculum. Every student should see themselves and their families and their communities reflected in the curriculum. Students will learn about the rich heritage of Alberta and Canada while valuing the strengths of diversity. They will study significant events in provincial, national, and world history and how they impact our current world. There will be opportunities to demonstrate commitment to the common good by exercising compassion, empathy, and support for each other in our diverse society.

On antiracism, Alberta's new K to 12 curriculum will continue to address topics and concepts and issues related to antiracism, particularly in social studies and wellness portions. Concepts, topics, and issues related to antiracism, diversity, and pluralism may also be addressed in other subject areas such as English, language arts, and literature. All new curriculum will be aligned with the ministerial order, as I've said over and over again. I cannot wait for you to have a look at it because I believe you will really see the tremendous effort and work that's gone into it.

When we look at the rollout, we did inherit a draft of the K to 6 curriculum. It was not put forward to the validation stage prior to my taking office, so something that we heard very much through the election process was that the public of Alberta really wanted to see transparency in the whole development and implementation of this new curriculum. We heard that promise. We were elected very strongly – over a million people elected our government – based in part on that promise to provide transparency, and we have done so. We will continue to do so as well.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

With that, we go over to MLA Glasgo.

Ms Glasgo: Thank you very much, Madam Chair, and thank you, Minister. I get to ask you another couple of questions, which is always exciting for me because I love getting the opportunity to exchange with you. I am going to ask some questions about PUF funding as I know that this is a matter of great importance to you, to be taking care of the most vulnerable, whether that be in school or within society or those who can't speak for themselves. I know, Minister, that you care a great deal about providing dignity for those, for all, and for making sure that we can do our best to care for the vulnerable within society, like I said, always but especially in your role as Minister of Education, I know that this is something that is on your heart and something that you and I have spoken about extensively.

I've received feedback from constituents, which is why I think it's important that I ask you this question. As you know, I'm their representative here in the Legislature. While it might be a critical question, I think it is very important that I do my job as an MLA in asking on PUF funding. We know that you've made changes to PUF last year and that some students who previously received supports from PUF might now receive them from another program, either a specialized learning support or what have you. I understand – and you can correct me if I'm wrong – that that was to ensure continuity of supports when students move, I believe, from ECS to kindergarten or from kindergarten to grade 1 or however that works. Like I said, I'm asking for clarification as well because I'm just trying to get clarity on this for a couple of constituents so that I know better when I go back to speak to them, of course, because that, ultimately, is what I'm here to do. I'll frame it by saying that.

I am questioning. I'm sure you're well aware that you've received a lot of feedback, we'll say, on PUF funding, and this funding was established to support young children who have been identified with a severe disability or delay. I know that you agree that this is our responsibility as a government to be able to provide extra support for these children within our education system, and I know that you work with the Minister of Children's Services on many of these things as well. It seems to me that your budget does reflect this, your deep care for this.

It's my understanding, from reading the funding manual to school authorities, that the PUF grant is included in line 3.2 of the estimates, under Learning Support Funding. If you could clarify, that would be great. I guess, Minister, my question will be: can you please confirm that this funding is accounted for in your budget and

show us which line item it's under specifically so that when constituents ask, I can point to that line item?

And could you please explain, I guess, elaborate on how this grant supports students and how these changes or what have you, perceived changes, might come across that way?

I guess I would just like to hear what inclusion of these students in our classrooms means to you, Minister, because I know that you do have quite a serious background in this with your brother and with your past experiences in rehabilitation. I can't remember. Rehabilitative practitioner I believe your former role was. I know that this, like I said, protecting the most vulnerable, is something that you have sought to do in every aspect of your life, and I know that this is something that's very, very important to you.

I believe MLA Smith has a question regarding this as well, so I am going to yield my time to MLA Smith so that we can try to stay on the same topic and get you to answer these questions in one go.

The Chair: All right.

With that, MLA Smith.

Mr. Smith: Thank you. How much time do I have?

The Chair: A minute.

Mr. Smith: One minute? Okay. I'll be real quick.

The question that I want to ask you, Minister, is: what is this support, PUF funding, going to look like compared to last year's budget? I know that I had colleagues reaching out to me, many former teachers or teachers concerned about the PUF funding and how it was going to be rolled out last year. I guess the question that I've got, then, this year is: what will the support, going forward into this coming year, look like compared to last year's budget? Thank you very much.

The Chair: Spectacular.

To the minister for five minutes of response.

Member LaGrange: Sure. Thank you so much. Can you hear me all right? I heard some echoing.

Thank you so much for the questions. Absolutely, PUF, unit funding, is and continues to be, has been, will be, and will, moving forward, continue to be an integral part of our ECS funding in our province. As I've indicated, we are the only jurisdiction that uses PUF for two years, eight months; the youngest in all of Canada to actually provide assessment, diagnosis, and services to severe disability or severe language-delayed students. I'm very proud of that, and I do know the impact that that has going forward. We want to set up our students, particularly our special-needs students, with success.

