



Legislative Assembly of Alberta

The 31st Legislature
First Session

Standing Committee
on
Families and Communities

Ministry of Education
Consideration of Main Estimates

Tuesday, March 11, 2025
9 a.m.

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The 31st Legislature
First Session**

Standing Committee on Families and Communities

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Goehring, Nicole, Edmonton-Castle Downs (NDP), Deputy Chair
Wright, Peggy K., Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview (NDP), * Acting Deputy Chair

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Also in Attendance

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Standing Committee on Families and Communities

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Ministry of Education

Hon. Demetrios Nicolaidis, Minister

Jeff Willan, Assistant Deputy Minister and Senior Financial Officer, Financial Services and Capital Planning

9 a.m.

Tuesday, March 11, 2025

[Ms Lovely in the chair]

**Ministry of Education
Consideration of Main Estimates**

The Chair: Well, good morning, everyone. If everyone could take their seats, we're going to get started here. I'd like to call the meeting to order and welcome everyone in attendance. The committee has under consideration the estimates of the Ministry of Education for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2026.

I'd ask that we go around the table and have members introduce themselves for the record. Minister, please introduce the officials who are joining you at the table. My name is Jackie Lovely, and I'm the MLA for the constituency of Camrose and the chair of the committee. We will begin starting to my right.

Mrs. Johnson: Jennifer Johnson, MLA for Lacombe-Ponoka.

Mr. McDougall: Myles McDougall, MLA for Calgary-Fish Creek.

Mrs. Petrovic: Chelsae Petrovic, MLA for Livingstone-Macleod.

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

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

Mr. Nicolaides: You want me to introduce everybody?

The Chair: Would you?

Mr. Nicolaides: I'd be happy to. On my far left Kindy Joseph, assistant deputy minister of program system support; to my immediate left Lora Pillipow, deputy minister; myself, Demetrios Nicolaides, Minister of Education; to my right Jeff Willan, assistant deputy minister of financial services and capital planning, who's wearing a suit; and to my far right Sarah Brennan, executive director of K to 12 fiscal oversight.

Ms Wright: Peggy Wright, MLA, Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview.

Ms Chapman: Amanda Chapman, MLA, Calgary-Beddington.

Mr. Eggen: Good morning. My name is David Eggen. I'm the MLA for Edmonton-North West.

Mr. Haji: Sharif Haji, MLA for Edmonton-Decore.

The Chair: We do not have anyone joining us online.

I'd like to note the following substitutions for the record: Mr. Rowswell is here for Mr. Lundy, Ms Chapman for Member Batten, Ms Wright for Ms Goehring as deputy chair.

A few housekeeping items to address before we turn to the business at hand. Committee proceedings are live streamed on the Internet and broadcast on Alberta Assembly TV. The audio and visual stream and transcripts of the meetings can be accessed via the Legislative Assembly website. Members participating remotely are encouraged to turn your camera on, if anyone should join us via that mode, while speaking and mute your microphone when not speaking. Remote participants who wish to be placed on a speaker's list are asked to e-mail or message the committee clerk, and members in the room should signal, please, to the chair. Please set your cellphones and other devices to silent for the duration of the meeting.

Hon. members, the main estimates for the Ministry of Education shall be considered for three hours. Standing Order 59.01 sets out the process for consideration of the main estimates in the legislative policy committees. Suborder 59.01(6) sets out the speaking rotation for this meeting. The speaking rotation chart is available on the committee's internal website, and hard copies have been provided to the ministry officials at the table. For each segment of the meeting blocks of speaking time will be combined but only if both the minister and the member agree. If debate is exhausted prior to three hours, the ministry's estimates are deemed to have been considered for the time allotted in the main estimates schedule and the committee will adjourn. Should members have any questions regarding speaking times or rotation, please e-mail or message the committee clerk about the process.

With the concurrence of the committee I can call a five-minute break near the midpoint. The three-hour clock will continue to run. Does anyone oppose having a break? All right. We'll have a little break, then.

Ministry officials who are present may at the direction of the minister address the committee. Ministry officials seated in the gallery, if called upon, have access to a microphone in the gallery area and are asked to please introduce themselves for the record prior to commenting. Pages are available to deliver notes or other materials between the gallery and the table. Attendees in the gallery may not approach the table. Space permitting, opposition caucus staff may sit at the table to assist their members. However, members have priority to sit at the table at all times.

Points of order will be dealt with as they arise, and individual speaking times will be paused. However, the block of speaking time and the overall three-hour meeting clock will continue to run. Any written material provided in response to questions raised during the main estimates should be tabled by the minister in the Assembly for the benefit of all members.

Finally, the committee should have the opportunity to hear both the questions and the answers without interruption during estimates debate. Debate flows through the chair at all times, including instances when speaking time is shared between a member and the minister.

I would now invite the Minister of Education to begin with your opening remarks. You have 10 minutes, sir.

Mr. Nicolaides: Great. Thank you, Chair. I'm happy to be here today to discuss our budget and main estimates. I've introduced the officials that I have with me at the table. In the gallery I also have Meghann Eagle, assistant deputy minister of system excellence; Carla Johnson, assistant deputy minister of curriculum and career education; Boris Contreras, assistant deputy minister of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit education; Zoe Cooper, assistant deputy minister of strategic services; and Erin Owens, executive director of capital planning.

Alberta's education system is currently facing several challenges as growing communities, rising enrolment, and increasing costs are putting pressure on our schools. Our government is fully committed to ensuring students and schools have the supports that they need to be successful. I'm confident that Budget '25 responds to the challenges that we face with investments that will ensure Alberta students receive the world-class education they deserve and expect.

Starting first with our operating spend, Education's operating spend will reach an all-time high of \$9.8 billion in '25-26, which is an increase of \$426 million or 4.5 per cent from last year. Our goal is to drive as many dollars as possible into the classroom, and we give our school authorities maximum flexibility to use these funds and manage their resources. As the province continues to grow, so too does our student population. Through Budget '25 we're making

historic investments in education to address rising enrolment and deliver world-class education to our kids.

Beginning next school year, we will support school boards by providing funding based on an updated, two-year average adjusted enrolment model rather than a three-year weighted moving average. This approach will allocate funding based on 30 per cent of a school authority's current student enrolment level and 70 per cent of its projected enrolment for the upcoming year. This is a move that many school authorities have requested and is more responsive to growth in metro and urban jurisdictions while at the same time still shielding those authorities with declining enrolment. Over the next three years we will invest more than \$1.1 billion into our education system to address enrolment growth. This funding will support the hiring of more than 4,000 teachers, educational assistants, and other support staff over the next three years.

We've also heard that rising costs of programs and services are putting a strain on school board operations. We've responded by increasing funding rates. Last summer we increased rates by \$85 million, and this will grow by another \$389 million to support classroom operations.

We've heard from teachers that addressing increasing, complex classroom issues remains an urgent priority. To help address classroom complexity, we are providing \$55 million in this budget, which is a 20 per cent increase from what was provided last year. This funding for classroom complexity is part of a \$1.6 billion investment to support specialized learning needs of students.

I'm pleased to say that we are increasing all the other learner support funding grant rates by 2.32 per cent in the '25-26 school year. In addition, Budget '25 will make sure that students are taken care of with \$110 million in funding over the next three years to provide support for mental health, literacy and numeracy, and complex needs and autism.

Supporting our youngest learners is one of the most important things that we can do. This school year we've increased the frequency of screening for grades 1 to 3, and we've added screening for kindergarten. We've also planned future screenings for grades 4 and 5. This work is vital to giving children the literacy and numeracy skills that they need in the early, formative years. These simple screening tools were developed by academic experts from across North America and are strongly supported by third-party organizations, including Autism Canada and Decoding Dyslexia Alberta. Schools use the results of these screeners to identify students who need additional help building literacy and numeracy skills, and through Budget '25 we'll be providing over \$40 million to support these interventions for students.

Student transportation is an important part of our education system, and we are investing \$487 million to support a safe transportation system for more than 335,000 students across the province. Since Budget '22 transportation funding has increased by \$167 million, or 52.5 per cent. To help with rising transportation costs, we are maintaining the school bus driver grant to support training as well as the fuel price contingency program.

We also know that our school boards are facing rising Internet and cybersecurity costs and threats, and we are providing an additional \$10 million in funding to address these challenges. We're doing this by introducing a new school technology grant that will increase SuperNet funding rates by 20 per cent, raising the current rate from \$800 per site to \$960.

We know as well that rural schools often face unique challenges such as declining enrolment and serving students across large areas. Our updated funding formula continues to shield rural school jurisdictions with declining enrolment, and our model includes several grants designed to address challenges in operating small, rural schools. We've increased maintenance funding for rural

school boards to support rising costs and allow them to maintain their buildings more effectively. We want rural communities to remain vibrant and for rural students to continue to receive a high-quality education.

9:10

Francophone schools also face challenges that are similar to rural schools, and in addition to the increased costs associated with providing equivalent minority language education, we're also increasing the francophone equivalency grant by 25 per cent budget. Budget '25 also provides \$2 million in preplanning in '25-26 to support advancing the readiness of francophone school projects for future years.

Curriculum implementation also remains a priority. We've recently piloted the elementary social studies curriculum in more than 500 schools this year and are looking forward to it being finalized. We're also engaging right now on development of new draft curriculum in junior high for math, social studies, physical education, and wellness and career and life management. We'll also be providing \$66 million to support curriculum implementation.

We're also investing in career education to make sure students have the opportunity to explore career options. This funding will help support new and existing dual credit programs, bring more collegiate schools online, and help develop partnerships. Over the next three years we will be investing over \$102 million to support career education programming.

We're also investing to support First Nation, Métis, and Inuit students. In Budget '25 we're providing \$94 million to school boards so that they can provide system, program, and instruction supports and support First Nation, Métis, and Inuit students.

With respect to capital we're also investing to build needed schools across the province. In the fall we committed \$8.6 billion to meet the province's need for school space. In Budget '25 we will kickstart additional school builds, including 30 new schools, eight updated or replacement schools, and three charter schools, 41 new projects in all. Eighteen of these projects will be in the Calgary region, and 14 in the Edmonton region. These projects will provide 14,000 new spaces in Calgary, 16,000 new spaces in Edmonton, and just about 8,000 across the rest of the province. Over the next seven years our goal with the school capital construction program is to build more than 100 new schools across the province, expand the use of modulars, and altogether add approximately 200,000 student spaces across the province.

In closing, as we meet the challenges facing Alberta's education system, the key message that I want to leave you all with is that we are listening. We have heard the concerns of many of our education partners, our teachers, and we are listening by changing the three-year weighted moving average, investing more in education supports, conducting early literacy screening to ensure that our students get the right start, and by providing more career education opportunities. Working with our partners and taking action, we will face these challenges head on. The investments that we're making in Budget '25 will ensure that every student in Alberta continues to receive a world-class education.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

We'll now begin the question and answer portion of the meeting. For the first 60 minutes members of the Official Opposition and the minister may speak. Hon. members, you will be able to see the timer for the speaking block in both the committee room and on Microsoft Teams.

Members, would you like to combine your time with the minister or would you like to have blocks?

Ms Chapman: I'm happy to combine.

The Chair: Minister, what's your preference?

Mr. Nicolaides: I'm okay with that, yeah.

The Chair: Combined? Okay. Please proceed.

Ms Chapman: Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Minister and all the folks who are in the room today to help answer questions as we dig into the 2025 Education budget.

Through the chair I'd like to start today by reviewing the changes to the Education portion of property tax. I know this increase to property tax isn't popular with municipalities. I think the feeling is that it's confusing for people. They get a tax bill from the city. They'll see a big increase this year, and maybe they don't understand that increase is actually an increase to their provincial tax. At the same time that we're decreasing personal income tax, we increase property tax. On page 57 of the fiscal plan, I see a property tax increase of \$392 million this year, \$311 million next year, and \$141 million the following year. So if my math is mathing, that's a tax increase for Albertans of \$844 million over this budget cycle. Is that correct? And can the minister just walk us through that plan to increase taxes to fund education?

Mr. Nicolaides: Yeah, I think the numbers that you mentioned there are correct. Unless Jeff or Lora kicks me under the table, then I'll assume it's not correct, but I think your numbers are correct there. Of course, the increase in property taxes – as I'm sure you know, currently just under a third of the total education spend is covered through property taxes. That percentage will be increasing by '26-27. Education property tax will fund 33.4 per cent of Alberta Education's operating spend. So two-thirds of what we spend and what we'll continue to spend in Education: the revenue will come from other sources.

But there's, of course, a need to provide increased funding to support growing complexity in our classrooms, to support early literacy and numeracy, to support the hiring of additional teachers. Of course, the province is facing some significant economic and financial challenges and pressures, especially with the clouds of tariffs and economic uncertainty, so we need to ensure that we're in a situation where we can continue to provide stable and predictable funding to our education system.

Ms Chapman: Thank you, Minister. Unlike personal income tax, property tax is not equitably distributed because, of course, property values are much higher in some areas. The last time I checked, Calgary had the highest property values in the province, followed by Edmonton and then some of our smaller municipalities: Lethbridge, Red Deer, Medicine Hat, et cetera. Is the minister able to provide us with a comparison of how much more tax households will be paying in Calgary compared to, say, Edmonton or Lethbridge?

Mr. Nicolaides: Yeah. I'll ask my team to see if they have that breakdown by municipality. I'm not sure that we do, but we'll have a close look, and I'll come back to you on that piece. Oh, we do have it; just Calgary and Edmonton. Of course, as to your point, you know, property values are quite varied and differ from different communities, so those values will be different. What we had for Calgary and Edmonton for '25-26: Calgary homeowners that have a home value that's in the median will experience an increase of approximately \$239, and in Edmonton this will be an increase of about \$92. Again, that's simply due to the variance in home values.

Ms Chapman: Okay. I think you answered this in your first one, but all money that comes in through that education property tax increase goes directly to education.

Mr. Nicolaides: Yeah, that's correct. Every dollar that comes in from the education property tax goes directly to support education systems and services.

