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The 30th Legislature
Second Session

Alberta Hansard

Tuesday evening, June 2, 2020

Day 24

The Honourable Nathan M. Cooper, Speaker

Legislative Assembly of Alberta
The 30th Legislature

Second Session

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Legislative Assembly of Alberta

7:30 p.m.

Tuesday, June 2, 2020

[The Speaker in the chair]

The Speaker: Good evening, hon. members. Please be seated.

Government Bills and Orders Second Reading

Bill 18 Corrections (Alberta Parole Board) Amendment Act, 2020

The Speaker: Hon. members, is there anyone wishing to join in the debate today?

Seeing none, I'm prepared to call the question.

[Motion carried; Bill 18 read a second time]

Bill 15 Choice in Education Act, 2020

The Speaker: Hon. members, is there anyone wishing to join in the debate this evening? I see the hon. Member for Edmonton-Decore has risen.

Mr. Nielsen: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. Appreciate the opportunity this evening to rise and add my thoughts to the debate around Bill 15, the Choice in Education Act, 2020, a bill that I feel makes some changes that are not in the best interests of Albertans when it comes to education. The one great thing I have about Edmonton-Decore is all the different schools that I have available there. As a matter of fact, I have 26 schools that vary, you know, elementaries, junior highs. In fact, I very proudly can say that all three of the high schools north of the Yellowhead in Edmonton all reside in the riding of Edmonton-Decore. So I get a chance to speak all the time with parents about, you know, the various programs that are available.

When we talk about choice, Mr. Speaker, which is, of course, the whole topic around Bill 15, I do remember the opportunity I had when I served in the 29th Legislature along with yourself. I got the opportunity to help move forward the Arabic bilingual program. That program existed within, at the time . . .

The Speaker: I hesitate to interrupt; however, I'm finding it difficult to hear the hon. Member for Edmonton-Decore. I would have thought that the Minister of Advanced Education got all of his words out at the dinner break, but it seems that he hasn't. If he'd like to take the conversation to the lounges, I'd be more than happy to have him do that.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Decore.

Mr. Nielsen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As I was saying, I did have the opportunity to help move that along. It was a program that only existed within Edmonton public, and that program had been operating in there for the past decade at that time. The member for what is now Edmonton-North West had a couple of feeder schools along with a couple of my schools that all fed into Queen Elizabeth high school and offered the Arabic bilingual program.

One of the things, when I spoke to members of the community, was that it was such a great program, but it wasn't available to everyone. But one thing that they were very, very specific about when they were asking about that program: (a) to be expanded provincially. There were a couple of things that they said were

absolutely crucial to this moving forward, and that one key piece, Mr. Speaker, was that it remained within the public school system. They didn't want that program, essentially, to potentially be – I believe their word was “hijacked.” They wanted the program to be about the language. They wanted the program to be about the culture, about the food, about the music, which, if you've ever had the chance to experience the Arabic culture, it's amazing, and did I mention the food that's available?

The reason I say this, Mr. Speaker, is because I've seen moves by the current government to water down considerably the public education system. We saw in previous sessions where we wanted to take out the word “public.” By watering that down, I believe that's what led the way for the current bill that we have before us, Bill 15, the choice in education, because they're just trying to lump it all into one big box. I find it interesting, because the consultation that the government has put forward on this – it was an interesting stat that over 60 per cent of the people said that they were just fine with what was being offered currently in the province of Alberta.

I bet, Mr. Speaker, you're wondering why I point out that 60-plus per cent. It's actually very, very interesting, because we have heard in the past how the current government has gone on to, shall we say, lecture the Official Opposition around how the provincial election happened and this gigantic mandate in the history of Alberta that they were given. Here we have this gigantic mandate number that has shown through your own consultation that everything is just fine, so I wonder why we are bringing this type of bill forward.

The only thing I can think of, Mr. Speaker, is that there are efforts to go along to privatize education. We've even heard a member of the government caucus that said: well, if we can privatize liquor stores, why can't we privatize education? Education has to be absolutely accessible to everyone, but the problem is that we know that, say, for instance, charter schools actually do have the ability to say no to somebody: no, you can't come to our school. That point alone now starts to put up barriers for people to be able to access that. And once you have barriers, it's not actually a choice now, is it?

Here we are getting hung up on the language. It's funny how it always seems to come down to the language. I've said this time and time again about multiple bills that have come before the 30th Legislature around what the language says. When I look at it, Mr. Speaker, one of my first things I'm always doing is looking for the bogeyman. So when I look at Bill 15, the choice in education, I'm looking for the bogeyman. What could be going wrong? What's getting left out? Who is it affecting? Who is it singling out? Who is it eliminating? Stuff like that.

Then I start to look at – maybe, Mr. Speaker, I should probably back up here a little bit. One of the things I learned through my time in the labour movement is that when you're developing language at this moment in time, the language is not actually for us. We already know what's going on. We know what supposedly the intention is. The language is being developed for those that come after us, when we're no longer around to be able to explain what our purpose was behind it. The more you complicate it, the more you convolute it, the more you hide it, the more difficult it becomes for those people to be able to interpret it, so I'm always looking for those kinds of things as well.

7:40

I see here within Bill 15, the Choice in Education Act, 2020, the chance that there are going to be people who are excluded, because we know that public schools accept absolutely everybody, no matter what. But when we start giving the ability for individuals to be excluded, then you're actually eliminating that choice. So the intention might be there to create choice, but the language tells me

you're eliminating it, you're blocking it. That's a problem, Mr. Speaker.

Right now, as I mentioned a little bit earlier, 60-plus per cent of people have said: "No. Actually, what we have here in Alberta is pretty good." It's actually probably better than most places in terms of what you're able to access. But by diluting our public system, one that has to take absolutely everybody, in favour of creating a system where somebody could be eliminated, that's not a good thing.

I guess I have questions around Bill 15, Mr. Speaker, questions such as, you know – we'll probably, maybe, have a chance to see this more during Committee of the Whole around Bill 15 – some of the specific results from the engagement sessions that you had that had more calls for vocational schools, okay? You know, I wouldn't mind seeing some of those things.

Myself, I certainly am a fan of that. I mean, let's be honest; not everyone wants to be an engineer. I know; I tried. It wasn't necessarily what I was looking for at the time. I wanted to sit at my desk the whole time, draw, and they said: "Well, no. You're going to go out in 40 below, and you're going to do this survey." And I went: "I'm going to do what? No. Get somebody else to do that. Bring me the numbers." So as it turns out, that wasn't for me, okay? I remember a really good friend of mine: yeah, that kind of stuff wasn't what excited him at the time. But fixing cars: man, he just got fired up about that kind of thing, tearing 'em apart, putting 'em back together.

So there should be programs that are available for that, but do we need to necessarily build a whole other school to accomplish that, or can we go to an existing school and add that program, like, for instance, the Arabic bilingual program? There was a need in my area of the city of Edmonton, where the Arabic bilingual program started, and over the course of time they identified that there was a need to create a provincial program, just like French, just like Ukrainian, just like Cree. Yeah. These are all within the area of Edmonton-Decore. Italian. It's awesome. I love it. You get invited to all the cool parties. What kind of information were we able to obtain that said, "No. We had to go in a different direction" than maybe doing that?

I'm curious as to some of the conversations we had with the school boards, okay? You know, a couple of the biggest school boards in the province: I believe that they have a very good idea of what's going on in their areas and what they can offer in terms of programming. I'm curious as to how that conversation went with those school boards around, you know, the possibility of a charter school bypassing them, going straight to the minister, which, Mr. Speaker, I should mention, is essentially giving the minister new powers, which I clearly remember members of the government bench, members of the government caucus in the 29th Legislature, really had a large problem with any time it appeared that a minister was getting new powers.

So here I am getting caught up on the language a little bit, where one minute we're saying one thing but the next minute we're doing something else, and those things kind of start to oppose each other. So did you really believe that then? You know, that's what creates confusion for people, Mr. Speaker. Again, going back to the question, though: what kind of conversations did we have with the school boards across the province on this topic of, you know, potentially charter schools going around their system and going straight to the minister?

Of course, I would also be interested in the actual respondents. I've mentioned, of course, that 60-plus per cent said that everything was just fine. What were some of the comments around that? I would love to maybe, you know, see some of the engagement that happened around that. You know, how did those comments, then,

depending on what they are, inform this bill, Mr. Speaker, and did it actually inform this bill? Or was it just: "Well, this wasn't actually what we wanted to hear, so we're just going to push that off over here, and we're going to do what we want"? I have to admit I've seen legislation come forward in the 30th Legislature that tends to do that. "We know we're not going to hear what we want to hear. We promised this, so we're going to do this, because no matter what, we want to be able to stand up and say: promise made; promise kept." But you end up creating legislation that's not in the best interests of Albertans.

I guess, when I think about some of that engagement process and some of the things that we're seeing here like, for instance, the minister making direct decisions, did the minister of red tape say, "Well, that's okay. We're going to create red tape, or that eliminates it"?

The Speaker: Hon. members, Standing Order 29(2)(a) is available if anyone has a brief question or comment. I see the hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood has risen to ask a brief question or comment.

Member Irwin: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I appreciate it. I'm always quite interested to hear what the hon. Member for Edmonton-Decore has to share. In fact, his riding, part of it, is just north of my own, so we share, you know, a lot of similar demographics. I know that, actually, some students who live in my riding attend schools in his riding. He's home to a number of high schools as well. I was quite appreciative – you know my background is in education. Of course, I was a teacher and an administrator, and then the last part of my career I spent working in Alberta Education primarily with curriculum, in fact. So I was quite pleased when one of the areas that I had responsibility for when I was in my final role was as executive director of high school curriculum, so I had purview over languages, second-language programming, and languages programming across the province. I'll talk more about this when I have the chance to speak. Alberta does offer a rich array of language programming across the province, not just in urban areas, in fact.