What we did here in the past was that for those students that were in kindergarten, when PUF was available in kindergarten, after, once they left kindergarten, they faced a huge cliff where the funding was no longer available. We introduced the specialized learning supports grant, and you're right, MLA Glasgo, that that falls under the overall envelope of supportive learning, the learning support funding envelope. I apologize that there are very similar titles. The specialized learning support, the PUF funding grant: those two grants fall under the learning support funding envelope, which is going to be at record levels with the additional increase of \$40 million in this upcoming school year. That overall learning support funding envelope will be at \$1.356 billion, \$40 million more than the previous budget. It does cover many grant items, including specialized learning support, the PUF funding, the FNMI grant, the ESL, the French language, the refugee, the socioeconomic, the geographic, and the school nutrition grants. I

can highlight for you that in the 2020-21 school year in the specialized learning supports grant we spent \$556 million, and in the PUF pre-K we spent \$80 million. A good portion, approximately half of the dollars of that overall learning support grant, went to these two specialized grant funds to of course provide the supports that are most necessary for those students.

5:30

I just want to break down for you some of the supports that students do receive. You know, school divisions are able to provide those students with additional supports, whether, you know, perhaps they need a technological item to help them in their learning, or perhaps they need an educational assistant. There are any number of additional resources. Whether they are through assessment or through actual tangible resources, those school divisions get that additional funding on top of the base funding for those students, and this is very important to understand. All those students are funded at the base level, first and foremost, and then these additional funds are provided on top of that base funding to address their most urgent needs.

The program unit funding, as I said earlier, is something that we continue to hear about and that in my re-evaluation of the whole learning support funding envelope over the next few weeks we will delve even further into. We continue to work with all our education partners and ensure that those special-needs students do indeed get the supports that they require. When the new funding manual and the funding profiles are actually put out at the end of March, you will see how we are able to address not only the specialized learning support, or the SLS, which supports all students through kindergarten all the way to grade 12 so that that learning support is consistent throughout all of the education journey, not just in kindergarten but right through from kindergarten, grade 1, right up to grade 12, so those students are not forgotten in the upper years.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

With that, we go to Mr. Deol.

Mr. Deol: Thank you, Madam Chair. To the minister through you, Madam Chair, my question is actually very specific to the new high school in Edmonton southeast. The announcement of this school was made last year, in 2020. When the announcement was made, we were almost, you know, at the opportunity, or you could say the worry, of losing this project. As the Edmonton school board said, this is the project on the top of the priority list last year and that we would move ahead on that rather than risk losing the opportunity.

There was quite a confusion last year on design funding. When I tried to get information through my office, I had different information, but my constituents actually had much different information than I was able to receive through my office. But saying this, the day before yesterday I put this question to the Infrastructure minister: where are we on this in terms of capital planning funding? He said that the school actually has funding available in this budget, and it was surprising for me to see today's announcement, looking into the school projects, that it is not on the list. My question to you specifically is that I also looked into the websites. I did not find any completion date for this. Where are we on this? Is capital funding available for this school?

I would also like to cede my time to Member Hoffman. She wanted to add more to this question.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thanks.

Ms Hoffman.

Ms Hoffman: Thank you very much, Madam Chair. Just to reiterate that the question around what line item the curriculum money is in has been asked probably at least two or three times, and we haven't been given an answer as to what line item it is in the budget. That question is definitely in order. I've been either participating or observing estimates since 2008, under Ed Stelmach's leadership. Questions that are specifically tied to key objectives and to questions around which line item those objectives will be funded through – if the minister isn't willing to answer that question, I think it is such an affront to democracy because this is core and foundational to the work we do as members of the Assembly in debating the budget. Knowing what the objectives are and where they line up in the budget is pretty standard . . .

The Chair: Ms Hoffman.

Ms Hoffman: . . . so I'm happy to receive that answer, through you, Madam Chair.

Other questions I wanted to touch on at this point are around transparency. Again, we didn't get an answer. We got definitely some comments around this being transparent, but we didn't get any commitment to actually table the feedback that was given around the curriculum.

Other topics I want the minister to touch on include the school nutrition program. Which line item does that fit in in this budget, and can we have a breakdown as to what it was and what it will be this year?

As well, I wanted to touch on the fact that I appreciate there is a continued commitment, which was started around the time under Minister Eggen's leadership, to ensuring that we do move forward with new school construction having playgrounds attached to them. I know the flowery language that was used around that and echo the commitment and the necessity and having the playgrounds with new school construction, but we also need playgrounds with existing schools when they reach their life expectancy. I don't believe that the minister said anything about that. Is there any commitment to expanding playground commitments for mature schools?

Lastly, as it relates to playgrounds, there is a reference to: if schools want to do something like add a ramp to make their playgrounds more accessible, they can pay out of pocket to do that. I think that inclusivity should be a foundation of this initiative around building new playgrounds at any school site. Recess is supposed to be one of the best times of day, and we know that it is one of the most isolating times of day for students who have disabilities, a variety of disabilities. Will the minister commit to changing policy around that and ensure that playgrounds that are funded by the people of Alberta are inclusive so that all students have an ability to play in them?

To recap: timelines for the southeast high school; the school nutrition program; which line items within the budget is key objective 1.1 to be implemented under in terms of the rollout of the curriculum; playgrounds and ensuring that they're more inclusive.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms Hoffman.

To Minister LaGrange for five minutes of response.