Ms Chapman: Okay. Perfect. Alberta students remain the lowest funded in the country in the Education budget. When we adjust for population and inflation, it's actually seeing a cut of \$25.5 million. Why is the education property tax increasing so considerably when funding to the actual system is not?

Mr. Nicolaides: Well, funding to the system is increasing. I did see a recent analysis – I think it was done by CBC – that really questioned the assumption of Alberta being the lowest funded, some interesting information there which highlighted that we are not. I do know that the Alberta Teachers' Association, some other organizations are looking at those numbers. But I think those numbers in some of the ads and things that I've seen are maybe four or five years old, and there's been significant increases in Education in Budget '23, Budget '24, and now subsequently in Budget '25. In this budget we're increasing spending to education by 4 and a half per cent. We're at \$9.9 billion; \$49 million is spent every single day a student is in school. I certainly wouldn't characterize that as anything close to a cut.

We've changed the three-year weighted moving average to the two-year average adjusted enrolment, which will help provide funding to some of our fastest growing school divisions. I think that this is definitely the right approach. As I mentioned earlier, we'll be providing a \$1.1 billion increase in funding over the next three years, which is a significant increase in spending. In fact, our current funding that we've provided, the 4 and a half per cent, outpaces our enrolment projection as well.

9:20

You know, within that context, I think it's also important to highlight just how our students perform. Alberta receives the highest scores in Canada in science, in reading, in financial literacy, creative thinking. In many areas we score the highest in Canada and among the highest in the world in our PISA international rankings and in other rankings, so I think our education system does quite well.

Ms Chapman: Yes. I actually just read an article about the PISA scores that was interesting because the suggestion was that in Alberta it's the top 25 per cent that is drawing the test scores up and that we actually have a wider gap than other provinces, which was interesting. I can't remember where I read it, but I'll find it again. I'll send it to you.

The average increase to property tax that folks will be paying is just that, an average, and I know individual households will feel the strain of those increased taxes differently, depending, of course, on their property values. The Premier said recently that it's right for Calgary and Edmonton to pay more. We know those metro areas have seen the most growth and, you know, should be getting most of the new schools, but when I look at the capital project, thinking about it that way, shouldn't we be seeing twice as many schools built in our metro areas?

The way I read the plan currently, you have 16 school build projects in metro areas and 15 projects in rural areas or smaller municipalities. So if metro areas are paying the lion's share of your tax increase and experiencing the most growth in the province, why are the current capital projects distributed so evenly between metro

and rural school projects? Shouldn't our metro areas be getting more schools?

Mr. Nicolaides: Yeah. I think the short answer to that is, I would say, to stay tuned. As I mentioned, we're adding 41 school projects in Budget '25 as part of the school construction accelerator program. We will be announcing those individual projects in the next few days, and we are determining where the schools should be built and which communities should receive the schools based on objective data and analysis. The primary consideration that we're using, of course, is enrolment pressure and utilization rates, so no surprise when we look at those variables. The Calgary and Edmonton metropolitan areas have some of the highest enrolment pressures, some of the highest utilization rates, and that's where the vast majority of the school projects will land.

A couple of weeks ago, of course, I announced 11 projects that were ready to move forward through the school construction accelerator program. Five of those projects were in Edmonton. Three of those projects were in northeast Calgary, where we're seeing some significant growth. Again, more projects will be announced over the coming weeks and years as we move towards that goal of building 100 new schools over the next seven years.

Ms Chapman: Okay. I'll just jump ahead, a question about – okay. Through the chair, I'm just offering up some numbers from 2024 for context, but the question relates directly to the '25 capital plan. Your 2024 capital plan had 43 school projects: 19 construction, 16 design, and eight planning. In the 2025 capital plan as has been released, I see 31 announced projects: 18 construction, six design, and seven planning. Is the \$834 million you have allocated for the '25-26 fiscal year paying for those 31 projects, or is what you're saying that you're going to be announcing additional projects for the '25 capital plan?

Mr. Nicolaides: Yeah. I'll defer to Jeff as well, but that is to support current projects and also to support, I believe, the new projects as well that we'll be announcing. As I mentioned, we do have 41 projects in Budget '25 that we will be announcing. We have announced a few projects that will be moving forward already in our rural communities and smaller cities, including a new school in Lethbridge and other projects across the province. We will be announcing as well within the next few days the other projects that we will be building in Calgary and Edmonton as well.

Ms Chapman: Is there a reason for the change to stretching out the announcement of the projects? My understanding is that historically you came forward with a complete capital plan for the province. It usually happened in advance of this meeting, this estimates, which was nice because then we had an opportunity to ask questions about it. What's the rationale for spreading out the announcements over a few weeks the way you've done now?

Mr. Nicolaides: Yeah. I'm not sure, but we took the same approach last year as well. I think it's important that we're able to, you know, attend in person in respective communities, whether that's in Lethbridge or in Grande Prairie or Medicine Hat, and work with the school division and the parents and community there so that we can announce individual projects that will be coming forward for those respective school jurisdictions and provide them with that information. Obviously, it does take a little bit longer to provide that information in that manner, but we want to make sure that we can involve the school boards and the communities as best as possible.

Ms Chapman: If I understand you correctly here, we're going to be expecting to see 10 additional projects announced as part of the 2025 capital spend?

Mr. Nicolaides: I think it's more than that.

Ms Chapman: I see 31 announced right now. Am I right?

Mr. Nicolaides: No. I think that you're including active projects as well, current active projects. I'll give you a little insight since you're asking. We will be announcing 10 projects in the Edmonton area, and we will be announcing 16 projects in the Calgary area. Then there are the additional ones that we've already announced for our rural communities. I don't know if we have the list of those ones that we've just announced in our rural communities. In total those are the 41 projects that we'll be announcing.

Ms Chapman: That accounts for the \$834 million that you have allocated for the '25-26 fiscal year?

Mr. Nicolaides: Yeah. Jeff wants to offer a more detailed and smarter explanation, so I'll let him do that.

Mr. Willan: I'm not sure about smart.

Thank you, through the chair. Again, Jeff Willan, assistant deputy minister of financial services and capital planning. The \$834 million is funding a number of things. One is that it's funding previously announced projects. We have 91 projects that are currently under way before Budget 2025. Then within the school construction accelerator program we are announcing 41 school projects which make up \$81 million, including modular classrooms, and then on top of that, when you're looking at that 31 number, there were 22 additional projects that since September 2024 until Budget 2025 had been accelerated through the school construction accelerator program. That equates to a \$96 million investment in '25-26.

When you total those dollars up, including some collegiate and charter school expansion, that's your \$834 million investment in '25-26 across all projects, including the 41 to be announced and the investment in the 91 that were in flight.

Ms Chapman: Gotcha. Okay.

What is, through the chair, the amount for your charter and collegiate schools? Do you have that as a stand-alone number as part of that \$834 million?

Mr. Nicolaides: Fifty-eight million dollars this year for charter and collegiate.

Ms Chapman: Perfect. Thank you.

Okay. Oh, no. Okay. See, you threw me with all this news. I had some questions about the lack of schools in Calgary, but now they're coming. They're not here yet. They're not here yet, but I guess they're coming, so I will spare you my yapping about capacity issues in Calgary.

9:30

Okay; let's just stay on capital. We were promised that it was \$8.6 billion in spending on school capital over the next seven years. What I see in the fiscal plan is the first three years have a total spend of \$2.6 billion. I'm guessing that the bulk of the spend will come in the four years after this current budget cycle. You know, that's a choice given the enormous capacity pressures that are currently facing our metro boards.

In the '25-28 fiscal plan you're spending an average of \$873 million per year on schools, which means in the four years

following, '29 to '33, you'll need to spend \$6 billion, or an average of \$1.5 billion per year. Page 157 of the fiscal plan shows capital spending growing \$37 million from '25-26 to '26-27 and \$155 million from '26-27 to '27-28. Through the chair, can the minister just please walk us through the detailed plan on how his government plans to spend the promised \$8.6 billion, and why is the government delaying spending until after this current budget cycle.

Mr. Nicolaides: Sure. Yeah, happy to. I wouldn't characterize it as a delay in spending. Of course, just as a quick overview in terms of our capital process, the individual projects have to proceed through three stages: the first stage being planning, the second stage being design, and then the third and final stage being construction. This is a new practice that began in Budget '23 as a result of Auditor General recommendations and suggestions to improve transparency around school capital spending and financing.

Given that these schools need to move through the various stages, obviously, in the planning and design stage the amount of funding that's required is much less than is required for a full construction. The school projects need to move through that, so as we add in the 41 new projects that are in Budget '25 here, that we're announcing over the course of the next few days, those will enter our capital plan in either a planning or design phase. They typically need a smaller amount of money to conduct the work that's necessary for planning and design.

Then once they move to construction, of course, that's when a larger portion of funding is required to help pay for construction costs. Obviously, the construction cycle can take typically approximately two to three years once all the preliminary work is done. Even within those two to three years of construction costs are a little smaller at the beginning of the construction and ramp up. We have factored that in, and that's why you see a larger spend in future years. As more of these projects advance to construction phases and move to more detailed phases of construction, then more dollars are made available.

That being said, one of the key elements that we have introduced in our aggressive school construction program is the notion and the concept that a project can move between those three stages at any time in the year. In the past two budget cycles a project could only move forward from planning to design to construction annually in the budget cycle, but we recognize that we need to build schools as quickly as possible. So we've revised that process, and we've worked with Treasury Board so that if a project has completed the requirements of the planning stage, then we can go to Treasury Board and we can tell them that this school division has ticked off all of the boxes on these three projects, all the planning work is complete, they're ready to go to design, and then Treasury Board will provide us with additional funding in-year that we can distribute to the school board so that they can conduct the necessary design work.

Once the design work has been completed, we can go back to Treasury Board and say: the design work is now complete; we are requesting construction funding for these projects so they can move ahead. This new process will allow schools to be built much faster than has been the practice in the past.

Ms Chapman: Does the minister know when we can expect construction to begin on school construction – can we call it SCAP?

Mr. Nicolaides: Sure. Yeah, we can call it SCAP.

Ms Chapman: Does the minister know when we'll see construction begin on schools funded under SCAP?

Mr. Nicolaides: Yeah. I'll defer to Jeff to correct me if I'm wrong, but I guess it varies because we've made all of the school projects candidates for SCAP, so ones that were already in the capital plan can be accelerated. You know, many projects have moved forward. A few months back I was in Spruce Grove to announce that the Spruce Grove composite high school, which was currently in design, had completed all of the design work. A few months ago we were able to announce that we had unlocked the construction funding for it as part of SCAP, and it's now moving forward with construction, so construction funding is being provided now to that project and is beginning.

Construction can begin on these projects as soon as they're ready is the short answer because, as I mentioned, a lot of projects are already in the queue in our capital plan and can proceed already.

Ms Chapman: Okay. I'm going to preamble this one a little bit. When the government announced an \$8.6 billion spend, the school construction accelerator program – I don't know – I think I expected to just see more acceleration in actual school construction. Now, I know you said you've got new projects coming, but what I see in the capital plan this year are fewer construction projects than the previous year. I have a note here about design projects because that's also lower now, but I think that will be increased with your 10 additional projects that are going to be announced.

The issue is that we have a real crisis happening in schools right now. Edmonton public schools are at 90 per cent capacity; Airdrie public schools, 96 per cent capacity; Cochrane, 95 per cent; Chestermere, 98 per cent; CBE, 95 per cent. Lethbridge-West schools are at 130 per cent capacity.

I don't want to get started on high schools, but I have to mention it. North Trail high school opened in Calgary last year. It was immediately full. It was full before the end of the year. There were families who live in the surrounding communities who fought for that school for years. They're already being overflowed kilometres away to one of a small handful of high schools left in Calgary that aren't at or over 100 per cent capacity. High schools, the minister will know, are the most complex build, which means best case scenario is we won't see a new high school opening in Calgary until 2028.

The UCP have underspent and underinvested in school capital for years to the point where they now have to create an accelerated funding model for projects that boards and communities have been asking for for years. What is the rationale behind waiting so long to build schools to keep pace with need and population growth?

Mr. Nicolaides: Yeah. Thank you. It's a very important question. Indeed, we fully acknowledge and see and recognize the significant enrolment pressure that our school divisions are under. You know, I think Calgary board of education went from an 85 per cent utilization rate in one year to a 92 per cent utilization rate the subsequent year. Edmonton public schools is reporting, I think, the highest enrolment increase in 60 years, so these are not normal times when it comes to enrolment pressure.

A key reason that we're seeing this sudden and significant enrolment increase is due to population growth. Of course, Alberta's population increased by 200,000 in 2023 alone, a similar number in '24, and we're now edging out just about 5 million people within the province. We've seen a significant increase in our population over the past couple of years as have other provinces.

I think Alberta's population increase has been disproportionately higher than other provinces, but many other provinces have also seen increases in population and are struggling with similar challenges. We've seen this, we've recognized it, and, most importantly, we've taken action to help address this. That's why the

Premier announced an \$8.6 billion investment in the spring to aggressively build these schools as quickly as possible.

The accelerated process is working and is working very well. I mentioned earlier that we were able to accelerate the Spruce Grove composite high school replacement, as an example, and we did that a couple of months ago. If we were in the previous cycle, that project would have only been able to receive construction funding now, but we were able to accelerate it, move it forward. It had met all the design requirements and is now receiving construction funding to begin that.

9:40

In total because of SCAP we have actually advanced 22 projects: 17 have been advanced into construction, three into design, and two have been added into planning. Some of the ones that have been accelerated, including Calgary: I just announced very recently that a new high school in Cornerstone and two new elementary schools in Redstone have been accelerated to receive construction funding. Again, that was done about two months ago. If we didn't have the SCAP program, they would only be receiving construction funding right now as we discuss and debate the budget.