I would actually just like the Member for Edmonton-Decore to speak a little bit more about how that diversity of choice within the public system has really impacted students in his riding. I know, again, that he's visited a number of those schools. He might even want to name some of those schools and give them a shout-out.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Decore.

Mr. Nielsen: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I really appreciate the Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood talking about, as I alluded to earlier in my comments, the diversity that Edmonton-Decore has. You know, I've always joked with everybody in the House, and I love to tell this. There are 86 other MLAs in the province that will debate me fiercely about who has the most diverse riding in the province. It's Edmonton-Decore, but we can have that debate another day.

The language programs that are available within Edmonton-Decore: I had mentioned a few. We have French. We have Ukrainian. We have Italian. We have the Arabic bilingual program. One of my Catholic schools has a Cree program. This is to reflect what is within the community. We didn't have to go and build all kinds of extra schools to be able to fulfill the needs within the community. Those programs were available to be created through, you know, Edmonton public schools, through Edmonton Catholic schools. This gave students the chance to experience all kinds of different cultures and languages.

Mr. Speaker, if you ever get a chance, I'd love to take you around to some of those schools, like St. Philip or Evansdale in my own home neighbourhood; Queen Elizabeth, which has the final stop for my Arabic program; and St. Matthew for our Ukrainian program.

7:50

These are the kinds of things that we want to be able to provide to students, but we don't necessarily have to start upending the system in order to be able to fulfill that, to just simply be able to somehow say that we're creating choice in education. The choice is already there. We just simply have to invest in what we already have, make sure that we have teachers in our classrooms, make sure that our schools are upkept and functioning properly, make sure that our EAs are within the programs so that our students that need a little bit of extra help have that help and we then have the ability to set our students up for success.

I've always said, you know, that our students not only will lead here in the province or here in the country; they will lead on the world stage. This is the type of education that's available right now here in the province of Alberta. I'm worried that Bill 15, the Choice in Education Act, 2020, may potentially upend that apple cart and start creating more harm than it does actual good.

I do appreciate the question from the hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood. You know, Mr. Speaker, if you ever want to visit, you're certainly welcome to come up.

The Speaker: I look forward to visiting and touring all of those schools that you identified.

Hon. members, we are at second reading of Bill 15. Is there anyone else wishing to join in the debate? The hon. Member for Calgary-*Buffalo* has risen.

Member Ceci: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to address Bill 15, the Choice in Education Act, 2020, for the first time and to say that I really enjoyed the words from Edmonton-*Decore*. I would like to put some of my thoughts on the record with regard to this bill, particularly how I think that the current system that we have is working quite well.

I represent a rather compact riding, Calgary-*Buffalo*, as diverse or probably more diverse than Edmonton-*Decore*'s riding. The communities of Calgary-*Buffalo* include Inglewood and Ramsay and the whole Beltline area up to 17th Avenue, for the most part, and then Mission and Cliff Bungalow as well as the Eau Claire and downtown areas of Calgary, so it's quite compact and quite diverse. Primarily, most of it is in the high-rise condo form of downtown Calgary, and those first communities I mentioned – Ramsay, Mission, and Cliff Bungalow – are really the only single-family part of it.

You know, there are not that many schools that I'm aware of. I've been to all of them over the five years that I've been sitting in this Legislature, with the previous government, the 29th Legislature, and the 30th. Primarily, those schools are under the CCBE and the CBE. There's one private school that I have visited, Janus Academy, that teaches very, very challenged young people up to grade 6 at that location, at Ramsay elementary. St. Monica elementary and junior high school is there as well as Connaught community school.

The Piitoayis native school, which is under the CBE, is an important program in the Calgary region. It is not the only but one of the only places where native, First Nations, education exclusively takes place for young indigenous people. It's in a beautiful school, Colonel Walker. There's also a CBE school there as well as Ramsay elementary. The Janus Academy shares the bottom of that school. Unfortunately, the Janus Academy has to

move out of that space because that part of the riding is growing in terms of the number of children who want to go to Ramsay elementary. It's an elementary school, as I said, and they need the space that Janus occupies at this time. The folks at Janus are looking for another space so that they can harmonize both their elementary and their junior high schools in one location. Right now they're in two locations. Western high school is also in the riding as well as St. Mary's high school.

As I said, it's a rather compact riding, and what I've read off there is probably almost every school. Maybe I've missed one. But because of the high schools and the junior high schools children are bused in as well as at Connaught and some of the elementary schools. They're bused in from other parts of Calgary. Parents choose these existing schools because they offer quality education, whether it's in the Catholic separate school tradition of teaching children or the public education system.

I must say, too, that Ramsay elementary and Colonel Walker and Connaught are in beautiful, beautiful sandstone buildings that are over 100 years old, and both those school boards have done an excellent job of maintaining those schools as heritage buildings as well as current educational facilities. When I think about the existing schools that are in Calgary-*Buffalo* and think about the fact that parents send those children to those schools whether they live in Calgary-*Buffalo* or outside, I'm filled with great pride at the work they do. I only want to support their efforts at being successful in teaching and guiding our future generations. What I worry about and what I see in this bill before me, Bill 15, the Choice in Education Act, I believe is a step back from continuing to build the traditions of education in both the CCBE and the CBE that I see today and that have been going on for probably a hundred years.

I worry that this bill – not worry. I believe fervently that this bill will see a hollowing out of those incredible institutions in my riding, and the current educational system, upon being hollowed out, will lead to the dissatisfaction of many of those parents who now feel like their children are getting the best education possible in the number of schools that I mentioned. I think that upon that happening, they would want, understandably, to look around for other opportunities for their children. They as parents do want the best for their children, and they may have the desire to look around for different approaches for those children.

8:00

I worry about that because I don't think the system is broken, Mr. Speaker. I don't think we need to see that wholesale change as identified in the Choice in Education Act, 2020, Bill 15. I don't think that there is a strong enough consensus that what we have today is broken. I say that because I've been to school graduations, I've been to classrooms, I've talked with children about any manner of things, and I have a pretty open-door policy with regard to going to classrooms when I'm asked to talk about government or talk about an issue of the day that those children want to have explained from my perspective.

Certainly, during the last provincial election campaign I can remember that at least one high school had a forum, well attended, and there were over 300 young people in the theatre. All of the candidates were there. Maybe one didn't show up, but it was close enough that almost all the candidates were there. The young people in that case had prepared questions, of course, and they were eagerly awaiting answers from the people who were on offer to the citizens of Calgary-*Buffalo*. They did a wonderful job. They provided a locale. They provided an understanding to those of us who were trying to share with them, and from what I saw from that, it was clear to me that they have had a first-class education. Though that's one small example, I wonder why we're changing things.

Certainly, I went through the public education system. I would hazard that, you know, most of us here either had a separate school education or a public education. If you can permit me, Mr. Speaker, I think we all did pretty well to get through that. We have achieved quite a bit in our individual lives. We're here, and we've had the opportunity to look at legislation, myself over the five years I've been here and some of the people here for a lesser amount of time. But, again, I don't think things are necessarily broken. Certainly, the minority of students in this province and probably the minority of people represented here have had some private school education or have been home-schooled. But our system works really well.

I look at some of the reactions to this bill that is before us. You know, I think there are some really good criticisms that have been offered. One of them is by the EPSB in terms of the decision-making process being taken out of the hands of boards as a result of what's in this bill. A direct quote from the board chair of the Edmonton public school board would be: there should be consultation; there should be conversation with the local school board; this bill will make it easier for charters to open up, and it paves the way.

Again, I think it's not correct. It's not right that there be, in a sense, some wholesale actions, or the Wild West will occur in terms of charters not having to work with the local school boards. If the local school boards can't address the needs, which has been the way it's been for a significant amount of time, then the current system is that charters can get approved. The Piitoayis school is not a charter school. It works under the auspices of the CBE, and indigenous education takes place under the auspices of the CBE. Mr. Speaker, I think that's the way it should work. It's worked for a really significant amount of time, and I, for one, would not like to see that changed.

As I said, with the current system and the way it's funded, granted, there are challenges in the funding to the education system at this point in time. Municipalities are wrestling with this challenge every day, as we know. But the changing of this current system of education that we have in the province will be problematic for the existing boards and the existing education of our children, the majority of our children, in this province. If that happens, Mr. Speaker, as I said, the process of decline of the current education system and the existing school boards will start, and if that happens, then there'll be dissatisfaction, and if the dissatisfaction leads to a proliferation of approaches to education, the outcomes are not all that clear to me. The outcomes for children in the future walking away with an education could be very different across the number of children who are going to schools in this province. I don't disagree that there needs to be choice, but I think the current way that choice is meted out is more beneficial for the vast majority of students who are educated in this province.

Now, my colleague from Edmonton-Decore talked about the process of review that the government of Alberta went through to come up with the direction of this bill. For me, I worry that the engagement was, in fact, not properly executed, and unfortunately I'm left with the view that the approaches were not done right.

The Speaker: Thank you, hon. member.

Standing Order 29(2)(a) is available, but before I do that, I might just provide a brief comment for the hon. Member for Calgary-Buffalo. You had mentioned your compact riding, and I wondered if you were aware that it is, in fact, by land mass the most compact constituency in the province of Alberta, at just 10.56 square kilometres.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Decore would like to raise a brief question or comment with respect to the remarks.