Member LaGrange: Thank you so much. I'm happy to respond back on the Edmonton southeast school. That school was in design phase originally, and then last year, in the 2020 year, it went to full funding. There are five new high schools that are anticipated to open in September 2024, with a total student capacity of approximately 6,375 students. There is the one in Edmonton, the grades 10 to 12 school in southeast Edmonton for Edmonton public schools; there is the one in Blackfalds, the grades 9 to 12 school for

Wolf Creek public schools; there is the grades 10 to 12 school in Heritage Valley for Edmonton Catholic schools; there is the one in Langdon, the grade 7 to 12 school for Rocky View schools; and there is the one in Leduc for grades 10 to 12 for Black Gold school division. Those are all slated to open in September 2024.

The understanding that I have right now is that the design phase appears to be complete or close to complete and that their procurement is under way, so it's very good news for southeast Edmonton, that by 2024 that school will be built and have students in it. It'll be a state-of-the-art, top-of-the line school that the students there will be proud to be part of and will benefit from those excellent, excellent learning spaces that will be there. I am happy to clarify for those who were not sure where things were at.

5:40

In terms of the curriculum funding, again I would state – I have stated it many times, but I'm happy to answer it again – that it is coming out of my Department of Education. Starting in '21-22, you'll note that there are minor changes in funding in the department. As we begin curriculum implementation, the department will support school authorities in the development, procurement of resources through centralized management, and that is on page 102 of the fiscal plan. Just to clarify that piece: fiscal plan, page 102.

When we look at the nutrition grant, it is, as I said earlier, one of the grants that falls under that \$1.356 billion of the student learning supports, and for Budget 2021 it was at \$16 million, just to clarify that. I believe that was the question, and if I've missed that question, because I didn't fully hear it, please feel free to ask it again in the next round of questions.

The playgrounds. Absolutely, playgrounds are something that – you know, when I was a trustee for 11 and a half years, it just never made sense to me that we were building schools, particularly elementary schools or K to 9 schools, that did not even have a playground. I know of some school authorities that didn't have a playground for five to six years after a school was built. This is not something that we should continue on with. I felt very, very strongly that we need to provide schools with the resources so that they weren't burdened with the extreme costs of building a playground.

I know that when I went to school, like many of you, the playgrounds were pretty simple. You know, they were pretty basic playgrounds, basically some pipe that was welded together and a swing on the other end of it. If you had a slide, that was a huge win. Now those playgrounds are just beautiful beyond belief. They really engage students. They are just works of art, but they also come with a very high price tag. A really good-quality, state-of-the-art playground is \$250,000, roughly. Well, you can get some maybe in that \$150,000 to \$200,000, but we're providing every school division with \$250,000 to build the best playground possible. Absolutely, we're looking for elements that are inclusive, but I do know that some school divisions have spent \$300,000, \$400,000, \$500,000, and even more. They felt they wanted to go to the additional extreme to get something that was even more enhanced because they had specific requirements.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister. I appreciate that.

Now we're on to Ms Lovely.

Ms Lovely: Thank you, Madam Chair. Thank you, Minister, for this opportunity to ask you a question. When I'm door-knocking, parental choice comes up all the time, so my question is this. We know that parents, not politicians, are always in the best position to make decisions on how their child should be educated. Alberta has

a long and successful history of supporting choice within our education. I was pleased to see on page 32 of the business plan key objective 4.1, “support choice within the education system.” Minister, my question is: can you outline some of the ways the government has empowered parents and cemented school choice into our education system?

I have another question. We know that Albertans value choice in education, and protecting the right to school choice was something that this government campaigned on. Parents and not politicians have the right to choose what kind of education works best for their children. This government has upheld the right for parents and school choice in Alberta, respecting parental rights that have been overtaken by political agendas and failed teaching fads. Under outcome 4 on page 32 of the business plan you explicitly state that key objective 4.1 is to support choice within the education system. Can you discuss the efforts your ministry is taking to continue to support school choice in Alberta?

Next, under Initiatives Supporting Key Objectives on the same page, I see that \$811 million has been allocated to sustain existing school facilities in Alberta. What projects will this money support for education for Alberta students?

With that, I'd like to cede my time to Member Rutherford.

The Chair: Fantastic, Ms Lovely.

Now on to Mr. Rutherford.

Mr. Rutherford: Thank you, Chair. How much time is left?

The Chair: Three minutes and 15 seconds.

Mr. Rutherford: Perfect. Minister, this past year hasn't been easy on anyone. I think that's pretty obvious to state. The global pandemic has completely upended our usual way of life. We know that it has had a huge impact on families and kids. The routine and that sense of normalcy are so important in the development of young minds, and the pandemic has interfered with this. We have seen this manifest in mental health issues in our youth in this past year. Mental health supports for youth are always important, but, I mean, there's really a light shone on it now as to how serious it can become. My question is: can you speak to the supports available to students through the learning support funding – that's line 3.2 on page 73 of the estimates – or other grants in your ministry?

Before we move on to answering that, I've had, you know, parents reach out this last year and really discuss, overall, the effect that this has had on their kids, the importance of them going to school. When schools opened up originally in September and again this past January, I know that was a big relief for many parents. It's important to have kids in routine and to be able to interact with other people their age and be a part of the school culture and receiving an education. It's important, so I'm glad to see that efforts were made to make sure that schools could remain open and do so safely.