Airdrie is receiving a new high school as an accelerated project; Chestermere is receiving a new K to 9; Edmonton is receiving a new 7 to 9 in Pilot Sound, a new elementary in Glenriding Heights, a new elementary in Rosenthal, Laurel, River's Edge; Okotoks, a new high school: many projects – these are all in the construction phase – that have been expedited. So the expedited process is working very well.

As, I guess, perhaps a quick pitch to our school boards and our municipalities, as I have been doing over the past few months, you know, I like to think of it a little bit as a race. Perhaps using that as a metaphor, the starting gun has been fired, the gates have been opened, and the school projects are out of the gates. Whenever your project is ready, whenever you've met the design requirements, the planning requirements, let us know, and those projects can move to the next stage and receive construction funding. We're ready to proceed as quickly as they are.

Ms Chapman: You talked about, like, the acceleration is the fact that the projects can move from one stage to the next without waiting for the next year's fiscal plan. Do you have an idea of what amount of time that we're talking about saving here? Like, you're going to build a school in three years instead of five years? Are you going to build a school in four years and six months instead of five years? Do you have an idea of what the pace of acceleration is going to look like?

Mr. Nicolaides: Yeah. Of course, it'll vary on individual projects, but our estimate is that the project can be accelerated anywhere between six to nine months, generally speaking.

Ms Chapman: You know, I went through a lot of those capacity issues. I do understand that population growth happened quite quickly. Although, certainly, this was a government that was engaging in advertising campaigns to ask people to come to Alberta, so I do wonder why we weren't planning a little bit more in advance on that population growth.

But the fact remains that we have school boards who are either over capacity or – and, I mean, the minister knows this, too. These capacity numbers: when we start talking about 95 per cent, 98 per cent, it might not be 100 per cent, but we're already losing programming space in a school. Eighty-five per cent is considered, you know, the optimum utilization that will still allow a school to have a before- or aftercare program, a library, a makerspace, like, a lot of types of areas that we would consider to be important in

schools. When we're at these capacity rates, the school is really overfull at this point.

Can the minister tell us what's being done to support the communities who needed these schools four years ago? They're still going to be waiting – right? – two, three, four years for construction, depending on, as you say, the type of school project.

Mr. Nicolaides: Yeah. Well, again, to those communities I would say that we're working as quickly as we can. Obviously, it does take a few years to get a school built, but we've changed our process so that projects can be built faster, so that schools can be built faster, and we're responding as quickly as possible to get those schools under construction.

In addition, of course, a school is a more permanent solution, but we recognize that that can take a few years. We have also provided investment to more immediate and short-term solutions. We've made some significant increases in funding to our modular classroom program and increased funding in this budget so that we can purchase and install more modular classrooms. Of course, modulars aren't the permanent solution, but they can be an effective immediate remedy. They can be built and dispatched very quickly, in just a matter of months. We have, as I mentioned, increased the budget that we have available so that we can purchase more modulars, dispatch them. They are temporary, interim solutions, but they can help alleviate some pressure very, very quickly until the school projects can be completed.

I do want to, you know, just provide some overview of the general landscape, I guess, of our enrolment and just provide you with our enrolment summary over the past few years. We've seen a significant increase, and this has definitely been an unexpected increase. In 2021 the Calgary board of education was working with the Ministry of Education and actually looking at school closures. In fact, in 2021-2022 the top priority projects for the Calgary board of education, as an example, were modernization projects, not new school construction but actually a lot of modernization projects.

In 2020, coming out of COVID, we actually had enrolment decline. In fact, in the '21-22 school year we saw a 1.3 per cent decline overall in our head count. We came out of, you know, this COVID period and coming out of COVID, a period of stagnation, even enrolment decline, to a period of historic growth. So I'm not sure how you can foresee that and you can really experience that or be prepared for that.

As I mentioned, the population increase that we saw was also seen by other provinces. As I mentioned, in '23 and '24 population increased by about 200,000 each year. The significant element of that population increase was international arrivals and immigration. We've seen that in other provinces as well. Of course, the provincial government doesn't control immigration, but we saw significant increases with immigration levels, as did other provinces, and we're working as quickly as we can to build schools and other infrastructure to accommodate the significant increase in population growth.

Ms Chapman: Thanks, Minister.

Just staying on capital, on page 106 of the fiscal plan there's a discrepancy between the budgeted and forecasted amounts for capital spending on previously announced school projects. You missed your target and only spent 75 per cent of what you should have, so you underspent by \$157 million in promises to build new schools. Can the minister please explain why you weren't able to spend the money promised on building new schools? What impact will this underspend have on timelines for schools to open?

Mr. Nicolaides: Yeah. I'll get a detailed answer for you. You're looking at the budget versus forecast for '24-25?

Ms Chapman: Yes.

Mr. Nicolaides: It was \$722 million versus \$658 million?

Ms Chapman: Uh, \$592 million versus \$435 million on the previously announced school projects line.

Mr. Nicolaides: Oh, I see where you are. Okay.

Ms Chapman: Does that make sense? I think my math maths. That was the underspend of \$157 million.

Mr. Nicolaides: I'll defer you to Jeff. He's got a way better answer than I would give you.

Ms Chapman: Okay.

Mr. Willan: Sure. Thank you for the question. The differential between budget and forecast: this is the progression of work that's done on the active schools. Infrastructure is the ministry that's looking after the delivery of school capital projects. As they progress throughout the year, as you can imagine, the readiness of projects as they enter into different phases, there are different amounts of dollars that may be expended based on readiness of the project and how it's been tendered, et cetera. So all this is is the spend is just now matching the actual work that's been done. The budget was expecting to spend \$592 million, and in essence at the end of the year it ended up being \$435 million. The projects are still all active, but the spend in the completion of work was less than the projected budget at the beginning of the year. So it relates to in-flight projects.

Ms Chapman: That means that we would see an additional \$157 million spent in that? You're saying that the projects are still the same. So the budget amount: you're going to spend that money; you just couldn't walk it out the door this year.

Mr. Willan: Correct.

Ms Chapman: So it will walk out the door next year.

Mr. Willan: Yeah. Over the next – then they will re-cash-flow how the dollars are required to match the expenditure of the work that's done on those projects, of which there were 91 in-flight projects last year.

9:50

Ms Chapman: Thank you.

When SCAP funding was initially announced, there was an indication that this government planned to fund capital projects for private schools. This would be a new thing in Alberta and in the country. There are no examples in Canada of public money being used to build private schools, and public money for infrastructure that isn't accessible to the public is somewhat unprecedented. I'm not seeing any line items here on private school construction. Why are there no line items for private school construction? Do we know how much school construction funding is going to be used for private schools?

Mr. Nicolaides: We're still working on developing the details of how we might work and partner with our independent, nonprofit partners to help them expand spaces. We know that in Calgary, Edmonton, and in other areas many of our independent, nonprofit providers have significant wait-lists, and many of them of course

are working to provide specialized programming to students with unique needs, with learning disabilities or other complex needs. If we can work with them to expand spaces and help individual students receive the best possible individualized support, we're interested in looking at partnering with those independent schools and expanding spaces. We're still working on finalizing details as to how we might work with them and what that might look like.

Ms Chapman: Yeah. Wait-lists, I can imagine. I think lots of parents would like to get their kids into a program with controlled class sizes, which we can't offer in our public schools.

Are there any funding metrics in place to ensure private schools are not supported to the detriment of the public system? Do you have a timeline for when you think you're going to announce your program for private school capital funding?

Mr. Nicolaides: I don't have a final date as of yet. You know, I would say that just generally within the next couple of months, give or take, we should have some more details ready and be in a position to announce more details of that. We're still working on ironing out the details as to how that program can work.

Ms Chapman: Okay. Chair, we're allowed to share our time in this first block between members, right?

The Chair: Yes. Who's going to speak next?

Ms Chapman: The Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview.

The Chair: Would you prefer blocked or shared time?

Ms Wright: Shared would be lovely.

The Chair: Minister?

Mr. Nicolaides: Yeah. That's fine.

Ms Wright: Perfect. Thank you so much. Through you, Chair, to the minister I'm going to switch the subject up a little bit. I'm certain that you won't be surprised by that idea of workforce planning and strategy given all of those employment pressures. My first comments are specifically directed to pages 92 and 154 of the fiscal plan, of course, dealing with public sector compensation.

When one does a little bit of research with the Alberta learning information service, we learned that educational support workers, specifically educational assistants, in terms of the job market for them, it has changed from sort of warmish to coldish, which of course means that there are too many positions open and not enough folks interested in those positions. I think that when we combine that with the knowledge that there are many education support workers presently on strike, that tells the narrative that we absolutely need to be dealing with.

When you add the complexity that our classrooms are experiencing at the moment, when you know that many of our school divisions like Edmonton public are looking at unfunded positions of about 1,000 or so, when you understand that bargaining isn't perhaps the most fair, in my view, at the moment, given wage caps – again, I know this is a preamble, and last year I got caught in the preamble. I'm going to try not to preamble quite so much. When you also consider that page 92 of the fiscal plan talks about that compensation, which doesn't of course really account for inflationary pressures given the last decade of about 30 per cent inflation, I'm wondering how the government is going to demonstrate to those folks currently on strike and, as well, those who are still working in the different divisions within the province that the positions they hold are indeed valued.

I understand that there's a contingency of about \$4 billion, that was noted in the fiscal plan, page 11, that does talk about wage pressures and compensation pressures. My very first question is: I'm wondering if part of those contingency dollars, part of the planning for those contingency dollars will be going to off-set some of those inflationary pressures for wages for both striking and nonstriking workers.

Mr. Nicolaides: Sure. I'd hate to start chatting about Minister Horner's budget and the pieces that are contained with his estimates and what he's planning to use them for. Be happy to refer you to Minister Horner and Finance committee for more detailed explanation about his contingency line items.

As it relates, though, generally to Education staff – teachers and educational assistants – there's no question that our staff are incredibly valued, and there's no question that our staff, our teachers, educational assistants, and others, do tremendous work. I commend them every single day for the amazing work that they do in helping to provide a world-class education. Of course, they're at the front of that and bear the lion's share of the accolades when we do see incredibly strong PISA results and things of that nature. I think we would all agree that it is our teachers, educational assistants, and other staff who bear the lion's share of the accolades and deserve the accolades the most for the attainment of those results.

Just to provide some, you know, context, out of the \$9 billion that we're spending in Budget '25 for education, about \$5 billion goes to teacher salaries and benefits and another \$2 billion is spent on support staff salaries and benefits. So the lion's share of our spend goes to support our staff, goes to support our teachers, our educational assistants. With the \$1.1 billion that we will be increasing our spend over the next three years, we estimate that we'll be able to hire 4,000 more teachers and other staff so that we can ensure that these classrooms, that these schools that we're building are adequately staffed and students have the staff that they need.

Ms Wright: Thank you, Minister.

Kind of piggybacking off of what you've talked about here, we know, of course, that classroom complexity has been getting increasingly complex over the last number of years, particularly as we've moved to a much more included system rather than segregated system. Speaking to page 44 of the business plan and outcome 4 as well as key objective 4.5, unfortunately, of course, and speaking from very personal experience, classroom conditions are indeed on the decline as class sizes continue to rise. We know that parents continue to talk about their own student needs going unmet, and we also know, as I alluded to previously, that teachers and support worker positions are at times going unfilled, which of course has added to the sort of basic demoralization of all of those folks working in education at the moment.

We know as well that Alberta's kids are caught in a chronic underfunding maelstrom, and despite that we also understand that because of that chronic underfunding, we have not yet made ourselves into that sort of top tier of funding for the entire country. We know that we are certainly not there. We're far, far below that. Given as well that you've also stated the need to build schools as quickly as possible, but we also need staff to run those schools – when I consider my very last position, we were funding staff over 90 per cent in our school at that point. That particular school, I know, is running at 100 per cent capacity, so I can imagine what their budget is looking like this year.

What I'm really wondering at this point, then, is: given all of that context, what exactly are the specific details in terms of real, both

qualitative and quantitative, investments that are going to be made to improve the working conditions of teachers and school support workers, which of course will then go a long way to improve the learning conditions of our kids in our schools? I'm looking for a detailed way for a plan to create the conditions as well for recruitment and retention because we know those positions are going unfilled. Would this include everything from individual classroom supports, things like iPads? You know, it's a very, very specific thing, but particularly for kids with lots of complexities those are the things that they need.

10:00

Working with what was, of course, AHS to fund more positions for people like speech-language pathologists and occupational therapists – and if that indeed is case, Chair, what are the plans for working with other ministries like Advanced Education to ensure that there are seats in our educational institutions? Are we thinking about a return to the regional collaborative service delivery model, which was very successful? Then, further, what's the plan for consultation?

Mr. Nicolaides: Okay. Lots there. Stop me at any time. A number of pieces there; I'll try and address all of them, and apologies if I miss anything.

Certainly, addressing the classroom complexity challenges and issues is a top priority. We know that this is a source of contention for teachers and educational assistants. I've heard it first-hand and lots of discussions with our school boards and the Alberta Teachers' Association and others about how we navigate and deal with complexity and how we navigate and deal with inclusion into the classroom and how we support students in the best possible way.

Our policy on inclusion is, I think, about 20 years old, and I know other provinces have recently been looking at different approaches or updates to their policies. I think we might need to do the same. But apart from a policy discussion, we also need to take real, tangible, immediate steps to help address some of these challenges that we're seeing in the classroom. We recognize that, and there are a number of things that we're doing.

First and foremost, we've implemented the literacy and numeracy screening mandatory from kindergarten to grade 3. The reason that we've done that is twofold. Number one, because we know with confidence as research conducted right here in Alberta with researchers right here in Alberta can show us that these screeners can predict with 95 per cent accuracy if a student is going to have learning disabilities or challenges in the future. So if we can find out that information as early as kindergarten or grade 1, that allows our school boards to then implement the earliest possible intervention to prevent those children from needing additional support in future years.

That's part of the strategy: let's identify as early as possible students that may have learning challenges or may experience learning difficulties; give them the intervention support that they need to prevent downstream continued challenges or complexity. To help facilitate this strategy it's part of the reason why in this budget we are also providing targeted funding for literacy and numeracy intervention. Yes, it's important to conduct the screeners and the assessments, but we also need to make sure that there is targeted funding provided to our school boards so that they can hire additional support staff to help conduct the intervention that's required and necessary.