Mr. Nielsen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I will certainly on your behalf maybe challenge the Member for Calgary-Buffalo to maybe respond a little bit to that.

Also, when he was starting to bring forward his thoughts around the consultation period there on how this bill was informed, I think there might be some important thoughts that we need to hear, you know, based on some of the feedback that he heard from visiting with students, with parents, with school boards and how that kind of information can impact our decisions as legislators to make sure that we're bringing forward stuff that is in the best interests of Albertans. So I wonder if he wouldn't mind sharing that as well as on maybe, yes, the Speaker's question.

The Speaker: The hon. member from the most compact constituency of Alberta, Calgary-Buffalo.

Member Ceci: Thank you very much. You know that I tell the truth, Mr. Speaker, and that all members here should follow the words of the most compact MLA's riding in the province.

Member Irwin: Not the most compact MLA.

Member Ceci: Yeah. I'm not the most compact MLA, no. I'm just looking around to see who that might be.

Member Irwin: It's Edmonton-Strathcona.

8:10

Member Ceci: Okay. The leader of my side is the most compact.

You know, just before I get into the engagement process that formed some of the direction of this bill, I do want to – probably all members feel the same way – lament the fact that convocations across this province are not taking place in the usual way they have for forever and that engaging with the young people who are crossing the stage is not going to take place in the same way. I know that those young people are probably feeling that, and there are some really creative ways I've seen on social media and other ways that young people are doing that.

I can remember that last year about this time I went to Western's convocation. It was at the corral in Calgary – I think it was the corral – and there were almost 900 young people who crossed the stage that day. It was a long day, but the speeches were incredible from the half-dozen young people that were, you know, assigned to do different things speechwise. I was able to sit amongst them as well as the academics, the teachers, the faculty, the trustees, and others, and it was a great opportunity to see what has been achieved. I lament the fact that this bill may not change that immediately but will irrevocably change the way things work in this province and in my riding, that dense riding of Calgary-Buffalo.

When I look at the engagement results that certainly have been put together and inform this, the first thing that strikes me is that it is not generalizable because respondents self-selected to participate. So it's not replicable. You can't replicate this. It's not science. It is opinions, and regrettably the government has taken some opinions and highlighted those and made those more important than others. That's populist. That is what that is. You may think: what's wrong with that? Well, what's wrong with that is that it's akin to politicians looking at which way the wind is blowing and saying, "I'm going that way" and then, when the wind changes, "I'm going that way" and when the wind changes again, "I'm going that way." The difficulty is that we're talking about an education system.

The Speaker: Hon. members, is there anyone else wishing to join in the debate? The hon. Member for Drayton Valley-Devon.

Mr. Smith: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I consider it a privilege to be able to stand and speak to Bill 15, the Choice in Education Act, 2020. Many of the members in this Legislature understand that I was a teacher for 30 years. What maybe some of them don't know is that I was a public school teacher for every one of those 30 years. I taught, actually, in the small town of Drayton Valley, in the high school in Drayton Valley, at Frank Maddock high school. In my 30 years of teaching I was employed by the Parkland school division, by the Twin River school division, and by the Wild Rose school division, and I never left the same classroom. I was in the same classroom for all of those years, under all of those three boards. So things in education and in public education sometimes change, but I managed to be able to have a very enjoyable career of 30 years within the public school system.

I am a supporter of both public schools and this act, the Choice in Education Act, Bill 15. Please understand that as a public school teacher I saw the value of public schools, I saw the hard work that the teachers give every day in those public schools, and I saw the kids benefit from the teaching of those schools and those teachers and the public system of education that we have in Alberta. We have an amazing system of public education.

I can tell you that I had the opportunity to represent this Legislature down in California at – I'm not going to get this right – the National Conference of State Legislatures, I think, down in the United States. One of the things that I had to do when I was there was attend some of the sessions that were on education. I can tell you that when I stood up and explained that I was from Alberta, that I was a legislator from Alberta, that I was a public school teacher in Alberta, that I had dealt with the curriculum in Alberta and gone through the testing processes in Alberta, without any word of a lie, everybody would be quiet, everybody would look, and always I had people coming up to me and saying: "Wow. You're from Alberta. That's what we want to be. That's what we want to be like."

One of the things that I think is so valuable about our system is that we have a very balanced approach to education, and we have some of the best provincial testing anywhere in the world. We're leaders. We have an equitable formula for funding for all of our students across this province that many of the – I can remember talking to a group of legislators from Tennessee going: if only we could have that in Tennessee.

I am very proud of the training that teachers receive in this province. We have some of the best teachers in the world in this province in all of our systems of education. And we have some of the best curriculum. I was very happy to learn a little bit more about the Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood and her experience as a part of the curriculum development in this province. I want to thank her very much for helping to develop that curriculum. We have some of the best curriculum in the world. We are known for our capacity to develop curriculum in this province. It was one of the reasons why I was concerned with the way I saw the curriculum being developed prior to this past election and why I'm very proud of the Minister of Education and this government and the firm and steady hand that she has been applying to the development of the curriculum, that I believe we'll see rolling out here pretty quickly.

Having said all that, and I hope you can see that I am not – I am very proud of my service as a public school teacher. That does not mean that I cannot support this bill. It does not mean that I cannot support choice in education. As a matter of fact, it's because of my experience as a public school teacher that I can support this bill and I can support the choice that this government is providing for the children and the teachers and the parents of Alberta.

I guess I'll start this way. I mean, obviously, as the former critic for Education in the UCP Party prior to the last election I had lots of conversations with the Public School Boards' Association of

Alberta. I've had lots of conversations with the public school board trustees in my constituency. I've had numerous, numerous opportunities to have conversations with the ATA, and the conversation can sometimes get back down to this idea of choice in education and the funding that we have for choice in education.

I want to start by saying this. I want to address one of the – I believe it's a fallacy – starting points that most people who have a problem with choice in education start with, that the taxpayers that helped to fund the schools and our choice of schools in our province, that those tax dollars are only for public schools, that they have a prior right to those tax dollars. I would argue that those taxes are collected for education, not simply for public education, and that Albertans, as they raise their kids and they want to see their kids learn and they want to see their kids grow and mature and become productive citizens in society, have every right to access in a reasonable way the tax dollars that we collect for the purpose of education regardless of the choice that they make in putting their children into that choice.

8:20

I look at this province, and I can see that we have a long history of that choice and of funding that choice and that it has always had a very high degree of support by the citizens of this province for the funding of choice in education. I believe that there is a high degree of support for it today and that there will be a high degree of support for that moving into the future. Albertans are comfortable with this idea of choice, and they're comfortable with the idea of funding that choice in reasonable ways. We have never funded every choice equally, nor would I support that, personally. I believe that we have found a very good compromise in the funding of choice.

This bill does not actually speak to that funding of choice, but it does promote choice and greater choice in education, so let's take a minute here to take a look at what the bill actually says and does. It starts with adding into the preamble a statement about choice in education.

Whereas the Government of Alberta recognizes public schools, separate schools, Francophone schools, private schools, charter schools, early childhood services programs [and the provision of alternative programs] and home education programs as being valued and integral in providing choice in education to students and parents.

That's one of the amazing things about education in Alberta, and it's one of the things that some of our American cousins were just amazed at, that we in Alberta will fund publicly a wide range of choices, that we just read out here: francophone, public, Catholic, private, home education, charter. We drive our system based on the desires of the parents and the needs of the students, not based on somebody's ivory tower idea of what is best for your kids, and that's the way it should be.

It amends part of the private schools section of the Education Act to recognize that private schools are integral in providing education to the students within Alberta's education system. It is one of our options that parents have the opportunity to pursue, and it is an important and integral part of this province as it provides education for its students.

We're going to allow charter schools. We're going to take away the cap. We're going to allow for vocational charter schools. These are positive things.

Now, I would like to address some of the comments that I've heard coming from the opposition about this act and maybe question some of their presuppositions. Calgary-Buffalo said: I don't think that the public school system is broken. We'd agree. It's not broken, but choice is not dependent on whether or not a system is broken. If there is a problem in any school in any of the choices

that we've got, then it's up to the professionals and to the administrators and to the people involved to be able to address those problems within the system and within that particular school or that particular division, but being broken is not going to have any kind of a serious part of the conversation about whether we should have choice.

It's easier for charters to open up. Yes, you're right. If we take a look at the legacy of the NDP Party, they did not allow one charter school to be added to the list, not because there wasn't a need for it or a desire for it, and it's not because they couldn't meet the processes and the applications and the requirements for a charter school. They made the choice that they were not going to allow Albertans to have that charter school choice, and they made the decision not to support it. We, on the other hand, don't believe, like the Member for Calgary-Buffalo, that by allowing charter schools to open up, there's going to be a Wild West. No. The Minister of Education is still going to have control over the process. They're still going to notify the public schools. There's still going to be a conversation between public schools and the ministry about whether a charter school is needed and whether it can move forward and whether it's meeting all of the criteria for a charter school. There's not going to be a Wild West that's going to break out, honestly.

That it's going to lead to a decline in public education. You know what? I would have taken great offence at that, and I do take great take great offence at that as a public school teacher. My capacity to teach and to make a difference in my kids' lives was not dependent on whether there was a charter school that happened to be within a certain number of kilometres of my classroom. I had a lot of pride in the effort and in the work, the hard work that I gave as a public school teacher. It's not going to decline and it's not going to stop because there's an alternative out there. As a matter of fact, it might even drive me to think about, "Well, what are they doing that's so much better?" or, "How are they getting those results?" or, "What can I do as a teacher because I want the best results possible for the kids in my classroom? If I see somebody doing it better, I want to learn from that." That's actually one of the things that charter schools were designed to do, to be able to bring new ideas into the realm of education so that we could actually elevate education and elevate not only other charter schools but also elevate those within the public, the Catholic, or the independent school system.