I think you highlighted some numbers earlier on, maybe in your opening statement – since we're in about hour 5, I can't exactly say when it occurred. But I think you talked about, you know, the case rates that had occurred in schools, and it seems like, aside from a few incidents, the parents, the teachers, and the kids have done really well at maintaining a safe environment so that those schools can remain open. Again, I'm just looking for some information around mental health supports through the learning support funding or other grants from your ministry.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Rutherford.

Now on to Minister LaGrange.

Member LaGrange: Great. Thank you so much. As always, great questions. I was very proud to be the minister who introduced the Choice in Education Act, to have that passed through. MLA Lovely, you indicated we do have a long, proud history of choice in Alberta, and that was certainly something that we heard loud and clear when we were campaigning. But even more so, in the 2019 survey that we put out, when thousands – actually, it was over 50,000 Albertans – shared their views on choice in education, we heard very clearly that they supported choice.

When we passed that Choice in Education bill, it really did affirm that parents have the right to choose the type of education that they feel is best for their children, that of course they, not politicians, should have that choice available to them. So, you know, we just celebrate the fact that we do have so many choices in Alberta which are not found across Canada. I believe it's one of the strong pillars that makes our education system so great in Alberta. We do have a public and a separate school system. We have francophone schools. We have charter schools. We have independent private schools. We have early childhood education. We have home education.

You know, it is really something to celebrate because this legislation that we introduced really does affirm that parents have the right to choose the kind of education they feel is best for their children. They have the right to the support, the creation of new charter schools, including vocation-based charter schools. It protects the status of independent private schools, and it provides new options for parents who choose to home-school their children.

5:50

Given that we've had such a long, proud history, you would think that this was something that was never in question. But, unfortunately, there were many questions and many that were very fearful that these choices wouldn't exist, so it was very important for our government to take the steps to really reinforce that they are valued and that they are respected throughout all of Alberta, and we're very, very proud of that.

When we look at the COVID response – and thank you, MLA Rutherford, for your questions – it has been hard. There has been anxiety. I know that there was tremendous anxiety when we were looking to open schools to in-the-classroom learning in September. It was a very anxious time because we were dealing with the pandemic, which still had many unknowns. Yes, we had developed a very robust re-entry plan with three scenarios. We had schools that were prepared. We had given the health guidelines. We continue to review the guidelines with Dr. Hinshaw and her team. All of those were put in place, but it's always the fear of the unknown.

As a mother and as a grandmother – I'm a mother of seven; I'm a grandmother now of seven grandchildren – I understand that fear. I understood that, yes, while it was very important to get our students back with a teacher in front of them in the classroom so that they could have that socialization, that ability to be with their peers, to have that interaction, we did recognize that there would be anxiety and that this will be something we will be looking to deal with for probably a long time. We did recognize, as a government, that the COVID-19 pandemic is both a health and social crisis. We've been addressing that through both immediate and long-term physical and mental health initiatives that the Associate Minister of Mental Health and Addictions has been implementing. I've been working closely with him, as have all the other ministries, and we will continue to work closely on a number of initiatives.

Under the learning support funding envelope I also want to highlight that we provide funding to school authorities to support student wellness. This includes psychological and social-emotional support and access to mental health workers and behavioural

consultants. That is funded under our student wellness program allocation because it does recognize that children and student wellness can affect classroom learning and social interactions, both of which are essential to their success. Funding is provided to create capacity among school authorities, to offer children and students wellness programs that will help improve their educational outcomes and some of the . . .

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

With that, we're going to Ms Irwin.

Member Irwin: Thank you.

The Chair: Sorry; Member Irwin.

Member Irwin: No sweat. Thank you, Chair. I'd like to direct you to page 31 of the business plan, where you talk about increasing "opportunities for hands-on learning experiences in apprenticeship, trades and vocational education." I know first-hand, having been a teacher and administrator in rural Alberta, the importance of those programs. You know, I would love to just get a little bit of clarity around how much funding is being allocated specifically to those areas. I have to tell you that we have heard some reports of schools losing programming, including dual-credit opportunities.

I was proud, when I was working in Alberta Education, to help oversee the expansion of dual-credit programs, of course, under the leadership of previous minister Eggen. You know, those are incredibly powerful programs. To hear concerns that some boards may have to be ending dual-credit opportunities is quite disheartening because, from our perspective, there is so much room for growth in dual credit, and it's a perfect way to address your outcome there of increasing those hands-on learning experiences. Rural jurisdictions, of course, in particular, are facing some challenges. So I would just like to ask: how will you ensure equitable access to experiential learning opportunities like dual credit, like RAP, the registered apprenticeship program? What funding supports are in place?

I will cede my time to Mr. Eggen.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Eggen.

Mr. Eggen: Thank you, Member Irwin and, through the chair, to the minister. I have kind of a mixed bag here of things that I wanted to ask about in different topic areas, so excuse the lack of unity of theme with my questions. I'm curious about – on your capital project I see, for example, you have the Milk River renovation. Always, when you're doing a major renovation, I think it's prudent to make sure that you are doing a cost evaluation against building a new structure altogether, so I'm just curious if your capital department did undertake a comparative analysis to see whether the Milk River, you know, renovation would compare up in cost efficiency to building a new structure.