The reports that are received as a consequence of the intervention are incredible. I'm not sure if you've seen the reports that are produced, but they're really incredible and detailed and show, you know, a student's phonological awareness, their ability. It really

breaks it down on an individual level and compares the student against the mean so that teachers have really detailed information about how to support that student. That's kind of pillar 1: let's do the early intervention; let's do the work early and get that support to students.

The second thing that we're doing in this budget is increasing by a significant amount the funding that we provide in the classroom complexity grant. Just for context the classroom complexity grant was first created in Budget '23, and the purpose of the grant is to provide targeted funding to school boards so that they can hire psychologists, speech-language pathologists, occupational therapists, or other professionals that the school board deems necessary and appropriate to support the complex learning needs of their school division.

In this budget we are increasing that grant by 20 per cent, so in this year we will be spending \$55 million to our school boards to support the classroom complexity grant and to help them hire those professionals that I mentioned. We are also providing additional funding, \$65 million over the next three years, to support mental health-related initiatives and to support mental health services and support, focusing on prevention, early identification, or well-being. We're also providing \$5 million in this budget to diagnose and provide assessments for autism and other complex needs. In addition, we are also increasing our grant rates, primarily PUF rates, which, of course, is program unit funding. As I'm sure you're aware, the PUF program helps to provide support for students with moderate language delays and other challenges in their early formative years.

There's more, of course. You know, there's not just one answer to addressing the complexity issues and challenges. We do need to look at policy, as I've mentioned, but we do need to take direct measures to help school boards hire additional staff and resources. We are trying to address this in a multipronged approach.

I have talked, you know, with the Alberta Teachers' Association about violence in the classroom. I've talked with groups, ADHD Alberta and other organizations. When I was talking recently with the Alberta Teachers' Association, we had a conversation about violence in the classroom, and through their survey of their members they identified that a significant portion of their members – teachers, of course – felt that they didn't have the necessary skills and competencies to be able to handle these challenges. So I'm interested in looking a little bit more at professional development and how can we support teachers in professional development, or how can we better support individuals in our BEd programs currently to make sure that they have the skills and competencies that they need to ensure that they'll be successful, to ensure that they're ready to tackle the real-world conditions? I want to talk more with the deans of education and others to ensure that we're providing BEd students and teachers with the right level of training and support that they need to be able to handle these dynamics.

Ms Wright: Thank you. Through the chair and to you again, Minister, I would also suggest that it's – given what you've just said, one of the most important things we can do to address that level of complexity and teachers' concerns, of course, is to get our support workers back into the classroom.

Speaking of PUF, program unit funding, I just happen to have a question about that. We're dealing with outcomes 1, 2, 3, and 4, pages 41 through 45 of the department's business plan, and expenses noted under ECS to grade 12 instructions on page 46, also of the business plan. As you alluded to, I did indeed have a few years' experience dealing with program unit funding as an assistant principal. I was there in 2022, when the weighted moving average was introduced, when PUF was cut, when the base funding was

reduced for many types of disability codes, which meant, of course, that also public schools could no longer offer a third year of funding for those early childhood programs, although private operators could.

At the same time, there were changes made to Alberta Health Services, which meant that families could no longer, Chair, count on AHS to provide them with assessments, and that included speech and language assessments. Those assessments, of course, provided parents and guardians with a look into whatever their own individual child's complexity and challenges might have been and also provided a basis for individualized programming – should they be able to access early childhood programming? – which, of course, put an incredible burden on parents. We know how much those assessments cost, and to not have them available through AHS made a real difference to parents in Alberta.

Of course, my own personal experience with Edmonton public as one of the boards that was offering programming at the time meant that we closed many of those early childhood programs. We went from something like 10 hubs down to just a couple in the city, which, as you've noted, made an incredible difference. There were so many gaps in the programming available to kids; so many kids who could no longer qualify for that funding. Certainly, the impact of those cuts, Chair, and changes cannot be overstated. There's been a drastic reduction in the number of kids who have been able to access the programming. Programming hours are reduced. Programming funding levels are reduced. Placements are hard to come by. Specialists are unavailable because perhaps they're now in private practice since they're certainly not working through AHS.

In the annual report for Education it states that the PUF grant was reviewed to identify gaps. I appreciate that you've added more dollars into it; however, at the same time, that isn't a full restoration of PUF. I'm wondering, then, what the plan is to fully restore the number of hours for PUF and for once again to include a third year for public school division students who might be entering kindergarten. What's the plan for reviewing the criteria? The criteria were also changed, that idea of going from the fifth per centile to the third per centile, for instance, in some of the coding criteria, which of course meant that kids were denied, which is one of the reasons why we're seeing that level of complexity in kindergarten.

10:10

Mr. Nicolaides: Yeah. Thank you. A very important question. I may defer to Kindy to talk a little bit more about some of the engagement work that we've done. But I believe it was back in Budget '24, actually, we undertook some targeted conversation and consultation with our stakeholders and other partners and this was a priority. It was actually reflected directly in my mandate letter from the Premier to specifically review the PUF program and explore how it can be further strengthened. Right away in '23 we began some of that work and had some extensive consultation with our stakeholders and other partners that led to some changes in Budget '24, where we did provide some increased funding in Budget '24.

We're able to provide more support to PUF in this budget as well, which is a priority for us. As I mentioned, PUF rates will be increasing by 2.32 per cent in the current budget. Furthermore, \$10 million is available in this budget to support two enrolment count dates, September and February. Of course, having the two intakes is important so that we can ensure that students who are identified and need that early intervention are able to do it at those different intervals throughout the year because getting that early intervention is critical and needs to happen as quickly as possible. This, of

course, will ensure that access to programming is available to children with severe disabilities or other delays.

In addition to the PUF grant we're also increasing the specialized learning support grant, the SLS grant, by 2.32 per cent, the moderate language delay, and several other grants that broadly help support students with complex needs, including English as an additional language or refugee grant as well.

We are committed to continuing to review and improving funding operation of the PUF program. That coupled with the work that we're doing in literacy and numeracy screening for students starting in kindergarten all the way into grade 3 demonstrates that it is a priority for this government to ensure that we provide the strongest possible supports for our early learners so that they can have the strongest possible start.

Again, as I mentioned, there are cascading implications of that with respect to complexity in the classroom. If challenges with respect to learning delays or other issues can be addressed early, then, of course, we can minimize complexity and other challenges in future years. Our general approach is to conduct that intervention and provide those supports as early as possible. That's why we're continuing to review and increase funding to PUF.

Ms Wright: One can assume, then, that you will also be looking at the criteria that are involved and that you will also be looking at that sort of half-day versus day-long funding as well.

Mr. Nicolaides: Yeah. We did consult on that back in '23, and we've had some opportunities to have some conversation about that and, of course, made decisions in Budget '24 and in Budget '25. I'm always happy to continue to have conversations with our partners about PUF and see how it can be further strengthened. Always happy to have that conversation because those youngest learners need the right support.

Ms Wright: Yes they do.

The Chair: That's our time with the Official Opposition.

We'll now move over to the government side of the table here. Then after you're done your segment, we'll have our short break.

Would you like to combine or share?

Mrs. Johnson: Share, please.

The Chair: Minister, what's your preference, combined or shared time?

Mr. Nicolaides: I'm happy to share time.

The Chair: All right. Please proceed.

Mrs. Johnson: All right. First, thank you through the chair to the minister and to all of your staff that are here today for all the great work you're doing. It's really exciting to hear, I think especially the accelerator program and that this is being a real strong priority within this government. So thank you for that.

Concerning collegiate schools, I've read a relatively new and only-in-Alberta school model that advances choice in education called collegiate schools. I note in key objective 3.1 on page 43 of the business plan it asks the ministry to enhance the availability and sustainability of career education programming opportunities that enable students to explore and experience various occupations throughout grades 7 to 12. I'm interested in learning a bit more about what collegiate schools mean for our education system and how they help to provide Alberta students with a world-class education. Through the chair, could the minister describe what a collegiate school is and what unique programming it can offer?

Mr. Nicolaides: Yeah. Thank you so much. An important question. I'm really excited about the prospects surrounding collegiate schools. I think there's a lot of potential and opportunity for them to expand, but of course, more importantly, the opportunities that they provide to students are incredible.

Perhaps just as a quick overview to answer your question there around what exactly they are and what kind of programming they offer, I guess the best way to describe them is that they are specialized schools. They do have specialized programming that's a little bit more unique than you might find in another school, and they have customized programming related to particular subjects or career fields. The most important thing is that they help to provide clear pathways for students interested in exploring a particular career or postsecondary journey. It gives them clarity. It gives them more high school programming that is related to – let's say that they want to pursue a future career in medicine, as an example. You know, a collegiate school would have programming that more closely connects in with medical programming.

They may have dual credit opportunities whereby students, of course, can earn credits for high school completion and then for postsecondary, and they typically exist with a postsecondary partnership so that there is, again, a clear pathway of where that student is going. They have a sense of what program they're going to be applying for at a postsecondary institution or a career that they're going to be moving into. It really helps students who have some clarity about where they want to go and what they want to do get there a lot faster.

Mrs. Johnson: Through the chair, thank you to the minister for that answer.

How does Budget 2025 support this unique programming across Alberta's education system, and is Alberta Education supporting this programming in other ways?

Mr. Nicolaides: Yeah. There are a number of ways in which we're supporting collegiate schools and collegiate programs. Overall in our budget we have just over \$100 million allocated over the next three years specifically to support career-oriented programming quite generally. Of course, some of that can be used for collegiate schools, but at a high level we do want to ensure that more students have an opportunity to explore career development opportunities and options, and that's where the \$102 million will be directed to, to our school boards to use to enhance career education generally.

As it relates to collegiate specifically, we have \$22 million over the next three years going over to start-up funding. Of course, as I think one can understand, there are some immediate costs associated with a start-up of a new collegiate program or school. Additionally, there will be \$43 million to support capital costs of new collegiate schools in '25 and '26. There's also \$6 million, \$8 million, and \$8 million over the three years to provide start-up funding. That's the \$22 million, that I mentioned, just broken down over the three-year period.

Just to give you a sense of, you know, where we're at, for the current application cycle for collegiate we received 22 applications by the January 31, '25 deadline. Any approved school, which we hope to be in a position to announce those approved schools shortly, will be provided with start-up funding to help them get off the ground.

So definitely a priority and something that, again, is a really exciting and interesting model as these schools partner, of course, with school boards and are hosted by school boards but also partner with postsecondary partners and industry partners. They can be very effective in helping students who know what they want to do, know where they want to go, get there a lot faster.

Mrs. Johnson: Through the chair again, thank you to the minister for that answer.

Finally, could the minister provide some examples of these schools and what programming they're providing to students that they wouldn't be able to access otherwise? So maybe: where are they in the province, and what do they look like?

10:20

Mr. Nicolaides: Yeah. I have a lot of examples here, so I won't ad lib. I'll just go through some of these examples. They're really quite exciting. They're really quite unique. There's actually one that I'm quite familiar with, the South Alberta Flight Academy, which is a really, really interesting program. It's hosted with the Prairie Rose school division. It's a high school program that allows students to earn their private pilot's licence along with their high school diploma. It's a partnership that's done with Prairie Rose public, Eagle Butte high school, and Super T Aviation, and the operations run out of the high school in Dunmore and the Medicine Hat airport. It's really, really unique that they get that opportunity to get their pilot's licence because obviously these are students who have some sense of where they want to go. They want to probably go into the aviation world or industry, and they're able to get their private pilot's licence while they're doing their high school diploma. It's helping them move forward.

Fort Vermilion school division has the Building Futures Collegiate. In this program students have the opportunity to obtain college credits and other credentials before they even leave high school, giving them a head start on getting to where they want to go. It also connects them to local employers for them to begin their careers in their home community.

There are a total of 12 operating collegiate schools right now, and they offer 30 pathways collectively into postsecondary in areas such as ag and ag tech, aircraft maintenance, class 1 driver training, commercial pilot status, fabrication, film, media, entertainment, arts, graphic design, health care, hospitality, skilled trades, and more. These are exciting areas where students can get a head start.

Mrs. Johnson: Great. Again, thank you, through the chair, to the minister for that.

I'll move on to Indigenous education. There are 48 First Nations and eight Métis settlements in Alberta. In '24-25 there were approximately 62,600 self-identified First Nations, Métis, and Inuit students attending provincial schools. On page 42 of the business plan outcome 2 outlines that the ministry should ensure First Nations, Métis, and Inuit students in Alberta are successful. I'm interested in understanding how the ministry supports these students. Could the minister explain what supports are provided in budget '25-26 to support First Nations, Métis, and Inuit students in achieving success?

Mr. Nicolaides: Yeah. Thank you. A very important question and a top priority for the ministry. I'd be happy to talk a little bit more about some of the things that we're doing in Budget '25 to help support First Nation, Métis, and Inuit students. First and foremost, I have to talk about the First Nation, Métis, and Inuit grant, which is, of course, a specialized and targeted grant that is provided to school boards to help them provide program and instructional supports to First Nation, Métis, and Inuit students, and that can be used to help support the implementation of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission recommendations. In Budget '25 \$95 million is going into that grant to support those objectives.

We also have the other targeted grants that have a more – you know, within the First Nation, Métis, and Inuit grant, there's a lot of flexibility built into that and built into how a school division can

use those funds, but also at the same time we have a few much more targeted grants to achieve very specific outcomes and objectives such as the bridging classrooms to communities grant. That's another one that goes to support First Nation, Métis, and Inuit students and communities, but that's much more of a targeted objective.

The objective of that grant is to help support Indigenous communities and school boards partner together and build relationships together to break down some of those barriers and build more productive and collaborative relationships to support student success and advance reconciliation. There's a three-year \$10.5 million investment. That was first announced, actually, back in July '23, but it's continuing in this budget because it was a three-year investment. Of course, a much more targeted grant.