I believe that some of these ideas that have been put forth need further consideration from the opposition. You need to re-evaluate some of your presuppositions that charter schools or choice in education would hijack a public program. No. It will complement. It will help to challenge. It will help to bring forward the best in pedagogy and the best in education. That's what choice and what competition can do when it's done reasonably. I am not arguing for unlimited choice or unlimited competition.

We are dealing with children, and we are dealing with schools, and we are dealing with large amounts of money. And there needs to be and we have found a very good way of funding our system of education in this province, of providing reasonable choice for our parents and providing reasonable choice to meet the needs of children. I was proud to be a public school teacher. I was proud of my school, and I was proud of my school division. I was proud of the kids that I taught, and I was proud of the marks that they received.

The Speaker: Hon. members, 29(2)(a) is available.

For the benefit of the hon. Member for Drayton Valley-Devon, I'm sure that he'll know that the constituency of Drayton Valley-Devon is 586 times larger than the riding of Calgary-Buffalo; that's some 6,100 square kilometres.

The hon. Member for Brooks-Medicine Hat has a brief question or comment for the hon. member.

Ms Glasgo: Well, Mr. Speaker, thank you very much. You know, I kind of just wanted to get up so I could learn how big my constituency is in comparison to somebody else's.

But I actually got up because I want to give the rest of my time and the rest of our Assembly's time to the Member for Drayton Valley-Devon, because, you know, if his classes were just as enthralling as his speech, I can understand why he was such a successful teacher. I was just wondering if the Member for Drayton Valley-Devon could elaborate on his comments and finish with his comments.

The Speaker: Well, at the 16th-largest constituency in the province of Alberta, you would know it's even bigger than Drayton Valley-Devon.

The hon. Member for Drayton Valley-Devon.

Mr. Smith: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. How much larger did you say my constituency was than Calgary-Buffalo?

The Speaker: Five hundred and eighty-six times.

Mr. Smith: Five hundred and eighty-six times larger.

8:30

You know what? To the hon. Member for Calgary-Buffalo: I would invite him to come out and let's spend a day in my constituency, and we'll compare the kind of driving that I have to do to get from school to school to school. At last count I think I have something like eight or nine graduations that I attend in my school division. And you know what? Sometimes they all are actually on the same day. It does make it difficult.

I also know that one of the joys that I have had as a public school teacher is also seeing the alternative programs that are part of the public school system. I actually want to give kudos to the Edmonton public school system. They have taught the world about how you can have choice within a public school system. They have Ukrainian programs, they have all sorts of language programs, they have alternative Christian programs, and all of these choices within the public school system work out really, really well. Isn't it interesting that because of the choice that they've developed and they've put into the Edmonton public school system, in many ways, unlike Calgary, there are far fewer charter schools? There are far fewer independent schools within Edmonton because they have offered and they have met the needs of parents and students within the public school system.

But that doesn't mean that you can't have choice from outside of the public school system. You see, in some ways, you know, I guess that as a Conservative I'm more broad-minded about this idea of choice than, supposedly, the progressives are. I'm just saying, right? I guess it's sort of like that my constituency is how many times bigger, Mr. Speaker?

The Speaker: Five hundred and eighty-six.

Mr. Smith: Five hundred and eighty-six.

Just like that's a fact, I guess it's a fact that on this side of the House, on the government side of the equation, we're actually very open-minded about this concept of parental choice and the concept of being able to make sure that our children's needs are being met within the tax-funded system that we have. What an amazing thing we have in Alberta.

As I said earlier, in going down to the United States, they looked and had to stop and had all sorts of questions – all sorts of questions

– when I was at the National Conference of State Legislatures. “Well, how do you make this work?” We are painting outside the lines as far as most of these states are concerned in the delivery of their education system that we would have a system that funds private schools. It’s not the same as how we fund public education. If you’re going to have more freedom from government rules and regulations, then you’re probably going to receive less money within our system. That goes all the way down to home education, where parents have the capacity to educate their children at home with a curriculum that they believe will meet the needs of their children while at the same time receiving some funding from the government, not nearly as much as you’re going to get if you’re an independent private school, not nearly as much as you’re going to get if you’re a charter school, or not nearly as much as you’re going to get if you’re a public or a Catholic separate school.

You know, I had an opportunity as a basketball coach – as I said, I taught for 30 years, and I coached basketball for 30 years. I’m not sure that there are too many gyms that I haven’t been in, and I have seen all the educational choices we have. We do an amazing job in Alberta, and this act is an amazing act.

The Speaker: Hon. members, are there others wishing to join? I see the hon. Member for Edmonton-Meadows has risen.

Mr. Deol: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Thank you for providing me with the opportunity. I’m happy to rise in the House to add to some of the comments on Bill 15, the Choice in Education Act, 2020. I’m struggling with where to start. To start my comments, I would like to add some of my experience, I would say, my personal experience, rather than having, you know, just book studies to debate on this issue.

I remember my childhood back in India, when I was young, going to school. The school system, the education system, was still building, developing after India’s independence. Back in the ’70s the government was moving forward, investing into the education system. The new schools were coming to the rural areas, villages, and there, you know, the new youth were kind of preferring one of the most respectable professions, I would say, to become teachers. This is how they were viewed in society. Teachers are not really just professionals; teachers are the nation builders.

There was a culture that people wanted to have their children get educated. That was due to the people having experience. I remember my village – I just wanted to bring this into the discussion – a reasonably large village in the state, with a population of about nearly 7,000 to 8,000 people. When my father went to school, there would only have been 10, 15, or 20 children at most who could afford to go to school. The schools were not really expensive, but they were not within the area. There were no roads to the schools. Schools were within the range of 10, 15 kilometres away from your home, and there were no roads to the schools. They would walk through fields or on rough roads, and they would walk a few hours, at least, one way, two hours, three hours. But some of the people probably saw the value of education. They were still, you know, committed and working every possible step as a way to get their children an education.

Very few out of those 20 people were able to afford to go to the colleges after that. I recall, if I’m not wrong, that in those days probably three or four or five people from our village were able to afford to go to colleges. It was not only expensive to afford, but also it was not really accessible for everyone to join. Then there was a time, after independence, when the government of India kind of, you know, realized that, so there was a greater deal of investment and focus required to develop education. It was not long after that – I will say in the ’70s – after 20 years or so, in my village that I don’t believe there was any kid that was not going to school. Most

every single child would actually go to school. There were students that would not really make it to high school, but every single child – the government of India was investing into the school system.

Becoming a teacher was something to be proud of. You would have more respect than anybody else in the society, and the teachers would not only teach; they would go out into the villages and neighbouring villages and recruit students, talk to parents about how old their children are. This is how the school system was going. But then in the mid-80s, under a similar debate, I would say, choice in education, some of these formulas were, you know, implemented. Slowly, 20, 25, 30 years after independence, those policies had been implemented.

8:40

I know the hon. minister of culture and multiculturalism has visited India. I don’t know if she had a chance to have the experience of going to the schools or, you know, looking into the schooling system in India, how they’re doing, but there’s a huge change. There’s a big change. There are more schools, many more schools, in the areas now, more universities, more colleges. There are fewer students because the affordability is totally gone. People cannot really afford to send their children to school.

The public school system. Why I was trying to bring that experience into this debate is because I’m seeing the pattern of what we are doing here. The members of the government side or the members, you know, who drafted this bill probably looked into so many different arguments, but what I’m trying to do is bring practical experience. This is not only of one country. I have a neighbouring country. I can speak on behalf of them, and we have other countries in South Asia we can speak on behalf of. They were moving forward in one direction, and then there was argument, then there was a debate, and then they decided to bring in the other system, other policies to provide more, you know, choice. That’s what we are discussing here.

So everybody had, I would say, a good heart, good intentions, you know. They thought, “Let’s give it a try,” but after 20, 30 years we can see the outcome. When we are proposing something here, definitely we need to learn from practical experiences. As the hon. Member for Drayton Valley-Devon said, the system is not broken. I’m glad the system is not broken. The majority of Albertans are saying that the system is not broken. But it is contingent upon us not only to keep it as it is but to make it better for the future generations.

Mr. Speaker, as you have, you know, lots of information about all the demographics of the different ridings, my riding is one of the densest ridings – I don’t know if it’s one of the compact ones or not – a very diverse riding. I know that people like choice. People like giving their time, devoting their time, having diversity in the school system, running the school in their own languages, the community schoolings, and people like to have their choice. We are not against that. What is bothering me here: the pattern and the focus, what we have been promoting or, I would say, projecting through Bill 15, is that this will bring in choice in education, when we see what has happened in the last one full year. I was talking about the dignity of teachers, the respect of teachers.

I just wanted to mention for the record that affordable education and public education were one of the biggest issues in my riding when I was door-knocking during the election. That was one of the main concerns. Jobs were among the biggest issues, and this was the other one. Not only that, when I was speaking to some of the public functions, and some of the members of the audience – I did not know if they were NDP or UCP or Liberals – specifically came to me: “Why are you not mentioning about affordable education, the great work? That is the only thing. We have turned towards the

NDP in the last four years because of the affordable education. This is very important for us.”