Then further to the capital project list that you released today, I'm curious to know how many of those capital projects are, in fact, P3s. We know that, again, we did a very careful analysis of the cost effectiveness and the efficiency and the practicality of P3 schools in the province of Alberta, and it kind of came up wanting, quite frankly. The P3 model simply was a way, I think, to defer capital costs further down a budget over a period of a number of years instead of a single year, so it was more of an accounting practice than it was a reflection of the practical reality on the ground, where school boards and parents and communities want to have access and control over their school assets. They want to use the school for different purposes. They want to make changes and renovations to

those physical buildings, and they would like to have that ownership to make those decisions. P3s interfere with that process, quite frankly, and, you know, the myriad of challenges around the province – I think you could be very aware of that as minister if you choose to look it up – of dissatisfied communities, school boards, individual teachers, parents, families, kids when they ended up with a P3 school.

So how many of those are P3 schools? Did you do an analysis of cost efficiency and effectiveness when making those choices for those capital projects? Could you release that information for us specifically on Milk River, the renovation versus building a new school, and the other ones if you did choose to build any of them as P3s?

I'm curious as well because there are a number of ones just for design, you know, so if you had five or six different schools there as a design announcement project – I sort of can understand the utility of doing that; maybe not so many on one budget – again, you would be engaging with a private company to go through that design phase. If you've made that choice, you've gone down that road, then you can . . .

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Eggen.

Now to Minister LaGrange.

Member LaGrange: Thank you so much. I appreciate all the great questions. The question on dual credit and those supports for students that are really wanting to have an experiential learning experience, I know very well. I have seven children, three of whom are in the trades, so I very much understand the value of being able to have those experiences early on, to be able to even get a portion of your trades certificate or have the ability to have it count in terms of credits toward a postsecondary. There are a number of avenues that they can explore in that area. I absolutely understand and recognize the value of this. We are, through this program and the continuation of the programs, enabling our youth to explore careers in the trades and in technology, which is critical to our economic future, that we have these valuable, valuable professions respected.

When we look at the career and technology studies programs that provide the opportunity for Alberta students to learn a trade or a vocation at their school through journey-certificated tradespeople, it's critical, so we want to continue that. We know that these valuable skills that students learn are taught by qualified instructors, so the department has begun intakes right now for the '21-22 cohort of the career and technology studies bridge to certification program. This is often called the CTS bridging program, and many of you may be aware of it. This program allows school authorities to apply for \$50,000 per participant in conditional grant funding to sponsor and support qualified individuals to complete an Alberta teacher preparation program.

6:00

Through this CTS bridging, certificated journeymen persons or health care professionals or informational technologists can work to become a teacher, and they can pursue all of their educational requirements to get their teaching certificate so that they are able to teach our students. This is one way that we are enhancing the ability for our young people to actually have those experiences.

Now, we do know that the RAP programs were affected by the pandemic, obviously, when businesses were having to close. Students were not allowed onto job sites, but I understand that since that time many of those students have been able to go back into their previous work experience endeavours.

Again I bring your attention back to the fact that we funded on a projected head count of 730,000 students, when 705,000 students

attended, so school boards did have the ability to maintain all of those valuable dollars, even though they had lower enrolment counts, to support their students, including the students that are in these wonderful programs, that we value so much.

In terms of the P3s – and, MLA Eggen, I totally understand what you're talking about. As a former trustee, a former board chair, we have experience with P3s, but it wasn't the infrastructure or the school itself. It was actually the contract that was of issue. That is something that I know Minister Panda, the Minister of Infrastructure, who actually is overseeing the builds of the schools – as you know, the determination of which schools are to be built is within my department, as Jeff had indicated earlier. It goes through that very intense gated process, and then once there is a determination of funds available by Treasury, then those schools are chosen, and they are turned over to Infrastructure to then oversee the builds.

Infrastructure really is the department that oversees the building of new schools or major modernization. They do all of the assessments and then, you know, assign it to contractors, so they will be the determinants of whether it becomes a P3 or not. In terms of Milk River, I am . . .

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

With that, we go back to the government caucus and Mr. Amery.

Mr. Amery: Thank you very much, Madam Chair. I hope you can hear me okay.

Minister, I want to take this opportunity to also thank you for providing your insight and your vision for our children in this province in the next fiscal year and throughout the rest of the mandate and beyond. I've listened with great interest. I know that we are nearing the end of this very long day of estimates, but I do have a very important issue that I want to raise with you, a personal issue that impacts me and impacts many, many Albertans.

As you already know, Minister, I have three young children, two of which now are in the Calgary public school system. I'm sure I speak for many of the very proud parents in Calgary-Cross and throughout our province when I say that we have all had and continue to have some concerns with respect to our children as they deal in this post-COVID world. As they returned to school, I think there were a lot of questions. Obviously, you heard many of those, and so have all of us, and we continue to hear that. I, frankly, still have some of those questions as well.