In addition, we're also providing support through enhancing, not replacing but enhancing, funding for on-reserve education. Of course, that is primarily a federal responsibility, but there are opportunities for the government of Alberta to assist. For example, we do provide funding through framework agreements with a couple of First Nation school authorities such as the Maskwacis Education Schools Commission and others to support improved programming; develop local programming, a lot typically around language development and support; and other teacher professional development. These are some of the objectives that are under way and that we support.

Mrs. Johnson: Thank you, through the chair, to the minister for that.

Performance measure 2(a) looks at high school completion rates. How will the support measures in budget '25-26 contribute to an increase in high school completion rate for self-identified First Nations, Métis, and Inuit students?

Mr. Nicolaides: Yeah. Thank you. Of course, outcomes are important, and we want to make sure that we are improving some of those metrics and we are improving completion rates and graduation rates. We are seeing some promising improvements in this area, specifically in high school completion rates, attributed to many of the significant investments that we're making to help support First Nation, Métis, and Inuit students. Completion rates for self-identified students has improved by 4.4 per cent from 2018-19 to '22-23, so we are starting to see those rates increase, which is remarkable and encouraging. We're also seeing other developments.

You know, working with other partners and creating those collaborative relationships is really critical to helping students improve. Partners like St. Paul education regional division and others are really invested in advancing and supporting Indigenous student outcomes. Just as an example, St. Paul education offers Indigenous-specific Cree language and cultural programming and outdoor education, land-based learning programming. As a result of many of these efforts, we are seeing, again, more improved student outcomes. The number of students completing high school within five years of entering grade 10 significantly increased by more than 5 per cent between '22 and '23, and the number of students achieving standard of excellence on diploma exams increased by 2 per cent from '22 to '23. We're also taking additional efforts through alternative school programs and working with other surrounding First Nations communities around Calgary, Edmonton, and other communities to find ways that we can, you know, partner and work together to improve outcomes.

In summary, we are seeing some signs of success, and we're going to of course continue our efforts there.

Mrs. Johnson: That's good news. It's good to hear that, and thank you for that answer, again through the chair to the minister.

I can see the information lags a year regarding performance measure 2(b), which involves the high school to postsecondary transition. How will measures in the '25-26 budget help and translate to an increase in postsecondary education rates among self-identified First Nations, Métis, and Inuit students?

Mr. Nicolaides: Yeah. Sure. Thank you. Of course, high school transition to postsecondaries is critically important, and we do have some analysis of those rates. Again, similarly, we are seeing some increases in those areas amongst Indigenous students. The six-year high school to postsecondary transition rate for self-identified First Nation, Métis, and Inuit students has increased over a five-year period that we've measured from 35 per cent in 2019 to just shy of 37 per cent in '22-23, so again starting to see it edge up, slightly but moving in the right direction. We do provide a number of different supports to help with that transition. You know, that transition can be significant and challenging, so we do help support several initiatives that are oriented towards those transitions.

One of them, of course, relates to dual credit funding, and we are providing increased investment to support more dual credit programming. Research has shown that students that have the opportunity to participate in dual credit programming and earn dual credit options are way more likely to make the transition to postsecondary than if they hadn't participated in a dual credit program. Obviously, you know, part of the rationale there is that if you finish high school and you've already got some postsecondary credits under your belt, you can be much more inclined to give yourself that extra push and say, "You know what? I already have some credits," and give yourself that extra motivation to attend. Again, there is some research that points to this and that demonstrates the success rate of students that do participate in dual credit programming versus those who don't. That's an important initiative that we work with.

10:30

More specifically, apart from dual credit programming that exists within our education system writ large, we do also provide dual credit funding to three First Nation education authorities in particular. There's about \$350,000 that's currently being provided to those three First Nation education authorities, and we're also working with our postsecondary institutions such as MacEwan University to identify ways in which we can address barriers for Indigenous students and help them with their postsecondary transition, so a number of different things that are under way.

Mrs. Johnson: Again, good news. Thank you for that answer again.

One last question. It has to do with revenue outlook. I see that on page 51 of the fiscal plan "total revenue in 2025-26 is forecast at \$74.1 billion," which the fiscal plan notes is "a decrease of \$6.6 billion from the 2024-25 third quarter forecast of \$80.7 billion." Despite this decline, I note that the total for education system support has increased from the previous year per line item 2 on page 69 of the 2025-26 government estimates general revenue fund document. What does this increase mean for your department?

Mr. Nicolaides: Sure. Well, of course, to better support our schools and our students, we are taking steps, as we've mentioned this morning, to address growing enrolment such as increasing grant rates and putting more money into the classroom as best we can. We are also moving to the more historical percentage support for education expense between property tax and general revenue. Typically in the past, property tax has covered one-third of

education spend and general revenue has covered the remaining two-thirds. In the '25 budget education property taxes will fund 31.6 per cent of our operating costs, which includes teacher salaries, textbooks, classroom resources, and all of the other associated costs of providing education.

You know, as I mentioned earlier – I think the question was asked earlier – education property taxes are not used in any way, shape, or form to fund government operations, capital costs, school construction, renovation, or teachers' pensions. They are used for operating dollars, salaries, wages, benefits, textbooks, other classroom supports and resources. It's actually directed through provincial law that money collected through education property tax can only be used to fund the public education system, which includes public separate school authorities. Other organizations such as independent schools, early childhood service, charter schools, francophone authorities are not eligible for funding under the Alberta school foundation fund. These dollars that are raised go directly to our public and separate school authorities.

Mrs. Johnson: Again, thank you for that answer, through the chair.

My final question as a follow-up to this is: what does the minister think this investment means for the overall government's perspective when it comes to the importance of education for Alberta?

Mr. Nicolaides: Yeah. I think this, you know, demonstrates, of course, how significant and important our education system is, and that's one of the reasons why we're making such a significant investment. We firmly believe in continuing to provide a world-class education to our children and giving them the tools that they need to succeed, and this budget will help us accomplish that. The revenue will go straight into the classroom and straight to support the delivery of educational services and will not be used in other manners or for other initiatives of government but directly to support educational services and costs.

Again, the other key thing that I would highlight: what for me Budget '25 really symbolizes and demonstrates with respect to our education system is that our government has listened very carefully to our partners, has heard their concerns, and, most importantly, is taking action to address the concerns that we've heard when it comes to education.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Minister.

We'll have our five-minute break now. Thanks, everyone.

[The committee adjourned from 10:34 a.m. to 10:40 a.m.]

The Chair: All right. I think most everyone's back to their seat now, so we will move back over to the Official Opposition. Would you care to share or . . .

Mr. Eggen: I would like to.

The Chair: Minister, what's your preference? Share?

Mr. Nicolaides: Yeah, I'm happy to share.

The Chair: Let's proceed.

Mr. Eggen: Okay. Thank you. Through you, the chair, my first question references page 44 of the business plan. Page 44 of the business plan has the Ministry of Education planning for a \$3.3 billion capital investment over the next three years, which is very ambitious and I think needed as well. But, you know, considering the growing scope of the corrupt care scandal, including the recent resignation of the Minister of Infrastructure who said that he could

not, quote, stand by many questionable procurement decisions made by this government – I was quite shocked to see that – and considering the \$3.3 billion Education plan is some of the very largest procurements in this current budget for the whole budget, I think Albertans need to know that each of these procurements for these capital projects have been executed with due process and each step in the process will be revealed through documents provided by the Ministry of Education for public scrutiny, in conjunction with the Minister of Infrastructure.

I'm asking, first of all, if due process was followed in this procurement. And, number two, can the ministry, together with the Infrastructure ministry, provide the documents that would validate a due process for this \$3.3 billion plan?

Mr. Nicolaides: Sure. Yeah. Thank you for the question. Obviously, it's critically important. I would have to defer you though to the Ministry of Infrastructure. Of course, they are the lead ministry when it comes to procurement. They are the lead ministry when it comes to the facilitation of the construction of the school projects.

Once we in the Ministry of Education have finalized the identification of the priority projects and received approval to proceed with whatever projects we've identified, the projects are then subsequently the responsibility of the Ministry of Infrastructure to take next steps.

What I can talk about are just generally, if I can, to answer some of your colleagues' previous questions regarding the number of projects and where those are at. In Budget '25, as I was mentioning, we will be moving ahead with 41 projects; 18 will – and you're scooping my announcement on Friday, but that's okay.

Mr. Eggen: Well, tell us where you're going to build them then.

Mr. Nicolaides: Eighteen of the 41 will be in Calgary metro, 14 of the 41 will be in Edmonton metro, and then we've already announced the nine additional projects that will be in north region, central, and south. Those have already been announced.

Mr. Eggen: Thank you. I appreciate that. I mean, I'm aware of the process, having built quite a number of schools as well when I was minister, but . . .

Ms Chapman: Two-hundred and forty-three.

Mr. Eggen: Two-hundred and forty-three, yeah, exactly.

There are two things going on here and I'm sure that you do understand it. Number one, these are schools that are identified by the Ministry of Education, and so, you know, in the court of public opinion, you are responsible for those schools and the procurement's now coming into question, right, with the Minister of Infrastructure saying that there's a number of questionable procurement decisions being made by this government. I think it's incumbent upon yourself as minister and your ministry to expedite the documentation that will show that these procurements and these choices for schools are done completely above the board. You know, there's another issue that is closely tied to this, and that is the choice of whether to build a school through conventional means or by using the P3, public-private partnership, model, which has proven to be very problematic. Again, it clouds the issue around procurement because, of course, you're getting a private company to build and maintain those schools, right? Free advice: whether you are passing that over to the Ministry of Infrastructure for those decisions, in the court of public opinion – and indeed it's all part of the government of Alberta making these decisions – you need to come clean about how those contracts are disbursed and who gets

the contract to build these schools, and is it done in a clean and transparent way? Question mark.

Mr. Nicolaides: Sorry. I may just ask Jeff to supplement a little bit.

Mr. Eggen: Sure.

Mr. Nicolaides: As I mentioned earlier, the procurement process as it relates to the new schools and any school construction process is handled by the Ministry of Infrastructure. They handle that entire process. I could say, though, that all projects, of course, are done in complete alignment with trade agreements, and all schools are built by public companies. Again, the Ministry of Infrastructure can answer more specific questions related to their procurement process.

We within the Ministry of Education work very diligently to be in full compliance with the Auditor General and other transparency requirements. As I mentioned earlier, in Budget '23 we changed our process related to school construction to provide more transparency, introducing the three stages of planning, design, and construction. This was directly because of Auditor General recommendations, just to help provide more clarity and transparency to the process. In the past sometimes government would announce, you know, "We're going to build a school here," and there would be an announcement about it, and then maybe two or three years later nothing had happened yet or dollars hadn't flowed out yet. Again, the Auditor General made some recommendations and said: let's have these three stages so that it's a lot more clear about where funding is going and what stage a project is at and how it's moving forward.

If you have additional questions related to procurement process, I think that's best handled by the Ministry of Infrastructure.

Mr. Eggen: Yes. Certainly, we will ask that minister. You know, he's just a new minister, a week old, so you can give him a heads-up that we will be doing that. That would be great.

I'm just trying to watch the clock very carefully here.

Question 1: are you doing a comparative analysis between conventional school builds and P3s? I know that there's a demonstrably higher cost during the lifetime of a P3 school, public-private partnership. Are you aware of that higher cost? Why would you choose to build a P3 considering that the public-private partnership over the lifetime of that school actually costs more? You know, you can't just defer the cost of a school over a longer period of time and say that you're saving money because, in fact, that's just not the case.

My second question, just in case we run out of time: is the Ministry of Education contracting to the Rubicon group in any way, shape, or form for consultancy, Rubicon being a consultant company that does do government contracts? Are you using Rubicon, or have you or will you be using Rubicon consulting as part of your operations as Ministry of Education?

Mr. Nicolaides: Sure. To the latter point, I think it was Rubicon you . . .

Mr. Eggen: That's correct.

Mr. Nicolaides: No, I'm not familiar of any contract or involvement with Rubicon as it relates to the Ministry of Education. I'm not aware of anything related to that. I'll give you some time back, maybe if you can squeeze in another question in a minute.

But, yeah, with respect to your first question, again I'd have to defer you to the Ministry of Infrastructure. I believe they conduct some analysis as it relates to the value of dollars and the value and

cost effectiveness of the P3 model and P3 contracts. Again, the Ministry of Infrastructure being the primary responsible and lead ministry as it relates to P3 and procurement, I think they would have some more detailed answers for you.

10:50

Mr. Eggen: Okay. Finally, when determining how much money is being spent in the Ministry of Education – you know, the minister likes to talk about how they're spending a record amount. But if you factor in population growth and inflation – right? – the simple formula of that is that there's an increase of 5.1 per cent in Alberta generally and in the ministry specifically. So in fact your budget is a reduction.

The Chair: Thank you, Member.

We'll move back over to the government side.

Mr. McDougall: Thank you, and thank you to the Department of Education for being here and the minister of course for your work. I would like to look at page 22 of the strategic plan, specifically priority 2, objective 3, which is about providing high-quality education and opportunities for skill development. The third bullet point on the plan details modernization of the education system through collaborating, working with "school boards, teachers, and First Nations education experts to develop and implement a new comprehensive" K-to-12 curriculum. To the minister through the chair: how is budget '25-26 moving this process forward? What does this collaboration look like? You know, how will it ensure alignment with the recently developed elementary school curriculum?

Mr. Nicolaidis: Sure. Thank you. A couple of things to unpack there, but thank you for that important question. I think the first thing to highlight is that Budget '25 includes \$66 million to help support the renewal of our kindergarten to grade 12 curriculum. It does include funding for school boards to assist teacher professional learning and development so that they can of course learn and teach successfully the new curriculum, which is important to ensure that we're providing that level of support. The professional learning funding that school boards receive for teachers with respect to implementing the new social studies curriculum, as an example, was done at a rate of about \$800 per teacher. School boards will also be receiving funding to purchase or develop learning and teaching resources that are aligned with the new curriculum. That's done at a rate of \$45 per student.