What we have seen in the last full year – we’re supposed to have more teachers for more students coming to schools. That was promised by the government or by the party in their election platform. Instead of having more teachers for more students coming to the schools, we have fewer teachers than we actually had in schools before this government came into power. We have let go of about nearly 20,000 assistance staff from the schools. They were helping teachers, helping children with very diverse needs, all kinds of work.

There’s still more to do. As I said, it’s one of the dense ridings, and this riding still does not have a high school in the riding, in that area. Then we see all those cuts, and on the other hand we want to promote and help the private schools and charter schools. It seems like the very thin line that strikes the balance between these has already been broken. That is what is worrisome here. This worry is not on behalf of my beliefs. This is not on behalf of my philosophical belief or what the party believes in. This is on behalf of what we have experienced based on the practical outcomes wherever these choices were made.

If we wanted to provide a choice, let’s have, I would say, a fair, level playing field, and it isn’t. It’s not showing in this. When we are not willing to commit to what it takes to run fulsome – the funding required for the public school system is experiencing a number of cuts.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: Hon. members, Standing Order 29(2)(a) is available.

I did hear the hon. Member for Edmonton-Meadows muse about how compact the riding is. It’s 1.7 times less compact than Calgary-Buffalo at 18.76 square kilometres.

The hon. Member for Calgary-Hays has a brief question or comment to make.

8:50

Mr. McIver: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I appreciate the opportunity to rise and speak on Bill 15, the Choice in Education Act, 2020, by the hon. Education minister. I’ve been listening with great interest to some of the debate from the other side of the House. I guess one of the things that occurs to me after listening to the speakers, including the one that just finished, is what’s changed.

The Speaker: I just want to provide some clarity for your sake more than anything. Just so that you’re aware, you are speaking under 29(2)(a), which you’re more than welcome to do, but it would limit you to five minutes at this particular point in time. I’m not sure. By the opening I thought maybe you might be expanding a little bit more. Are you hoping to speak under 29(2)(a) or on the main bill?

Mr. McIver: Standing Order 29(2)(a), Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: My apologies for interrupting, sir.

Mr. McIver: If you’ll allow me, then I’ll start again.

The Speaker: Please do.

Mr. McIver: As I listen to the comments from the folks in the House, including the ones from the other side, particularly the ones on the other side, including the previous speaker, I would ask them to reflect on what’s changed.

Historically, Mr. Speaker, if you go back to May 2, 2016, I had a private member’s motion in this House. For the record, because I think it’s pertinent to this debate, it read like this.

Be it resolved that the Legislative Assembly urge the government to affirm its commitment to allowing parents the choice of educational delivery for their children, including home, charter, private, francophone, separate, or public education programs.

Now, Mr. Speaker, what’s interesting about that is that when you were a member of the opposition along with me then, you actually called for a division on that motion on May 2, and 62 members of this House voted for that motion and zero voted against it. You can only imagine that when the NDP was in government there was the majority of the NDP members, including 12 that sit in the NDP today, that voted for that motion supporting choice in education. It leads me to ask the opposition to reflect on what’s changed, when in 2016 they seemed to be all in for choice in education. They seemed to be all in for all types of choices of education, yet today they all seem to be arguing against it.

Mr. Speaker, it’s just interesting. I think it’s – I can’t remember what section it is – one of the sections of the United Nations Charter of Rights where it says that parents should be able to choose the type of education that their children should have. Seems to me that this bill should be right up the NDP’s alley.

I would ask the hon. member to reflect in the time remaining out of the five minutes on what’s happened to his party when they used to be on parents’ side in 2016, when they actually used to believe that parents knew better than elected people how to educate their kids. Now, our side believed that then, and we still believe that now. I wonder what’s happened to make the NDP decide that they know better than parents on how to raise and how to educate their own children. I’ll just give some time now for the hon. member to reflect upon that.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Meadows if he chooses to do so.

Mr. Deol: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the hon. member for giving me the opportunity to, you know, answer some of his concerns.

As I stated in my debate in my argument, we are not against choice, but the way the choice is being implemented is worrisome. That is a problem. I was not part of the NDP government in 2015 to 2019, but one thing I remember: the economy was still slow. Alberta was still going through a sluggish economy, but there were a number of new schools coming to areas. There were a number of schools being renovated. There were more staff put into the schools. There was more co-ordination with school boards. The money was flowing. That’s what I was bringing into the debate. When I just mentioned how we are trying to implement the choice in education: this will not work.

That’s where we see we have been missing something in this bill. When the hon. Member for Drayton Valley-Devon was speaking to this bill, he didn’t reflect any view on this argument of the debate.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: Hon. members, are there others wishing to join in the debate this evening? The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenora has the call.

Ms Hoffman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is my absolute honour to rise in this House and speak to a bill that is about education. I fully believe that public education is the reason why I’m here today, not just because I grew up in a public education system but because my parents literally met in the staff room of a public school. My mom taught at Robert Rundle, and my dad taught at Sir George Simpson. One of them was having their staff room renovated, so the teachers and all the school staff were asked, if they needed to get a coffee at

lunch, to go to the other school to use the staff room facilities. And that's where my parents met.

The reason why they were both teachers, I will say, is, number one, because both of my parents grew up in very working-class families. My dad's father was a small-business owner but died when my dad was still in high school. Teaching was a profession that you could go to university – my dad was incredibly wise – for a year, get your degree, and start working right away. I guess it was a certificate at the time, not a degree. He had a love of education, a love of learning and, I think, was a very skilled teacher and later administrator as well.

My mom became a teacher because she grew up on the farm, and her mom wanted her to either become a nurse or a teacher. My mom didn't like blood, so she became a teacher, a very skilled teacher and somebody that I think inspired many youth over many years.

But it was that love of learning that pushed them both into this profession and that I hope inspires all teachers and folks who work in our education system to continue to give their best each and every day for all of the students who come into the classroom.

I do want to say a couple of things in response to questions that have been asked. I probably was one of the members who voted for the motion that the hon. Minister of Transportation was referring to, and it's because I do believe in all of the different systems for education. I don't believe that they should be rushed or expedited. I think that the current process around charters, where you approach the public school system, any of the public systems, and give them an opportunity to meet the education needs of the community and of the parents is something that I'm very proud of.

[Mr. Hanson in the chair]

I'm proud of the time I spent on the Edmonton public school board, a board which is touted for the choice of programs that we have here in the province of Alberta but also compared to many places around the world. Having the longest continuous Jewish day school program in North America – I think most people probably expect it would be in Montreal or in New York, but it's here in Edmonton. It's Talmud Torah, and it has been part of Edmonton public schools for many, many years. I think they had their 40th anniversary with Edmonton public when I was on the board and I think a hundred overall.

We have been able to very successfully respond to choice in a public system – of course, when I say “public system,” I mean public, Catholic, and francophone – in many ways. But what this bill does is that it changes the current process around how choice programs get established. Currently you go and you make a request to the public system, and if the public system can accommodate them and there's enough demand, they will be created within the public system. This is a completely new system, where you go directly to the minister, and the minister can grant a charter outside of the process of involving locally elected, democratically elected trustees and school divisions accountable to the public. That to me is one of the big changes between what was discussed in 2016 and what's being discussed here today.

Another change is that on the heels of a UCP policy convention, the membership voted for a voucher system. Charter schools get 100 per cent of funding; private schools get 70 per cent of funding. Now with schools being able to go directly to the minister to ask for a charter, that is essentially a way to increase the level of funding for schools in a very expeditious way. Of course, that seems to be following on some of the things that the minister herself said she would not do: she would not move on charters. But, of course, moving to 100 per cent funding from currently 70 per cent funding is a big change. I think that is an area that is being pushed through

in this bill in a way to achieve the outcome, essentially, of a voucher without calling it a voucher, by calling it an expansion on charters, again, without involving the public system in trying to fulfill that choice request of parents and members of the community.

9:00

I also want to talk about the UN declaration, and this one is around children and children's rights to an education to fulfill their full potential. One of the other changes is that there will be no anchor that home-schooling families are tethered to to support them in their educational journey. Right now, again, I support parents who choose home-schooling. I think that it is an option that works for many families, and the vast, vast majority of families do an excellent job, but I also think that they need to have some supports and some accountability.

One of the things that I love, again, about the system that we have in place is – when I was door-knocking, I was talking to a mom who had indeed chosen home education after her child was put in a seclusion room. That wasn't something that she was willing to accept, so she chose to remove her child from the school system to focus exclusively on her child's home education. She was talking about how hard it was to get some of the resources to be able to fully support her child.

I actually knew a home education school here in Edmonton in the Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar's riding. Perhaps he'll talk about it a little bit later. It's such an excellent resource because you can go in and you can do things like borrow a telescope. You can meet with a teacher, either the parent or the student or both, and talk about new strategies. You can meet with other parents who are also home educators and choose maybe one or two classes that you want to take onsite, often music classes or something that families will pool together and take with the support of that public school. Having the choice on how they engage but, again, with the oversight to ensure that the child has the support to reach their full potential: these are things that have changed in this bill. I think that it is a push to bring in a veiled voucher system and less accountability for the child, and that is my true concern here.

Since a number of my colleagues have given shout-outs to a number of schools in their ridings, I'll take the opportunity as well. I want to say how proud I am. I live very close to Ross Shep high school. Principal Paulitsch is retiring this year. I think that he's been there over 30 years and coached football for many, many, many seasons. This year we definitely did not lose to JP, but I don't think we got to play JP either because of the current health conditions here in our province.