My own experiences, Minister, I would submit to you, resemble something similar to the experiences of many of our parents, especially with younger children, and that is this. The COVID-19 protocols are being followed very diligently. I've had the opportunity to visit my children's schools. I've had the opportunity of visiting other schools. I know that staff and educators throughout our province are implementing the COVID protocols diligently and universally, but the reality is that young children simply need a lot more supervision and guidance when it comes to ensuring that they adhere to the protocols of social distancing, mask policy protocols, and so on and so forth.

Now, Minister, with all due respect to all of my colleagues, I think a lot can be learned by going through the line items and the plan, and I think a lot can be learned from hearing about real-world stories. I want to let you know that these real-world, tangible examples from those who are directly impacted, including myself, I think might be helpful to you in your ministry and as you move forward.

I can tell you now, Minister, that my five-year-old daughter has lost more masks than I care to remember, so I have a seemingly endless supply of masks in my car just to keep them stocked for

those days when I'm fortunate to drop her off at school but she doesn't have a mask, and that happens more often than not, quite frankly. The underlying issue here really is that I want to be satisfied and all parents want to be satisfied that our students are returning to school and returning to their classrooms in the safest possible manner. I know that the safe return of our students to the classroom has been a priority for all parents in Alberta and, quite honestly, a priority for you. In all of the discussions that I have been fortunate enough to be at and to hear from you, I think that has been a fundamental priority for you as we move through this COVID world. It's something that parents, teachers, and all Albertans have been asking us to ensure, and I think that if I were to tell you what I received the most feedback on, it is by far our safe return of the students to classrooms. I think this is really one of the most important things that we can do throughout this pandemic.

Minister, I've read your fiscal plan in great detail and with great interest, and obviously many of my colleagues have done the same. On page 85 it outlines a \$263 million grant from the federal government for the safe return to school program. Now, we know that this funding was earmarked for a number of different things: improving air ventilation, hand sanitization, hygiene, purchasing PPE, and so on and so forth. My question is a little bit more specific than that. My question is: how has this money been spent, and what is the overall impact to the education system? And, in particular, how has it ensured or how will it continue to ensure the safe return of our students? Moreover, I want to know in addition to that: are there any residual effects of these funds that will continue to benefit our schools over the long term as we navigate through COVID? I don't think a whole lot of us knew how long COVID would last – we probably still don't know – but can we expect to see the application of these funds and their impacts in the long term and not just in the short term?

Thank you, Minister.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Amery.

Now to the minister.

Member LaGrange: Thank you. Great, great question and very top of mind, because every decision that was made has been made through the lens of safety as the number one priority for both our students and our staff. I cannot tell you how that weighs heavily on myself and those in my department as well as all of the education partners and Dr. Hinshaw and her team, that provide us with ongoing guidance and support. You know, I often say that I have seven children, but I actually now feel like I have over 700,000 children that I'm looking after. It is something where I look at every one of those students as if they were my own child. What would I do and how would I want them looked after? It is very, very important that we provide the safest return to class possible. You know, while we haven't been perfect, because this is all new – the pandemic has been new – we feel we have had great successes, as you have articulated.

6:10

I do hear those real-world stories. I do hear from parents. Of course, I'm in my community. I'm actually out and about in terms of lots of Zoom calls with all the education partners. I meet with the zones, and I hear directly from both trustees and superintendents but also from teachers and from parents. I've had numerous letters written to tell me what's been good, what hasn't been so good, and we continue to look at refining the process.

We also know that right now we have variants of concern, and we are monitoring those very, very closely. I get daily updates on the numbers of students and staff, of current cases, that have actual

COVID as well as where those schools are. I am constantly looking at these numbers, and it's very, very important.

When that \$263 million of federal funding was transferred as part of a bigger initiative by the federal government to all school divisions right across Canada, I felt very strongly that those people that are at the front lines, these school boards, who are dealing with very unique situations from one end of the province to the other, are the ones that are in the best position to make the decisions. So \$250 million: the vast majority of that \$263 million was distributed to school authorities on a per-student basis. It was equitable right across the whole system. I know that was valued. I know other jurisdictions across Canada have chosen to do things differently and have utilized those supports in other ways, but I felt very strongly that it needed to go to the school jurisdictions themselves.

The requirements were that they had to be used for COVID-related items. School authorities had to use them for COVID-related items, they had to track those items, and we had to report back in December through the Premier in a letter to the Prime Minister that then would release, if we actually did adhere to their requirements, the second tranche. That \$263 million was divided in half. We got the first half in the first half of the school year, and now we've received the second half. One hundred and sixty million dollars has been used in this fiscal year, and the remaining \$90 million is continuing on into the next fiscal year because, of course, the government fiscal year does not align with the school year.

Education worked with our education partners on the safe re-entry guidance and how to best distribute these funds. As I said, the school authorities used these funds to address staffing. They addressed adaptation of learning spaces. They used it for personal protective equipment needs. They used it for cleaning and safety. They used it for considerations in their schools in terms of . . .

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

With that, we move on to Ms Hoffman.

Ms Hoffman: Thank you very much, Madam Chair. I expect this is probably going to be my last opportunity to speak during these estimates, so I want to sort of summarize a few of the key themes that I've heard and get the minister's response to them. First, I want to say thank you for clarifying specifically page 102 of the fiscal plan. I will note for the minister and for all who are following this that the Department of Education operations is going to be \$5 million less in the next year than it is currently forecast to be in this current year. This is the line item that the minister said the curriculum rollout is going to be funded under.