We will also provide funding to help support classroom piloting of new draft curriculum for grades 7 to 9. We are currently under way in developing new junior high curriculum in math and social studies and also junior high – well, to be more precise I should say 7 to 10 – physical education and wellness, career education, financial literacy, and other basic life and home maintenance skills. You know, similarly with the process that we took in the development of the elementary curriculum, we will be collaborating with some of our key partners and stakeholders to assist with the development of the junior high curriculum.

We do have and provide an open and transparent and collaborative process to engage with partners in developing the curriculum so that we can receive varied input and advice from key partners to help inform the development of the curriculum. Right now, we are currently engaging with a number of partners, including First Nations education directors and other organizations such as the College of Alberta School Superintendents. Some of the others that we're engaging with are the Council of Catholic School Superintendents of Alberta, the Alberta Teachers Association, the Alberta School Boards Association, Alberta Catholic School

Trustees' Association, Public School Boards' Association, the francophone school boards association, and others. We're working quite collaboratively.

Right now we are also talking extensively with teachers directly. We're engaging with just over 100 teachers who are members of our teacher curriculum consultation group that we've constituted so that teachers who are experts in particular areas can be part of these groups. They will provide feedback on the junior high math, social studies, and then the junior high physical education and wellness, career, and life management revisions that we're making. It's very important to have that teacher engagement.

These teachers are coming to us from a varied group. They have been nominated by school boards, Catholic school boards, public school boards, and others. They've also been nominated by the Alberta Teachers' Association and are from different geographic areas and communities. As you can see, we're really hoping to have a collaborative process to assist in the development.

With respect to the social studies curriculum as well, just to touch on that, which we released back in April of 2024, we do currently have more than 2,000 teachers piloting the new draft elementary social studies curriculum. It breaks down to about 500 schools in 62 school boards.

The Chair: Minister, the rule is that no one can speak for more than five minutes at this point. We just need to switch back to the team. Then you could finish your answer. I'm sorry. I have to abide by the rules.

Mr. Nicolaidis: Very well. I'll stop talking.

Mr. McDougall: Thank you for your attempt to be very comprehensive in your reply.

Perhaps I'll move on then. Taking a look at performance measure 4(a), located on page 44 of the ministry's business plan document, it reads, "Attracting and retaining excellent teachers enables high learning outcomes and greater student achievement. In 2023-24, 74.5 per cent of principals agreed that they are able to attract and retain teachers in their schools." The target for '25-26 is 74.8 per cent, which seems like a marginal increase. I'm concerned. I don't know what would be standard or what would be considered to be optimal for this type of target. Can the minister explain? In budget '25-26, how does it enable principals to achieve this target? You know, 75 per cent, is that a reasonable objective? What's impacting that?

Mr. Nicolaidis: Yeah. Sure. Happy to talk a little bit about that and hopefully not for five minutes. I'll try to be a little bit more concise in my answer. My apologies. Having 75 per cent of principals agreeing that they're able to attract and retain teachers in schools is a strong measure, but of course that continues to demonstrate that there are areas where there are challenges. We do hear about those challenges. We do hear about them from a number of school boards, including in our large municipalities, but primarily from francophone school boards or rural school boards. We are talking with them in a lot of detail to see what we can do differently and how we can create the right kind of conditions for them to hire more individuals.

You know, one of the things that I'm a firm believer of, especially when it comes to rural and remote communities, has to do with educating and developing local talent. I think that if we have the ability to deliver programming to more communities so that more individuals can get their BEd and other certification and qualifications needed in their home communities without having to leave their home communities, there's a higher chance and possibility that they'll stay where they are. I think we need to

continue to have conversations with our postsecondary institutions about how we get more BEd programs delivered through our different postsecondary partners, our colleges and others, into more communities.

As well, we're also looking at ways in which we can provide alternative pathways to teacher certification. You know, this is something that we do hear about from our rural school boards in particular, that, you know, they may have individuals in their community that have 15, 20 years' experience in a particular occupation or in a trade, but they can't come into a classroom and provide that expertise and teach that to the next generation. There is a path for them to do that through bridging, but it's a little cumbersome.

I remember speaking to a trades instructor in Grande Prairie who told me about going through a two-year process with tens of thousands of dollars to bridge to the appropriate level of teaching certification. You know, for someone who's in a career and working, to go through that is quite onerous. So I think we have to be a little bit more creative in ways in which we can help individuals with a specific skill set bridge to teaching, and I think that can assist.

11:00

But we are trying to take some steps. I know that the Minister of Advanced Education is providing some increases to postsecondary institutions to create more spaces in bachelor of education programs, which will be helpful, and we did also provide \$1.7 million in funding to the University of Calgary and the University of Alberta to expand spaces at their bachelor of education programs with a particular lens towards rural recruitment and remote recruitment and for Indigenous teachers as well. So these are some of the things we're working on.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Back over to the Official Opposition. Shared or block time?

Mr. Haji: Shared.

The Chair: Shared time.

Minister?

Mr. Nicolaidis: Yeah, shared.

The Chair: Shared. Please proceed.

Mr. Haji: Thank you, Madam Chair, and thanks to the minister for the overview as well as the department team for the background work on the overall budget. On page 44 of the business plan the key objective 4.5 addresses classroom complexities through specialized learning supports and improved access to qualified professionals and educational support workers. Apart from the key indicator that you have for that, apart from the general survey that is provided, how does the ministry measure the classroom complexities to figure out whether it is adequately managed and the students get the support they need?

Mr. Nicolaidis: Yeah. I think, you know, quantitative data and metric analysis is important. It's something for us to explore to make sure that we're actually making an impact. But I think the other piece is, of course, qualitative data and analysis in our conversations with school boards, the Alberta Teachers' Association, and other groups and organizations. We can, through qualitative measures and discussions, get a better understanding of how the classroom conditions are improving and whether our efforts are achieving the measurable impact that we expect.

Also, through some of the grants – the classroom complexity grant, as an example of being grant based. The school divisions, of

course, have to submit their proposals as to how they intend to use the grant, so we are able to see from the administration of the grant what types of resources are being secured and what kind of applications are being made. So that gives us a window.

Furthermore, I should mention, of course, that we do have our annual education results reports, the AERR, which is our primary accountability measure to ensure that we are achieving our intended objectives and goals. Using these different measures, I'm confident we can achieve success.

Mr. Haji: Yeah. Thanks.

There is an opportunity of triangulation in terms of measuring it, but when you look into your targets versus the Alberta Teachers' Association, that shows significantly a majority of the school leaders, actually 9 out of 10, report an increase of complexities. But in terms of your target, it's not indicating that, so I'm concerned how the public should know about the management of class complexity so that we can adequately resource through the budget.

Mr. Nicolaidis: Yeah. Well, there is no question: we are seeing increased complexity in our classrooms. We are seeing many more challenges, and a significant component of that is, you know, partly attributed to an increase in population. Of course, you have more individuals; you have more instances of complexity. We have as well seen increases in certain student demographics and profiles that can lend themselves to more complexity and challenge. For example, over the past four years the percentage of refugee students in our system has increased by 34 per cent, and we've had significant increases as well in students that require support or have English as an additional language.

In addition, there's a greater availability of assessment, and I think most parents would agree and understand that there are more kids that are being identified today than before with complex needs, learning disabilities, and I think part of this is a degree of demonstration of success. You know, we've talked about early screening in kindergarten and in grades 1 and 3, so if we're implementing that screening, we could be identifying more students with dyslexia or that need other supports. The identification of those students is a good indicator of where we're at and what kind of supports we need to provide.

But our objective and our understanding is clear. We are seeing more complexity in our classrooms, and we are providing more resources to our school boards and having some broader policy conversations to explore how we can work together to address these challenges.

Mr. Haji: Yeah. Through the chair, another challenge of the – I'm glad that you pointed out that there is an increase in terms of need because of the population growth or other complexities in the classroom that we are encountering in terms of an increased number of children requiring support.

Over the last two months educational support workers are not in classrooms and neither are students. Parents of children with special needs are home-schooling because they have no other choice. With all these challenges, through the chair, can the minister inform the committee how line 3.2 of the estimates will fix this problem? How will the objective be achieved when we are already seeing that educational support workers are not showing up to work?

Mr. Nicolaidis: Sure. To maybe just continue because my officials were able to provide some more information, in terms of the measures, we do have additional measures around classroom complexity that aren't highlighted in the business plan. For example, we do track and report the satisfaction of students, parents, teachers, and school board members that a school is

providing a safe, caring, and healthy learning environment. We do track that measure separately. We also track another measure which is the agreement of students, parents, teachers, and school board members that students can access supports and services in a timely manner. Those are the two main measures, but we do have, again, some of the other pieces that I mentioned.

In terms of support staff – sorry. I’m going to have to get a reminder of your question. It’s just escaping my mind.

Mr. Haji: The problem is that – I’ll give you an example from my riding, a snapshot. I have hundreds of support staff that are not showing up in the schools that are in Edmonton-Decore. In Balwin school 23 support workers are not showing up; in Delwood, 12; Evansdale, 17; Florence Hallock, 15; Glengarry, 10; John Barnett, 9. In M.E. LaZerte 33 of their support workers are not showing up. How will you achieve objective 4.5 when support workers are not showing up?

Mr. Nicolaides: Yeah. I know that some of our support staff are currently on strike and are working through that process. Of course, with many of our support staff salaries, wages, benefits, and other conditions are discussions and agreements that are facilitated directly between their union and the school boards. The provincial government is not involved in any negotiations with those unions directly. Those unions and their members have initiated strike action in some instances. My hope is that the school board and the striking unions can find a way to get back to the conversation, get back to the negotiating table and find the best possible way to resolve the challenges that they’re experiencing. At the end of the day, as you’ve mentioned, we need to ensure that students are able to receive the best possible level of support.

Mr. Haji: Well, through the chair, what is the contingency plan? Like, I’m focused on the business plan that you tabled that shows that objective 4.5 is at risk if those support workers don’t show up. What is the minister’s contingency plan?

Mr. Nicolaides: Yeah. The individual boards do have contingency plans. We do have some conversations with them to see if there’s any way in which we can assist them with their contingency plans or operations, but many of them do have plans in place and are executing those plans. They vary, of course, from school jurisdiction to school jurisdiction, but we do work with them as best we can to explore how we can support any of their contingency plans that they want to implement.

11:10

Mr. Haji: Through the chair: does Budget ’25 have any contingency wage increase allocated in case those contingency plans with the school authorities don’t work?

Mr. Nicolaides: Yeah. We provide, of course, the funding to our school boards and many of our school boards do have reserves, and they manage their own finances and operations that they can use.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Over to the government side. Shared or block time?

Mrs. Petrovic: Thank you, Madam Chair. I would like to do shared time if the minister is agreeable to it.

The Chair: Minister?

Mr. Nicolaides: Yeah. That’s fine.

The Chair: Please proceed, Member.

Mrs. Petrovic: Wonderful. Thank you.

First off, I just want to thank the minister and his team for all of the hard work that he’s done. I know this is no easy task, but I appreciate the work and the budget that’s been put forward to us.

I just have a couple of questions, and I just want to first focus on performance measure 4(b). Performance measure 4(b) on page 45 of the ministry’s business plan highlights satisfaction that schools provide a safe, caring, and healthy learning environment. According to the information provided, 84.1 per cent of the students, parents, teachers, and school board members were satisfied in this category. My first question to the minister through the chair: what factors are behind these different demographics feeling that schools are indeed safe, caring, and healthy learning environments?

Mr. Nicolaides: Sure. Thank you. An important question. Yeah. As you’ve noted, every year we do conduct those provincial satisfaction surveys to get some feedback from students and parents and others. Others, of course, being important partners such as teachers, principals, and school board members and the general public as well as it relates to their perception and opinion of Alberta’s education system. We conduct approximately more than 6,000 surveys as a consequence of this, and we do work to ensure that survey results for each of the 10 respondent groups are received so that they can be accurately and statistically represented. We do work to ensure that we have statistically accurate sample sizes.

The survey responses, just for some additional information, are completely confidential and no individual responses are reported, but they’re aggregated and reported in that fashion. Participation is, of course, important because it helps to provide some valuable insight and information to help the ministry identify areas of strength and areas where we need to conduct a little bit more work. It also helps to provide a more accountable and transparent education system. Some of the factors that are considered for this metric include student, teacher, and parent agreement that students feel safe at school and that teachers care about students and that students are learning about how to stay healthy. Those are some of the specific aspects that we measure in those surveys.

Mrs. Petrovic: Thank you for the answer.

My second question is just a continuation. The target for 2025-2026 is 84.3 per cent, which is a .2 per cent increase from the previous year. How is budget 2025-2026 working to ensure that this target is reached?

Mr. Nicolaides: Yeah. Well, thank you. Very important question. The short answer is that we are providing some supports to help ensure that we are moving in the right direction and then subsequently, of course, increasing those scores. It is a priority for the government to ensure that students are happy and satisfied with their learning environment. That’s one of the reasons, of course, why it’s specifically measured, because we want to ensure that there’s satisfaction in that regard. You know, targets: you did note that it’s a .2 per cent increase. It’s important that we have aspirational but realistic targets that are achievable within the time frame as well, because that’s an increase over the year. We want to make sure that that’s something that’s achievable and realistic.

One of the things that we’re doing in Budget ’25 specifically is some considerable work to ensure that we’re enhancing student well-being, and that’s being done by investing \$35 million in this budget to provide mental health learning support and other wellness support for students. That will help ensure that, you know, we’re doing what we can to provide the right kind of learning environment and learning conditions, that will subsequently help students feel

safe and satisfied with their environment, and help to move those measures forward.

In addition, we are also partnering with the ministry of children's services for the Alberta mentoring partnership and to facilitate mentoring in schools. We do also support antibullying initiatives such as respect in schools and other programs and initiatives. Again, all of these combined, we're confident, will help move the measures in the right direction and help ensure that students feel safe and happy at school.