I also want to give a shout-out to Edmonton Christian west, another excellent choice program, a Christian program in a public system, again not too far from my home. Amiskwaciy, on the old downtown airport grounds, is an indigenous focus program, and many of the students there are the first in their families to finish high school and have an opportunity to really embrace and practise their culture while engaging with the mandated Alberta Education curriculum. Mac, Archbishop MacDonald high school, a Catholic high school, right on the traffic circle, is a school that I've had a number of opportunities to go to and to see the students engaged in a variety of choices as well. French immersion is one of the programs that they're very well known for, as is Ross Shep. Then there's the other MAC, the MAC Islamic academy, not a high school. Two Macs, two religious focuses, both programs that I've enjoyed having opportunities to engage with, and I think that the students there deserve nothing less than a great education here in the province of Alberta.

Aurora is another one that I'll do a little shout-out for. The students always ask me engaging questions in really fun and

respectful ways. I always say: “You know, you can ask me any questions you want. If I feel uncomfortable answering, I might skip it. But please don’t be offended by me, and I won’t be offended by you.” That’s a school where they asked me about choice. They asked me if I was pro choice, and we had an excellent conversation about the rights to bodily autonomy. I think that those were grade 8 students at that time.

There are many excellent programs in our province. I stand by the vote I took in 2016. This bill is a significant departure from the vote and the motion brought forward by the hon. Minister of Transportation.

I want to say: make no mistake that this is on the eve of the minister issuing very strong attacks against the Calgary board of education, undermining and really pushing in a number of areas that weren’t anywhere related to the report that she asked for, a report that was asked for because she had concerns about how they were handling money. I, too, have concerns about the downtown building, the lease which was signed by a former PC cabinet minister. Nobody who’s currently on the board actually signed that lease. I doubt any of them are very excited to have to fulfill the terms of it.

One other thing I wanted to say – I actually do have an amendment I’d like to table – is that I was reviewing some of the *Hansard* from yesterday evening, and I have significant concerns about talking about the privatization of liquor stores and the privatization of the telephone, and now here we are, talking about it in the context of education. I don’t want to have an American-style education system. I think many Americans envy Alberta’s education system – the Member for Drayton Valley-Devon said as much – and I would like to keep it that way. I think that this bill that we’re considering today is a move in the opposite direction and one that will not be the envy of other jurisdictions.

With that, I’d like to move an amendment, a motion to refer. I’ll keep one copy and give the rest.

[The Speaker in the chair]

The Speaker: Just a moment. Once the table has the amendment, we’ll proceed.

Ms Hoffman: I hope the Speaker might indulge us with the square kilometres of my riding at some point this evening as well.

The Speaker: Hon. members, this will be referred to as REF1. If there’s anyone who would like a copy of the amendment, please feel free to raise your hand, and the LASS team will deliver one to you. If not, they are available as the self-serve option on the tablings table.

Ms Hoffman: I’ll also be happy to read it into the record, Mr. Speaker. I move that the motion for second reading of Bill 15, Choice in Education Act, 2020, be amended by deleting all the words after “that” and substituting the following:

Bill 15, Choice in Education Act, 2020, be not now read a second time but that the subject matter of the bill be referred to the Standing Committee on Families and Communities in accordance with Standing Order 74.2.

Mr. Speaker, may I ask for a time check?

The Speaker: Three minutes and 30 seconds.

Ms Hoffman: Okay. Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

The reason why I’m doing this is that, one, I have confidence that committees can add great contributions to the work of this Assembly and to the work of ministers. When I look specifically at the feedback, because it was issued the same day the bill was tabled, the feedback from parents was overwhelmingly – the majority said

that they were confident and felt good in the amount of educational choice that they have available right now. I guess one of the questions would be: why are we surveying parents and then not following their feedback when they give it?

Also, many, many of the responses were deleted from this, and it was said that it was because they were duplicates, but I do know many parents who got together at school council meetings and filled out the survey together, so even if the response is a duplicate, it doesn’t make it an invalid response. If 20 parents get together and fill out a survey the same way, I think that those 20 parents who took the time to do it deserve to have their voices heard. So I’m concerned that that was omitted from this data in the first place.

Nonetheless, still, the majority said that they were satisfied with the amount of choice that was available. When you look at the percentage of who it was that actually filled out the survey in relation to the percentage of students that attend these various types of schools, it was actually parents in charter schools who filled out the survey most frequently.

Again, if this is something that the committee wants to engage – the reason why I’m putting this here is not to presuppose what outcome the committee might arrive at but to say that the Standing Committee on Families and Communities, which I know was very busy during estimates time, I don’t think is very busy any other time other than when we’re debating estimates, so far. I think: what a perfect bill to refer there, one that specifically speaks to families, one that speaks to parents, and one that is focused on communities.

9:10

I know that the Member for Drayton Valley-Devon talked about the PSBAA and the strong opinions they have on protecting rural schools, primarily rural public schools. I think that this, again, is something that is very pertinent to communities and definitely to families. We’ve put the focus on parents over and over again, and I think it’s also important for children as well, obviously, the students who are actually the recipients of the education that we’re here debating today.

Those are the reasons why I think this belongs most appropriately to be discussed at that committee, and that is why I’m moving this motion to refer it there. Thank you.

The Speaker: Hon. members, Standing Order 29(2)(a) is available.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenora did inquire about some constituency facts for herself: just under the top 20 in smallest riding by land mass, at 18.22 square kilometres.

The hon. Member for Red Deer-South has a brief question or comment to make.

Mr. Stephan: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As I was sitting and listening to the Member for Edmonton-Glenora, I was kind of struck with a few things that came to mind. First of all, public education, of course, is a subset of education, and the Choice in Education Act is student-centric. It’s not system-centric. The first thing that the Choice in Education Act states is that “parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that may be provided to their children.” Parents do have the principal stewardship for the education of their children. I like parents being able to choose what they deem is in the best interests of their children. I know this from personal experience. I have three children of my own, and they have gone through the public education system. There were a couple of years when my wife and I deemed that it was in our middle son’s best interests that he would spend a few years being home-schooled. I was really grateful that we had that choice to act in his best interests and provide that opportunity for him.

I recall that during the last election – I think that in many respects why the members opposite are sitting where they are is that many Albertans were concerned that some of the steps that they were taking were subordinating the rights of parents and parental choice to the state. There were many parents who were concerned about that. This act reinforces that parents have that principal stewardship and that this act is student-centric, not system-centric. When listening to the members opposite, I think that what they find objectionable – they object to parents being the gatekeepers of their children's education, not the state, and in many respects what this act seeks to do is affirm the principal stewardship for the choice in our children's education as being with the parents.

The Member for Edmonton-Glenora also mentioned the concept of accountability. For those who know me, I like accountability a great deal. Accountability helps us be better. Choice is a component in helping to ensure that there is accountability, and the Choice in Education Act is an invitation for all schools to seek to love and serve the students in their population and to serve the public interest.

I would like to ask the Member for Edmonton-Glenora to comment. Who are the stewards of their children's education? Is it the parents, or is it the public school systems?

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenora.

Ms Hoffman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm happy to speak in support of choice and definitely have been pro choice much of my life, and it doesn't stop with my bodily autonomy. It extends to everyone's bodily autonomy, and it also extends to parents being able to choose what education system they choose for their child.

The big change here in the home education piece is supervision requirements, if any, of a home education program. That is a significant departure from one where there used to be a relationship between an anchor school, and many, many parents very successfully engaged in that program. That's being completely eliminated, which I believe pushes an American-style model for home education rather than a Canadian one, which we've had in place very successfully for many, many years, where parents, because they're anchored and connected to a school authority and to a school specifically, have the right to access significant supports from that school and a child also has the right to ensure that they're fulfilling their potential.

I'm happy to clarify because, definitely, the way the member characterized my position on this does not reflect my values or the values of our caucus. We certainly respect the role of parents in raising their children and choosing an education model.

The Speaker: Hon. members, is there anyone else wishing to join in the debate this evening? The hon. the Member for Edmonton-McClung.

Mr. Dach: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Very happy to join in the debate around the amendment introduced by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenora on Bill 15, Choice in Education Act, 2020. I'm struck by the maxim that we hear often – and I'm sure you're familiar with that, Mr. Speaker, when you listen to arguments in this House – that the more things change, the more they stay the same and that history often repeats itself. I'm struck by debate that took place in this House on a similar subject matter a number of years ago. In fact, it revolved around a bill that received royal assent after being debated in this House – royal assent was granted May 25, 1994 – Bill 19, School Amendment Act, 1994, under the Education minister, Halvar Jonson, under the Klein government. It had to do with this very topic.

It was the introduction of charter schools in this province. Of course, the debate railed around it quite a bit, and of course the minister of the day had initially hoped that the bill would pass in the form that he had presented it, but it did actually have a lot of debate. There was a lot of deliberation that took place, and I think that's what the hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenora hopes to have happen as a result of this amendment being passed, that a lot more debate and a lot more input be allowed on this bill, because sometimes the government changes its mind and the initial bill gets changed as a result of the input of others and some sober second thought.

I'm going to quote a little bit from an article that I found. It's a paper. I think it's a master's thesis done by a couple of individuals at MacEwan University, and I'll table the document at the first opportunity, Mr. Speaker. In their March 23, 2015, paper Parliament – that's the name of the individual – and Bilyk, I think – I'll get the name straight – really chronicle the debate that took place over the introduction of charter schools and say that the bill of the day at that time, Bill 19, received royal assent. It goes on to say:

However, Jonson's vision did not emerge unscathed. During the six hours the bill was debated in the Alberta Legislative Assembly, a myriad of amendments and compromises were made,

such as the processes that we're going through right now with the current Bill 15.