When I looked at the other tables in the fiscal plan around staffing, there's actually a decrease of one FTE planned for the Department of Education, and the minister says that this is the line item and these are the people who are going to be responsible for the rollout of arguably the first phase of the biggest curriculum rewrite our province has ever experienced. So it doesn't give me a ton of confidence that that's going to be executed with the resources that students and staff require to have a successful transition in terms of previous curriculum and this curriculum when that is the line item and it is being cut. Now the minister is probably going to say: well, it's going to be up \$5 million from . . .

The Chair: I will just remind you: through the chair.

Ms Hoffman: Oh, it is through the chair. Yeah. I didn't say that to the minister. I said that she's probably going to say it, which means I'm speaking through the chair, Madam Chair. She's probably going to say: well, it's an increase of \$5 million over budget. But the difference is the forecast. This year the department spent \$98

million. Next year they're planning on spending \$93 million according to the estimates that we're being asked to approve, so that is a \$5 million cut to the resources available to support curriculum implementation at a time where there's going to be more work done and needed to be done to support that curriculum implementation.

There is an increase projected for Department of Education operations in the two out-years. There's also an increase projected for education property tax for the two years in the out-years. This is a time when Alberta families, I think, need and deserve a government that's going to be there to support them, and we see that the government is going to be reaching into Albertans' pockets rather than funding the proper implementation of curriculum. Perhaps it's that the minister isn't ready to do a full implementation, and that's why it isn't being properly funded, but I don't think that that's fair to the students of Alberta.

I also want to highlight and get the minister's confirmation. Again, reading through the budget's estimates, line item 3.2, learning support funding is again being cut, this time \$257 million compared to the forecast for this year. Learning support funding, which is the line item that we keep being told to go to for things like PUF and other inclusive education grants: this year \$1.6 billion is invested; next year, \$1.3 billion. I'm rounding, obviously. So the difference is a cut of \$257 million over what's being spent this year to support learning support funding. I don't think that that, again, instills a high degree of confidence.

This is at the same time that we know that the minister's own numbers at the beginning of the day clarified and reiterated what Finance officials told us, that there will be 20,000 more students planning on going to school next year through whatever form that might be, whether it's home learning or learning in a school environment. Twenty thousand more students. The fiscal plan also shows that there will be more than 2,000 fewer staff there to support them, and we see that the funding that's intended is going to be far lower next year for that learning support funding according to the government's own general estimates. Will the minister confirm that line item 3.2 is accurate in her budget? It definitely doesn't seem to be reflected in a lot of the messaging that we're hearing, but it's in black and white on page 73, line item 3.2.

I also just want to say that this is a time when we've talked about the number of students going up but also the needs going up. We know that Alberta students have had a significant gap in terms of their learning as complicated by the chaos that's happening in our world right now, the number of times they've been sent home to isolate, and the transition between online and home and back to school environments multiple times. We know that this has been an incredibly difficult year. There have been learning gaps. There have been social and emotional gaps. There have been mental health and psychological gaps. Students need more support next year, not less. Cutting 2,000 staff from the numbers of staff who used to be there pre-COVID, Madam Chair, doesn't reflect the needs of Alberta students. The minister celebrated sustainable and predictable but fails to talk about adequacy. The real question is: are we adequately supporting students? I would say no.

The Chair: Thank you.

To the minister for a response.

Member LaGrange: Thank you for those questions. I believe we've gone over this over and over again, but I'm happy to do it again and point out the inconsistencies in what I just heard from the member opposite. When I look at page 102 of the Department of Education – when you look at the budget for 2021, it was \$88 million, and in estimate '21-22 it's \$93 million. What the member opposite was comparing was obviously the forecast. Of course,

there are many other things that are in the forecast because we are in a pandemic year, so there are items in there.

6:20

When I go to line 3.2 again, going from forecast to estimate, the actual budget for this line item for learning support funding for the 2020-21 year is \$1,315,179,000. It is now going up \$40 million to \$1.356 billion or \$1,356,000,090. When you look at the forecast, which was \$1.6 billion, that includes – and I’ve said it before – all of the COVID-related funding adjustments. I will read them again. There was \$248.6 million that was used for the reopening safely of schools funded through the federal government. There was an additional \$39.4 million decrease for front-line education worker wage top-up as part of the government’s critical worker benefits. These, of course, are the decreases that are now reflected in the new estimate because those were added in the forecast. There is \$10 million for the purchase of PPE that was also in that number.

Another adjustment in that number was an increase to enhance what I’ve been saying all along, \$40.9 million to enhance the specialized learning envelope, the actual learning support funding envelope, which oversees those specialized learning grants: the SLS grant; the program unit funding grant; the English as a second language and French language grant; the refugee student grant; the First Nation, Métis and Inuit grant; the socioeconomic status grant; the geographic grant; and, of course, the school nutrition grant.