Mrs. Petrovic: Wonderful. Thank you for that. My next question you've touched on a little bit, but understanding that we have five minutes to speak, I wanted to give you a bit more of a chance to elaborate on it. Performance measure 4(c), located on page 45 of the business plan, regards agreement that students can access supports and services in a timely manner. The document goes on to say that "timely access to supports and services fosters effective learning. In 2023-24, 73.9 per cent of students, parents, teachers and school board members agreed that there was timely access to student supports and services." The target outlined for 2025-2026 cites 74.2 per cent.

My two questions are: would the minister outline what sort of supports and services are available, perhaps in greater detail than before, for students to access, and given that there are a variety of geographic, demographic, and other assorted needs in each school, what constitutes a timely matter? Second, how does budget 2025-2026 improve timelines when it comes to accessing these supports and services?

Mr. Nicolaidis: Sure. Thank you. Yeah, providing timely access to services is important and, again, another reason why that's measured specifically and outlined in the business plan. We do work very carefully with our partners in the education system to make sure that we're achieving those goals. In addition to partners in the education system – school boards, the teachers' association, and other groups – we do also work collaboratively with other ministries that touch on this area. Those would of course be children's services, community and social services, Mental Health and Addiction, Health, and others; those are the primary ministries that we work together with to help achieve improvement in this area and help ensure that there are timely access to services.

Some of the specific areas where we do provide support, which, I should note, are all increasing in Budget '25: we are providing a 2.32 per cent increase to a number of different grants that are all in the category of specialized learning needs. This bucket goes specifically to address, you know, the specialized learning needs of students.

These ones include – I'll go through them here – PUF, program unit funding. All of these are being increased by 2.32 per cent; the specialized learning support grant is also increasing; the moderate language delay grant is increasing; English as an additional language; First Nations, Métis, and Inuit education; refugee students; socioeconomic status grant; geographic grant; school nutrition grant; francophone equivalency grant, which I should note will actually be increasing by 25 per cent instead of the 2.32 per cent that the others will be increasing by. This is being done to address increased costs associated with providing equivalent minority language education.

The classroom complexity grant is also increasing by 20 per cent, and this is being increased above the others given some of the conversation that, you know, we've had here today about the increasing complexity in our classrooms and the need to do more there.

To answer the second part of your question, we are changing our funding approach; we are changing to the two-year average adjusted enrolment method, which will provide funding at 30 per cent for the current year and 70 per cent for the upcoming year. That will subsequently provide school boards with greater certainty of funding, and those specific funding letters will be coming shortly to our school boards.

11:20

But the change in funding does reinforce the government's commitment to provide stable and predictable funding to help ensure that growing school divisions receive funding in a faster way and that smaller, perhaps declining or stagnating school jurisdictions are also shielded from sudden and significant variances in their funding, which can cause significant impacts as well. These are the pieces that we're working on to help move those measures forward.

Mrs. Petrovic: Wonderful. Thank you for that.

I know we're almost out of time. One last question just in regard to this, the topic of 4.2 on page 44 of the Alberta Education business plan, again, that is to "revise K-12 education funding framework to provide more funding to school authorities." I know a one-size-fits-all model for funding won't work for the entire province, and you touched on it a little bit, but to balance Alberta's diversity your ministry provides grant funding to address the varied and diverse needs of Alberta's school boards. Would you mind outlining how much funding will be provided in Budget 2025 to support the grant rate increase?

The Chair: Wow. We ran out of time. So sorry, Member.

Now we'll go back over to the Official Opposition. Shared or block time?

Ms Chapman: Shared.

The Chair: Minister?

Mr. Nicolaidis: Yeah. That's fine.

The Chair: All right. Please proceed.

Ms Chapman: I can stay on the business plan theme here because I had a few questions around that. One of the things that I often do is go back and compare to 2019 levels some of these metrics, coming out of four years of a different government then. Measure 4(b) that the member opposite just mentioned, actually it's 2 per cent lower now than it was after four years of NDP tenure in government. I'll get to a question, but this is just my interesting fun facts; 3(b), satisfaction with opportunities to receive a broad program of studies: that's actually had a 3.5 per cent decline since 2019, which I think could potentially speak to the, you know, choice in education because it turns out that students, parents, and teachers are less satisfied with their variety of learning opportunities than they were six years ago.

For my question I want to focus on performance measure 1(c), which is students who achieved the acceptable level on PATs because not only are these numbers significantly lower than they were in 2019 but they're on a continuous decline. We talked about this measure last year. To refresh our memories, since 2019 we have seen the percentage of students achieving an acceptable standard in language arts drop 10 per cent. In math it's a decrease of 14 per cent, and now that math number dropped 1.5 per cent just between last year and this year.

The targets the minister has set in the business plan don't see a goal to return to last year's level of math scores until 2026. Given the way these numbers have dropped every single year under the UCP's tenure in government, I don't really know where to find the confidence to believe that these numbers will do anything but go down again.

I know last year when we talked about this performance measure, the minister spoke about COVID learning loss as a cause for declining scores. I believe that all funding for COVID learning gaps has finished, yet test scores keep dropping. Through the chair, these test scores are quite concerning. What is the minister's plan to address the year-over-year declines, and when can we expect students to return to 2019 levels of achievement?

Mr. Nicolaides: Yeah. Thank you. A very important question. I think there are, you know, a couple of pieces to that. Certainly, as we had discussed last time as well, COVID has had a unique impact on learning loss and students' achievement and ability. It's not something that's just been demonstrated in Alberta but in other provinces and around the world. I know when the latest PISA results rankings came in, yes, Alberta led the pack, but there was still significant decline from previous years, and that was replicated across other provinces and other jurisdictions.

I think the overall analysis of the PISA results globally was that there has been decline broadly in student achievement levels which, again, I think is partly attributed to the significant interruptions that occurred during COVID. In spite of all of that, I think a lot of folks were really pleased to see that Alberta continued to lead Canada and continued to be a leader internationally in our scores. You know, when it comes to our PATs and other scores, diploma scores, obviously it's something that we're very interested in and something that we pay a lot of attention to.

Part of the reason why we're making some significant increases in updates to curriculum is to make sure that we can remain globally competitive. Much of our curriculum hasn't been updated in a significant period of time. I think our computer science curriculum is 20 years old, so we need to continue to update. Gosh, I don't even know what technology looked like 20 years ago. Maybe people were still using faxes or something.

Ms Chapman: Punch cards.

Mr. Nicolaides: Punch cards, yeah. Punching clocks.

We recognize that to make sure that our PAT and international scores and other scores continue to excel, we need to aggressively pursue curriculum reform. We can't be operating with 20-year-old computer science curriculum. We need to move forward quickly to update that.

As well, we're also taking steps, as we mentioned earlier, through early intervention. We talked a little bit about literacy and numeracy screening being mandatory now for students in kindergarten and grades 1 to 3. This is a significant new development. I can't overemphasize how critical this development is. So many other provinces – I know both British Columbia and Saskatchewan are currently engaging in conversations with my ministry to get more information about what we did, how we did it, when we did it, because they are very much interested in implementing the same type of approach. The early literacy and numeracy screening is particularly important because it can help us to identify learning challenges very early and give students targeted intervention. That will pay dividends in subsequent years and will help increase student scores in the future as well.

There's not one specific action or strategy that can be implemented to bring all of these scores up but we need to address

complexity, we need to provide early intervention, targeted language supports, and other aspects. We're taking action in all of these areas to help ensure that these scores improve and increase.

Ms Chapman: On your literacy, numeracy screeners – we've talked about them a number of times; they identify the learning challenges – you've mentioned targeted interventions. How much funding is being provided to deliver those targeted interventions to kids who are identified through your screeners as having an extra need?

Mr. Nicolaides: Yeah. I'll pull the exact numbers up. If memory serves me correct, it's about \$30 million over the course of the three years, but I'll get you the year-by-year breakdown; \$40 million, I lied. Yeah. I lied. Apologies. It's \$40 million over the next three years that's going to literacy and numeracy support. Again, I'll try and find the specific breakdown on the year-by-year for you, but that funding is going to our school boards so that they can conduct the interventions that are required as identified by the screening because, you know, we can do as much screening as we want, but if we don't have dedicated resources available to school boards so that they can hire additional staff or increase hours of EAs or whatever needs to occur to conduct the necessary interventions, then it's not really that beneficial.

One of the things that we have heard in feedback from our school boards when we implemented the screeners was that we need to make sure we can conduct the interventions; we need to make sure that we have some more targeted support.

The breakdown will be \$12 million this year, \$14 million next year, and \$16 million in the third year, so \$40 million in total over the next three years to support that work.

Ms Chapman: Just to confirm: that is new funding that you're adding this year?

Mr. Nicolaides: That's correct. This is a new grant. This is a new line item that school boards will receive. This is on top of classroom complexity funding that school boards will receive. Again, classroom complexity funding can be used to hire occupational therapists, speech-language pathologists, EAs, or other support staff, and other funding that is provided through the English as an additional language grant, the refugee student grant, specialized learning, SLS, grant. This is on top of all of that and, again, for a very specific purpose: to hire staff to execute and implement interventions.

Ms Chapman: Got it. Super quick one. When the Member for Edmonton-Decore was talking, you mentioned some satisfaction measures that aren't included in the business plan. Can you table those, or are they public somewhere?

11:30

Mr. Nicolaides: Yeah, my understanding is that they're posted publicly.

Ms Chapman: Ah, perfect. I will find them.

Okay. One more on the business plan. Metric 2(b), First Nation, Métis, and Inuit students: the minister will know they're still lagging the rest of the population on high school completion and transition to postsecondary rates, so 19 per cent fewer First Nation, Métis, and Inuit students complete high school and 23 per cent fewer transition to a postsecondary program upon completion of high school. Is the minister satisfied with these rates, and why are the goals to increase these rates so modest?

Mr. Nicolaides: Short answer: no, not satisfied. More needs to happen. I think there was a question from another member of the

committee earlier where I had the opportunity to talk in a little bit more detail about some of the specific work that we're undertaking to help increase those scores. In recent years we have seen improvement in those scores both in terms of high school completion and in postsecondary participation. That is encouraging, but we still need to keep working in that area.

I did have an opportunity to talk about some of the funding that is provided. If memory serves me correct, it's about \$95 million to support First Nation, Métis, and Inuit students. We'll continue to work in that area.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Over to the government side. Member, blocked or shared time?

Mr. Singh: Shared time.

The Chair: Minister?

Mr. Nicolaides: Shared.

The Chair: Please proceed.

Mr. Singh: Thank you, Chair. First, Minister, I appreciate you being here with us today, and I also want to acknowledge the work you have done in the ministry in ensuring the delivery of a student-centred education system that promotes the success of children and students developing the knowledge, skills, and expertise they need to pursue their career interests and make meaningful contributions to their communities and the world.

Through the chair, my questions are on performance measure 3(a). Performance measure 3(a), located on page 43 of the business plan, measures satisfaction with career education opportunities. The information provided indicates that effective career planning enables students to enter the labour force or postsecondary programs. In 2023-2024 69.3 per cent of students, parents, teachers, and school board members were satisfied that students received the necessary supports to plan for career or life after school. I see the target for 2025-2026 is 69.5 per cent. Could the minister please explain how school choice improves the metrics?

Mr. Nicolaides: Well, thank you so much, MLA Singh. Thank you for the important question. Yeah, satisfaction with career education opportunities is critically important and something that our government wants to strengthen. We believe firmly that we need to do more and provide more students with career education opportunities and exposure. Obviously, measuring the level of satisfaction with career education programming and opportunities is a critically important variable.

As I mentioned earlier, one of the significant components of our budget this year is about a \$102 million investment over the next three years for career education programming. This will go to a number of different areas. It will go to help school boards expand dual credit opportunities, help them with collegiate start-up costs and continued, ongoing costs and other areas. It's critically important, as I mentioned.

I do want to highlight as well that having options and having choice in our education system helps to facilitate this objective. If we have different collegiate programming or charter school options or varied options out there, we can help to create a higher degree of satisfaction when students and families are able to explore more diverse programming that really meets their needs and explores different career opportunities and options. Of course, not all students are on the same path. Students are looking at different options, and providing choice helps to improve those measures.

We did talk earlier about collegiate programs as well, so I won't go into that in a lot of detail. Again, their ability to provide really targeted learning in specific areas can dramatically increase satisfaction for students participating in those programs.

I do want to talk just very briefly as well about – I mentioned some of our charter school partners that as well provide STEM or location-based programming and other investments that we're making. These measures that we're undertaking will help us to move those metrics forward.

Mr. Singh: Thanks for the answer, Minister.

Through the chair, my next set of questions are on performance indicator 3(c). On page 44 of the business plan I note that performance indicator 3(c) tracks the average number of career education credits completed per high school student. The document indicates that tracking average credits completed in career education provides insight on how students are taking advantage of these career education opportunities. In looking at the information provided, I see that the average number of career education credits completed by high school student was 6.4 in 2019-2020, while it was 7.3 in 2023-2024. Could the minister please explain what factors are behind the growth in this average?

Mr. Nicolaides: Sure. Thank you. I'd be happy to touch on that. Yeah, an important metric. This is actually a new addition to our business plan, so happy to have the opportunity to provide a little bit more information about this new measure. The indicator does help to highlight and speak to our commitment to support schools and school boards to expand student participation in career education. As I mentioned earlier, we know how valuable it is for students and the benefits that are derived from student exposure to different career pathways and opportunities. We really want to see participation in career programming expand and grow and increase. It's one of the reasons why we're investing in collegiate schools, as we've talked about over the course of this morning. It's why we're investing in dual credit opportunities, and we're supporting career and technology studies and as well the registered apprenticeship program, which the latter gives students an opportunity to begin apprenticeship education while they're in high school.

Now, it can be challenging to pinpoint specific causes for the increases in credits. But we are seeing that increase, which is welcomed. We do know that we have been providing increased funding over the course of the past few years, so we think that there can be a correlation there between additional funding for dual credit grants, which increased from just \$2 million in 2019-20 to \$4 million in '23-24, a significant increase in what's been provided there.