The province was unable to secure as much power as it had initially hoped; clauses allowing the Minister of Education to appoint school district superintendents were removed. Members of the [Legislature] also proved more leery of charter schools than Jonson. In Jonson's initial Bill 19 proposal, the... Education ministry was allowed full control over charter schools.

I'm going on to quote this a little bit more, Mr. Speaker.

However, during the debate, several amendments required charter schools to acquire not only the approval of the Minister of Education, but of the local public school board as well. The amendments also gave local school boards the ability to monitor and, if necessary, revoke the charter of charter schools. Consequently, charter schools would have to work [in] close cooperation with local school boards. Moreover, the Members of the Legislative Assembly insisted the introduction of charter schools become a "pilot project," and introduced amendments to cap the number allowed to operate in the province at fifteen.

9:20

I may go on to quote other elements of this very, very interesting paper, which is very germane to our topic right now because it certainly lends credence to the member's introduction of this amendment to really give an opportunity for this House to dig a little deeper into the reasoning for the bill in itself.

The 1994 introduction of Bill 19 really did receive challenges from members of the opposition of the day and, I believe, also from members of the government backbench, which resulted in the minister, Minister Jonson, the Minister of Education of the day, walking back some of the major provisions of the bill, which now, of course, this government hopes to in at least one major way reimplement in what they may see as the righting of a wrong by having the ability of a proponent of a charter school application to circumvent the approval of the local school authority and achieve an application acceptance by simply going directly to the minister. The goal of Mr. Jonson in 1994 is being achieved now in 2020 by another Conservative government taking the steps that he had hoped to take but was thwarted by the Legislature of the day, who had some sober second thoughts about granting that type of ministerial authority over the application process of proponents of charter school applications.

I'm very pleased to see that we have a pretty strong precedent, Mr. Speaker, for asking that the opportunity be given to this House to really consider the merits, the motivation, and the reasoning behind the government's wish to circumvent the local school authorities in their role currently to arbitrate whether or not a charter school actually goes ahead because they may have an opportunity to provide a similar program in the public school system.

I notice in the paper that I referred to earlier that the *Edmonton Journal* headline of the day says: Klein Drops the Axe. In the similar context these types of changes to charter schools were brought in during a time of fiscal austerity, and it was argued at the time that there would be fiscal savings as a result of bringing them in. However, it also incited a reaction in the public school system, of course, and there was a reform that took place as a result of the implementation of charter schools. It's something that has flavoured our public school systems to the current day right throughout the province.

In the Edmonton public school board system there was a superintendent who on July 2, 1994, was appointed as the superintendent of the EPSB, a role he assumed on January 1, 1995. I speak, of course, of Mr. Emery Dossdall, who was a superintendent of Edmonton public schools for many, many years. I know I've mentioned in this House previously that he also was my grade 6 teacher in one of his first years of teaching. I did actually message him tonight on Facebook to see if I could get his comments if he's in a position to comment on this bill. I'm not sure if he is. He may still be a deputy minister or ADM in the B.C. Education ministry. If he's not retired, he may not be able to comment, but I sure would be interested in hearing what he would have to say about Bill 15 and this amendment because he was instrumental in reacting to the minister of the day's attempt to implement charter schools, to disallow, I guess, the opportunity for the public schools to try to incorporate those programs.

Superintendent Dossdall took the challenge to heart, and the paper goes on to say that

under Dossdall . . . teachers and principals experienced an increase in direct communication with [him], as he made a habit of personally visiting schools . . . [and] furthered the concept

of making sure that these schools had input and that parents had input

by shifting financial resources previously held by Central Services to the schools. This allowed [the] school administrative staff greater independence in making decisions.

It seems as though what we're getting away from is that local independence of school administrators and a greater imposition of more central authority by this government upon the ministerial decision-making process.

The paper goes on to say that

[Mr.] Dossdall did not restrict his activities to administrative reform . . . [He] also undertook an aggressive program of [monitoring] the merits of alternative programs under EPS. On January 25, 1995, he personally contacted representatives of all community groups known to be eyeing charter [schools], attempting to sell them on the advantages of seeking alternative program status instead. The advantages of operating within EPS were numerous: it would be much easier to find teachers, finding a building to house the program would be far less problematic and costly, and there would be less pressure on parents to constantly raise funds. Moreover, Alberta Education had not yet released its charter school guidelines, leaving charter school hopefuls in limbo and Edmonton Public as the only viable option. Despite the numerous advantages that came with alternative . . . status, however, making a deal with EPS was often seen as . . . undesirable . . . In many cases, the strongest advocates . . . drew their zeal directly from negative experiences with the public

school system . . . [However,] in spite of this, Dossdall's campaign to win over charter school societies was largely successful . . . [and] for the first time since 1986, a new alternative program was approved by EPS.

I won't go on to belabour the success of the program incorporation by EPS in response to the challenge laid out by the Halvar Jonson Education ministry administration, but suffice it to say that up to the present day the Minister of Education has seen fit to allow the local school authorities to make decisions with respect to reacting to a charter school application by trying to meet that need within the public school system and has so far been very, very successful.

As I mentioned in my preamble in the beginning, Mr. Speaker, the more things change, the more they stay the same. In the end, what happened to Mr. Jonson's legislation was that serious amendments were made, and there were checks placed upon the minister's desire to have the authority to circumvent the public school authorities in the application process for creating a charter school.

I think that the wisdom of the House of the day should prevail here in 2020 as well and on this amendment that the hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenora has brought forward, an amendment to Bill 15, to have this bill referred to the Standing Committee on Families and Communities in accordance with Standing Order 74.2. It's a very wise move to do whatever is possible to make sure that this House, this Assembly, these members, we as a group of legislators, seriously have an opportunity to really allow current members of the public, stakeholders of the day, educators, administrators to come forward and bear witness to what their thoughts are on the long-standing issue of oversight and also the ability to allow the public-funded, publicly operated school systems to do their best to incorporate the programming needs and desires of the public and, in the end, of course, certainly not do anything to diminish the right to choice, which we fully respect, but see if, indeed, that can be incorporated into the public school system.

9:30

Of course, Mr. Speaker, it's not that the public school system has failed in doing this over the years. The proof is in the pudding. The work started by Superintendent Dossdall of the Edmonton public school board in the 1990s is something that has proven worthy to this day, and I fail to see the need for the government to try to circumvent this long-standing, very proud tradition of the school authority having some say in providing alternative programs.

The Speaker: Hon. members, Standing Order 29(2)(a) is available if anyone has a brief question or comment for the member. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood.

Member Irwin: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I want to thank the Member for Edmonton-McClung for his comments. I know the social studies teacher in me thoroughly enjoyed that historical overview. I remember as a youngster being fairly engaged in politics, and I remember Halvar Jonson being one of our Education ministers. I was about 10, I think, in the mid-90s there when some of these . . .

Mr. Smith: Oh, I was teaching then.

Member Irwin: That's true.

. . . conversations were happening. I wanted to ask the member. The member gave a really good historical overview and a rather strong explanation as to why we need to refer this bill to committee, but I also wanted to ask the Member for Edmonton-McClung if he wanted to expand at all. We've had some of the other members

speak about, you know, the diversity of education within their own ridings, and I just wondered, to that member: have you seen sort of the power of public education in your own riding? Perhaps you can mention just some of the success stories that you've seen in your time as an MLA for Edmonton-McClung.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-McClung.

Mr. Dach: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Thank you to the Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood who always, always brings it back home to the constituency level and never is far from her heart when she talks in this House. The local nature of her representation is always something that I think every member of our caucus and every member of this Legislature should take to heart when they consider what their responsibilities are.

Certainly, bringing it back to the wonderful west Edmonton constituency of Edmonton-McClung and Nellie McClung, of course, being the woman after whom the riding was named, in the same paper had a school named after her or a program in a school. That was in September 1995 that the Nellie McClung program opened, attracting 70 students, and by 1996 it had doubled with 170 girls enrolled in the program. As of 2015 the Nellie McClung program continues to operate as an alternative program under the aegis of EPS. Indeed, the Nellie McClung program, named after the woman who my riding is also named after, has been a major success story in the Edmonton public school system, and I know that there's always a waiting list for people to get in to it.

I know that the opportunity to develop other types of schools within the EPSB has been taken advantage of time after time. In my riding I know that the local high schools have specific programs, the three high schools in my riding, Edmonton-McClung, Jasper Place high school, one of the largest if not the largest high school in the city with over 2,000 students, built in 1964. The school that is close to it is St. Francis Xavier in the Catholic system. We also have another Catholic high school now, Blessed Oscar Romero, in the west end, close to my office.

Those three high schools, of course, will be facing the same pandemic-impacted graduation ceremonies that everybody in this province and the country and globally, actually, faces. So my heart goes out to those individual students who looked forward to a graduation ceremony that they've been planning for many, many months, and now, of course, that's been thwarted. Hopefully, with the creativeness and ingenuity of Alberta students in their final year of high school they'll be able to celebrate in some way – online, digitally, or under small gatherings, as we've seen some high schools have been able to do, even some of the rural ones in Alberta – and give themselves an opportunity to memorialize their graduation in a way that is meaningful and brings a little joy to the occasion.

Hopefully, I get to see some of the students at a distance as I tour the constituency this week to take some photos of the schools and wish them the best in their graduation in 2020.

The Speaker: Hon. members, we are on REF1. Is there anyone wishing to speak to the amendment? The hon. Member for Brooks-Medicine Hat.