Again, I want to go back to the member’s comments in terms of the number of students, reiterating that the projected numbers for the 2021-22 head count are 725,955 students. That is correct. That is the projected head count. But the projected head count last year, in the 2020-21 year, which we are funding fully, is 730,030 students. As you can see, we are currently funding through our new funding model, the weighted moving average model, for 730,000 students when, in fact, it is only projected that we will see in this upcoming year 725,955 students. Again, we are continuing to fund our education system extremely well. We did not want to penalize anyone that had forecasted above, of which there were numerous, because, as I said earlier, in the 2019-2020 year our actual numbers were 711,843 students, total head count students, and, in fact, in 2020-21 the number of students that actually were in our schools was 705,917. We did not penalize any school division nor will we penalize them in this upcoming year.

Again, I want to reiterate that we have very healthy school reserves. They have gone from \$363 million in the 2019 year to, as of August 31, 2020, \$383.6 million in operating reserves. That’s a \$21 million increase overall. In the capital reserves they’ve gone from \$208 million to \$221 million as of August 31, 2020, an additional \$13.4 million increase.

It is wonderful to also be able to share that in Budget 2021 we are going to provide, on top of the funding that we’ve already allowed students to maintain even though they experienced lower enrolment, an additional \$130 million in mitigation funding that holds harmless school divisions . . .

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Now we move on to Mr. Gotfried.

Mr. Gotfried: Thank you, Madam Chair. Thank you to the minister as well for really giving us an incredible amount of detail around Budget 2021 today. I just wanted to thank her and her staff for a budget that does continue to ensure that Albertans are some of the best funded students, best funded education system across the country, which I think is a great commitment to the future, which we all know is a bright one.

I’d also like to thank you for the capital investment, over a billion in capital investment. I come from a more mature community, where I see I have one modernization on the CBE list, which I hope is going to happen. Many of the schools are, you know, well, 20, 30, 40, sometimes 50 years old in the area, and certainly that, I think, is something that’s required.

Minister, I know we’re tight on time, so I’m going to move straight into my question on experiential learning. We hear a lot about it. In fact, the Premier uses the term “parity of esteem” for many of the trades when he talks about them through the work that he did when he was a federal minister. I know we’re moving towards that in the postsecondary world as well, but on page 31 of the business plan one of the key objectives I see is key objective 1.4, an “increase [in] opportunities for hands-on learning experiences in apprenticeship, trades and vocational education.”

We know that hands-on learning in all forms is a great opportunity for students of today, but this demonstrates that not everybody is on a path to university. We have incredible trades schools and other vocations which students can do. Can you tell us a bit more about this objective, what the ministry is doing, what you’re doing to meet this objective for our students? A secondary question on that would be: I know that the only performance metric listed under outcome 1 is high school completion rate. I see there are some targets and objectives in there, but I would like to understand how that relates to this objective and how we’re going to make sure that Alberta students have the access to those apprenticeships, trades, and vocational education, which we know is so important.

I’ll cede the rest of my time to the minister. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Gotfried.

Now to the minister for your reply.

Member LaGrange: Great. Thank you. Again, critical programs for our students. It really does enhance their educational experience and their trajectory as they move forward from education on into the real world, whether they pursue a trade or whether they pursue some other postsecondary academic endeavour. I know that Minister Nicolaides and I have spoken quite often on how we can align so that the transition from K to 12 is more seamless as they go into postsecondary or into any one of the trades that they’re looking to move forward in.

I just wanted to add something that I hadn’t been able to say in the previous answer on this particular issue, that in the career and technical studies grant we are providing \$800,000 for rural school programming, which allows rural schools to bring in instructors who are specialized in their occupations and provide career-related training to those students. That’s in addition to all of the other supports that we are currently giving. We often see that rural schools, typically because of their location from a postsecondary, do not have the same ability to access those specialized career technologists and trainers. So that was very important, that we provide that equity across the system.

I do know that school authorities are becoming very innovative and creative. We have various examples of that where they are partnering with postsecondaries via virtual training. You know, given the emerging technologies that we have, that is something that they’re really tapping into and really ensuring that they can provide a diversity of programming in. Typically a decade or two ago the opportunities for students in dual credit were limited, but those have expanded greatly. There are so many more opportunities, so many more actual fields that they can get into and have that experiential learning. It is critical to get that at an early age.

Sometimes I hear from students themselves. I have a minister-student advisory council, and I hear from my students that one of the elements of trying on some of these professions early on and having the dual credit experience or the RAP program experience, the CTS programs, is that they can try a field of study or a career choice that they think they might like, but sometimes they find out – you know what? – it wasn't the best fit. So even finding that out before they head into postsecondary, where the expense is much greater in terms of their commitment to tuition and to perhaps even living expenses and some of the other expenses when you go to a postsecondary, giving them that early ability to try on activities, to partner with businesses that can give them that hands-on training . . .

The Chair: I apologize for the interruption, but I must advise the committee that the time allotted for the consideration of the ministry's estimates has now concluded. I would like to remind committee members that we are scheduled to meet next today, March 10, 2021, at 7 p.m. to consider the estimates of the Ministry of Justice and Solicitor General. Before we conclude, I would just ask that everyone take any of their cups or drinks with them and clear the room as we have a very quick timeline before the next meeting at 7 p.m.

Thank you, everyone. The meeting is now adjourned.

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