We're also working closely with our school boards and other partners to understand what is really needed. Like, what are the real barriers and challenges to student participation, and what can we do further to help increase student participation? In '21 they did provide us with some feedback. They did note some challenges that they felt were impacting student participation in career education programming. One of the things that we heard was a lack of industry connection at the school level for work integrated learning opportunities. We also heard a need for some more co-ordinated off-campus career programming, and we also heard just generally a lack of awareness among students about the options that are available to them.

We have taken some steps to try and address this. We have been partnering with groups like Careers: the Next Generation, which is an organization that works directly with school boards across the province to increase student participation in career programming. We have worked with them to help create some more awareness

and expand exposure of their programs in our schools. I'm happy to say that based on interest from school boards, we expanded the agreement in '24 to help more school boards be a part of their programming because there was a lot of interest. We did also in September of '22 convene the Career Education Task Force, which brought together industry partners, postsecondary partners, schools boards, and others to help inform steps that can be taken. We are working to implement the recommendations of the Career Education Task Force, which provided a number of recommendations to government about what can be done to enhance exposure and awareness of career education options and opportunities.

11:40

Just very recently we also created the dual credit advisory group in 2024, which similarly provided some ideas and recommendations to government about things that we can do to help increase awareness and participation into dual credit programming. One of the things that we've heard as it relates to dual credit programming had to do with funding, and that's being reflected in Budget '25 as we're now providing over \$100 million over the next three years in additional funding to help support career education programs and dual credits. That is helping to implement some of those recommendations.

Perhaps in the last few seconds that I have left I can just give you an overview of kind of where we're at based on the '23-24 school year. There are approximately 148,000 students in high school participating in career and technology studies nonapprenticeship programming, 15,000 students participating in high school apprenticeship programming, 17,000 students participating in dual credit, and 2,800 students participating in career education programming in partnership with a postsecondary institution. Some strong numbers there.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Back over to the Official Opposition. Shared or blocked time?

Ms Chapman: Shared still.

The Chair: Shared?

Mr. Nicolaides: Shared is fine.

Ms Chapman: Thank you through the chair, Minister.

You've made a change to the weighted moving average to move it to a two-year average. There's still an expectation, particularly for our growing boards, that they are going to have a number of underfunded students. One board estimated it as saying that if they had 3,000 last year, they're going to have 1,000 in the coming year. Can the minister confirm for me because I have heard that some folks think that the supplemental enrolment growth grant has been removed. Is that correct?

Mr. Nicolaides: Yes. That's correct.

Ms Chapman: Okay, but I do see mention of continued enrolment projection funding on page 75 of the fiscal plan. Can you please talk to us about your funding plan for in-year student additions if you have cancelled that enrolment growth grant?

Mr. Nicolaides: Yeah. The supplemental enrolment growth grant was brought in partly due to the significant increase in enrolment that we've seen over the past few years and many of our metro school boards experiencing some significant pressure as they experienced dramatic increases in enrolment and then working with a weighted moving average they were experiencing some

challenges. So the supplemental enrolment growth grant was brought in to help supplement funding and address some of those challenges.

You know, you noted that we're no longer providing the supplemental enrolment growth grant. There are a couple of reasons for that, and we do anticipate that the current funding approach will be able to satisfy the needs of our school boards.

One of the factors is the fact that moving to a two-year versus a three-year funding model will help to distribute funds in a faster way to school boards. They'll receive full funding for all of their allotted students in two years versus the three years. That one change will be particularly important and will help provide I think it was about \$50 million in the current year to school boards just by making that single change. That's one piece.

The second reason is because based on projections and forecasts from our school boards, we anticipate enrolment levels to return to more normal levels of growth, which have typically been around 2 to 3 per cent. We do anticipate based on their projections that we will return to those normal levels, so that would negate the requirement for the supplemental enrolment growth grant as well.

We'll explore what enrolment looks like in future years, but, again, based on projections from our school boards and from Treasury Board and Finance, with respect to population levels generally, we do anticipate that those levels will return to more normal growth rates.

With the two-year, I should also highlight just very quickly, that we are basing 70 per cent off projections. Obviously, it's important to be as precise as the school boards can be in their projection, but with 70 per cent of their funding coming from next year's projection, that gives them a little bit of flexibility and latitude with funding as well.

Ms Chapman: Perfect. Thank you.

I just want to go back on some capital questions. Charter schools. Now, I'm assuming that we – I know that the government has made a commitment to double charter school spaces in Alberta over the next seven years. I haven't seen announcements, but I'm assuming that might be coming in your announcement next week. I'm just wondering what the process is for approving charter school construction. Are these projects put through the same gated process as our public school builds? We have public boards, as I've mentioned a few times today, that are rapidly moving towards an over 100 per cent occupancy. I'm just wondering if the minister can talk us through the process for deciding which charters get to jump the queue in front of these, you know, highly overcrowded public boards.

Mr. Nicolaides: Yeah, happy to talk a little bit more about that. Our public charter schools will move through the same process, through the SCAP process and will be identified, you know, based on enrolment projections and community need and population, similar to the same parameters that we're using in terms of deciding which school projects will be moving forward in our capital submission. We're using the same criteria, looking at enrolment and looking at pressures in communities and in municipalities. We will continue to use the gated process and three stages. The projects will move through planning and design and construction, just as other projects are moving through as well, to help ensure that we're following the right process and procedure and that we are, you know, fully accountable and transparent with how these projects are moving forward. That's how we'll be proceeding with many of those.

Ms Chapman: Do your charter schools do public reporting of their utilization rates, or is that just direct to the ministry?

Mr. Nicolaides: It's a good question. I would have to maybe get back to you on that. Let me ask my team here and see if we do have public reporting on the utilization rates.

Ms Chapman: Okay. Thank you.

Just another one on sort of our alternate school providers. Education funding was kept to that increase of 4.5 per cent overall, but on page 69 of the government estimates, line 4.1, I see an increase of 15 per cent for private school support. Can the minister please provide an explanation of this line item and a rationale for why it grew at a rate three times the operating increase for education funding?

Mr. Nicolaides: Yeah. Most of the funding is of course determined based on enrolment growth. Our provincial school authorities have seen an enrolment increase of 2.5 per cent whereas our independent schools are projecting an enrolment increase of 7.5 per cent. They're expecting and anticipating – excuse me. And our ECS operators are projecting an enrolment growth of about 9 per cent. I'm sorry. I misspoke there. Public school jurisdictions are expecting to see a 2.2 per cent increase in enrolment growth.

So public schools are looking to see a 2.2 per cent increase; early childhood services, 9 per cent; and independent schools, 7.5 per cent. Of course, funding is then distributed based on enrolment levels. That's why you see some of the variants there.

Ms Chapman: What's the formula that the government is using for funding allocations between public, charter, private schools?

Mr. Nicolaides: Yeah. Thank you. It's the same formula. There's no variance, and they're all funded based on the two-year average adjusted. The rates are the rates, and, you know, they receive funding in allotment of the rates. The only variance is that independent providers – and ECS providers as well? Just the independent providers – my apologies – receive 70 per cent of the rate. So whatever the rate is, you know, public, Catholic, charter receive 100 per cent; independent schools will receive 70 per cent.

11:50

Ms Chapman: Okay. So Alberta public school students are the lowest or among the lowest, I guess, if Mr. Fletcher was correct in his article, in the country and have been since the UCP took office.

The rate that we had calculated for 2023 was \$11,464 per student; looks like it's around \$12,000 a student for 2025. Do you know your funding allocation per student in the private system? Do you just take 70 per cent of that number? Is that how that works?

Mr. Nicolaides: I'll have to defer to Jeff on that one.

Mr. Willan: Can you just repeat the question with respect to – you're asking for what we fund on a per-student basis or . . .

Ms Chapman: Yes. Yeah, what you fund on a per-student basis, yes.

Mr. Willan: Okay. Sure. Thank you. Our funding is determined based on the funding that we provide to school divisions as public, separate; and charter schools are public. When you look at the funding manual for school authorities – it will be posted later this month – you will see a rate structure in there for all school authority types. So there'll be public and separate, but there'll also be the independent school section, which will outline all of the rates. Those rates are typically 70 per cent of the public and separate rate. You'll see that across a number of their grants, and you can find that in the funding manual. Again, as I said, that will be published publicly towards the end of this month.

Ms Chapman: Thank you.

I'm not going to have time to ask this question so you're not going to have time to answer it, but on transportation I know the government has walked back their promise to reduce those walk distances. I had figures last year for transportation. I was hoping the minister could update for this year: three-hundred and thirty-five . . .

The Chair: Thank you so much, Member.

We'll move back over to the government side. Shared or block time, Member?

Mr. Lundy: Shared time, if it's all right with the minister.

The Chair: Minister?

Mr. Nicolaides: Yeah, that's fine.

The Chair: Okay.

Mr. Lundy: Thank you, and thank you, Madam Chair. When you arrive late to the committee you get the last block, so I'll see what I can do.

First off, obviously a big thank you to the minister and his officials and his support staff – really appreciate all your hard work – for joining us today.

I did want to ask a question on francophone education. This is, of course, particularly an important issue for me, having Beaumont in my riding. I know that francophone education is so important to many residents of Beaumont. In fact, I was able to attend a francophone school opening not too long ago in Beaumont, and it was really impressive to see the new facility. It was really exciting to get to talk to the principal and the school officials and the school board; just how excited they were with their new facility. It's obviously an important piece of our education system. In fact, francophone education is one of the pillars of educational choice in Alberta. I understand that francophone schools are also experiencing significant growth and challenges related to staffing and building school projects, with some of these challenges unique to their linguistic mandate.

Through the chair, I note that under the ministry fact sheet on page 39 of the business plan, it states, "The department works to ensure eligible students have access to francophone education while encouraging opportunities for French education through French language programs." Through the chair to the minister: how does Alberta Education work with the francophone community to establish where schools are needed?

Mr. Nicolaides: Yeah. Thank you. Very important question. We do work very closely with our francophone partners to help support programming and help to identify school sites that are needed, and subsequently build and construct those schools. We do value French-first language education, and we do want to work with them to see how we can deliver high-quality French language programming.

In April of '23 one of the things that we did is establish a working group with representatives from our four francophone school boards and Alberta Infrastructure and Treasury Board and Finance, so that we could all sit down at the table together to review and address francophone capital concerns and get on the same page and do that within the context of minority language education rights under section 23 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. Through this collaboration the working group reviews capital planning practices and we sit down and discuss processes as well as implement policy solutions. Each year our francophone regional authorities do submit – well, of course, first they assess and then

subsequently submit their capital needs, and they provide us with their assessment of what the priority projects are. Then those are evaluated against criteria that we use for all of our francophone regional authorities to help ensure that we're preserving and promoting French language education. That's the primary mechanism by which we conduct that analysis, and we prioritize and make a decision about which schools to build and where to build them.

Mr. Lundy: Great. Thanks for that background. That's really important.

A quick follow-up, as always through the chair. Are you aware of how many francophone school capital projects Budget 2025 funds? Is there any further funding to explore future projects?

Mr. Nicolaides: Everybody wants to get me to scoop my school announcements here. Maybe we'll have to do that before next time.

Yes. There are currently 15 active school projects throughout the province that are specifically oriented towards providing French education. There are five in Calgary, three in Edmonton, one in Airdrie, Fort McMurray, Lac La Biche, Lethbridge, Plamondon, and Sherwood Park. We will have some information about future francophone capital projects in the coming days, but as part of our commitment to francophone education we do have in Budget '25 – we have set aside \$2 million in preplanning funding. That's to help support site readiness and help conduct some of that preliminary planning for francophone school projects. The preplanning funding is quite helpful. It can be used to help, you know, determine site selection, help ensure site readiness, scope of development for the project, and other pieces.

Mr. Lundy: Yeah. Thank you. I certainly would never want to get out in front of the minister making his exciting announcements. In fact, I'm looking forward to additional potential announcements in the next week or so.

I would like to maybe close by coming back around to the public charter schools. I know you were able to touch briefly on that previously. It's obviously a big part of school choice in Alberta, and I can tell you that when I talk to parents and constituents in my office, they're very appreciative of school choice in Alberta and what an important role that plays. So I would like to, again through the chair, ask the minister: how does budget '25-26 support school

choice, and what school options are available to Alberta students and parents?

Mr. Nicolaides: Yeah. Thank you. Thank you for the opportunity to highlight just how important school choice is, definitely something that our government firmly believes in. We believe fundamentally in school choice because we fundamentally believe that parents, not politicians or trustees, are in the best position to make the educational choices for their children, and we have to create the right environment and conditions that support choice so that parents have the ability to make those decisions.

To answer your question in a little bit more detail, part of achieving the objective is to promote greater choice, as I mentioned, and create the conditions. Right now some of the options that are available include public, separate, francophone, public charter, independent, and home education. So there's a range of different options and opportunities, and even within those, embedded within those, embedded within the public and the charter and independent, are even more diverse and tailored programming.

There's programming specifically for students with specialized learning needs. We have schools specifically for students with autism or specifically for students with ADHD. Within our public we have all-boys or all-girls schools. We have STEM-focused charter schools. We have a range of different options, even, you know, cultural and language and religiously oriented programming. I was in northeast Calgary visiting the Khalsa Sikh school recently and just talking as recently as last night with Edmonton Islamic school leaders and others.

This range of programming is one of the things that I believe makes Alberta's education system strong and robust. Again, we firmly believe in giving parents the options to choose what's best for their kids.

The Chair: My apologies, Minister, for the interruption, but I must advise the committee that the time allotted for consideration of the ministry's estimates has concluded.

I'd like to remind committee members that we are scheduled to meet later today, March 11, at 7 p.m. to consider the estimates of the Ministry of Service Alberta and Red Tape Reduction.

Thank you, everyone. This meeting is adjourned.

[The committee adjourned at 12 p.m.]