Ms Glasgo: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you for the opportunity to speak to the amendment, which is essentially referring the Choice in Education Act, 2020, to the Standing Committee on Families and Communities. As a member of the Standing Committee on Families and Communities I thought I would just take an opportunity to address some of the comments that were made earlier.

Yes, our busiest season, I guess, is of course during estimates and during budget time. This committee provides oversight and an opportunity for questioning of ministers, and Education is one of them. I remember there being quite a robust discussion around education choice and how education was going to be funded. I keep hearing from the opposite side of the House, you know, that there have been these massive cuts to education – and, I guess, to their credit, it's really gotten through the respective social media channels and everything else as well – when in reality every single school board in Alberta received an increase in funding this year. There were actually no cuts at all. But I guess facts are inconvenient.

I hear a lot about the consultation as well on this particular piece of legislation. I know that for me in my nomination – and I don't know about you, Mr. Speaker – the biggest issue that I heard from our supporters and from people in the community was how important it was for parents to have that primal right, that right to be able to choose the kind of education that their children will receive.

I know for my parents that was certainly important. Just by the nature of where we lived in Medicine Hat, there were two schools that I could have been sent to. One was a public school, and it was I believe francophone and French immersion based, which is fantastic. At that point, back when I was going into kindergarten, there was no French immersion, actually, in the Catholic system, so my parents thought of that as an option. But my grandma taught in the Catholic system.

I actually ended up getting bused across the city to go to a fine-arts-focused kindergarten. For K through 6 I was in a fine-arts-focused school, which was really neat, actually. I got to expand on some gifts that I didn't even know I had and really got to hone in on that as well as develop the other side of my brain and, you know, learn musical instruments, reading music, and things like that, which really blossomed into quite a passion for the arts. That was a choice that my parents made, but that was within the public system. I mean, it was the Catholic school system and separate system but within the public system.

Now, I also remember I had friends that went to CAPE, which is the Centre for Academic and Personal Excellence. CAPE has had various locations within Medicine Hat but has always produced phenomenal students. One of my best friends – she and I actually met through science fair. I know, really cool. We met through science fair, nonetheless, when we were doing a project on algae, and we ended up making it to the regional science fair. She got her training from CAPE. She knew all this stuff about science fair that I had no idea of. We just didn't go over it in our school. They spent extra time and had different clubs and all kinds of things in that school. Then actually when I got elected and the Minister of Education was in Medicine Hat for her tour of my riding as well, we went to Tilley school; we went to Crescent Heights high school, a public school in Medicine Hat; a couple of others; and then we ended up at CAPE.

9:40

What I was amazed by at this school, Mr. Speaker, was the diversity in that school. For a city such as Medicine Hat, you know, you have a lot of presupposed notions about what that looks like, what that doesn't look like. I was just amazed by the diversity in those classrooms. We had kids from all walks of life. It was made very clear by the parents' committee that this was not a wealthy school. There were many children who needed assistance and many families who needed assistance to send their children to these schools, and they did whatever they could to provide that individualized programming for those students. These parents

chose this school not because – they chose it because they wanted the best for their children, and they felt that that was it. At the end of the day who are we to judge? Like I said, I've known lots of kids who went to CAPE, and they're doing excellent in their lives now, just like kids in other systems.

I heard the terms “Americanization, privatization,” you know, all of these things that literally do not appear in this bill, I believe, even once. But, like I said, facts are really inconvenient. I digress. But here we are talking about these things in the Assembly, and we have an opportunity to really support parents in this right now.

I think back to how many times the words “choice in education” have been conflated with other views or perhaps with groups or whatever else. It does make me sad because, at the end of the day, what's happening here is that we're undermining parental authority when we have those kinds of discussions. We're saying that the state, not parents, knows what's best for their own children, as the hon. Minister of Transportation stated, and I have a real problem with that. I know that a lot of the members opposite would like to have everything be state-controlled, but I hope that when I am blessed enough to bring children into this world, I, not the state, get to decide what is right for them. Like I've said, I believe, in other speeches that I've had in the House, I hope to have a gaggle of kids. If the good Lord blesses me with that, then there will be lots more of me running around, which is both scary and exciting.

Sorry; I kind of just went off on a tangent there. I really like kids.

You know, this bill really doesn't change a whole lot as far as what our public system is right now. We do have a strong public system in Alberta that is the envy of the world. My grandma used to actually mark diploma exams in the Legislature Annex, and she always talked about how proud she was to be a teacher in Alberta. She was a teacher in a Catholic school for most of her career. She taught special-education children as well as social and all different kinds of things. I'm not really sure that there was something that she didn't teach. I still think that she's one of the smartest people I've ever met, but that is because I want Sunday dinner as well as because I just think she's wonderful. She was always proud of our public education system and what is available in Alberta. Now she still advocates for that.

I mean, within the public education system in Medicine Hat there are sports academies, there are fine arts academies, French immersion – you name it, you can do anything you want under that public system. It's all available to you, and parents are still making that choice. So when we just, you know, cutthroat undermine choice in education, period, we're really doing a disservice to those children. Like I hinted at earlier, you know, people choose things for their children because they want a specialized learning environment. They want something. Maybe their child struggles with something and they want an individualized plan. Maybe their child really excels in one area, for example sports or music, and they want to choose that for their child. Who are we to say that they cannot?

You know, there is no legislation in Alberta currently that affirms that parent's right to choose their child's education. I'm really proud to be part of a government that is affirming that and codifying that and saying: “You know what? The UN declaration on the rights of the child: that's not just something we talk about at convention. That's not just something that we say when we're door-knocking. It's something that we will act on.” Mr. Speaker, I'm very proud of that. Like I said, in my nomination and otherwise this was central to our campaign and especially in my riding, where there are so many different types of education being offered. I think that in one week during the campaign I met with, like, two home-school families, I met with independent school families, I met with public school families, and their point was all the same: they wanted to

have that system that they loved preserved. In this bill, whether that's private, independent, charter, public, it doesn't matter; it's all still here. We're just saying that parents have that right to choose it now instead of the government's overarching hand. I think that codifying this is so important because we've seen the erosion of parental choice and parental authority come from that side of the House.

I mean, it is ironic that they all voted in lockstep – and I'm glad they did – for the Minister of Transportation's motion in 2016. Was it 2016? I mean, that's great, but, oh, how the mighty have fallen between 2016 and 2019. I saw attacks from various members. I will say that this is largely the Twittersphere, so yikes, but we've seen a lot of people coming at parents, loving parents who are choosing education for their children, including the NDP-affiliated Gil McGowan. I feel that it hasn't come up tonight, so I thought I'd just throw it out there that if these members on the far left over here would actually stand up against that, maybe I'd believe what they said when they said that they stand up for parents and that they believe that parents have a prior right to choose their children's education.

Up until now – and maybe the next speaker will say, you know: “I condemn that. They're not religious nutbars. Gil McGowan doesn't speak for our party, and the AFL don't have anything to do with us.” But, of course, they'd be – they would be not speaking correctly. Mr. Speaker, I caught myself. I'm sorry. I wouldn't want to use unparliamentary language. You know, I haven't heard that yet, so is it the view of the NDP? Is it the view of the members opposite? I don't believe any of them to be spiteful people. I believe them to be good people. In fact, I have lots of productive and kind conversations with them when we go out into the foyer, believe it or not. I know them all to be very, very good people, and it just really blows my mind that they would not feel obligated or not feel that they should respond to that kind of a response and not feel that they should condemn those kinds of hateful attacks on thousands of Albertans and thousands of Albertan parents who choose a faith-based education for their children.

Also, another point that I just have to put out there: charter schools aren't religious. We have many charter schools in Alberta, and also within our independent school system there are a variety of different religions. Are you trying to insinuate that Sikh parents, that Muslim parents, that Christian parents, that Jewish parents, any other type of religious parent is a nutbar? Come on, Mr. Speaker. I can't believe that any member on that side of the House or any Albertan would stand by that when our Charter of Rights so very clearly dictates that you have the freedom of religion.

I condemn Mr. McGowan's comments. I think they're reprehensible. But I also know that he's often an observer at the throne speech and a guest of the members opposite, so yikes. I probably wouldn't be bringing him next time, but you are who you hang out with, I guess. We'll let them respond to that.

Just more specifically on the referral motion, Mr. Speaker, because I know I should probably be tying it to that again, I will say that I don't believe this needs to be referred to committee. It doesn't. The consultation and the mandate for this have been happening and going on since 2015. Alberta parents have been reaching out to incumbent members and those of us who have been running to say: “Stand up for my right to choose my child's education. Stand up for my child who needs specialized education. Stand up for my family.” We've been doing that. We did that through the campaign, and we're still doing that now. I would say that in sending this to Families and Communities, although it is a wonderful committee that I happen to sit on, this would just delay this important legislation in being passed.

I believe that concludes my remarks. I would encourage the members opposite to make sure that this important bill gets passed,

and I would encourage all members of the House to shoot down this amendment, please.

Thank you.

The Speaker: Hon. members, Standing Order 29(2)(a) is available. I see the hon. the chief government whip has risen to ask a question or make a brief comment.

9:50

Mr. Ellis: Thank you. Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to thank the Member for Brooks-Medicine Hat for those comments. I as well condemn the associate of the members opposite, Mr. McGowan, and his remarks that he made publicly.

Mr. Speaker, I know the member brought up some interesting points, especially when it comes to choosing facts. I, too, have heard, of course, the narrative from the members opposite that there have been these massive cuts to education and the slash and burn of the UCP. But, you know, I have to – I have to – reflect on numbers that have been obtained from the Calgary board of education, just as an example. It's the per-student funding for those students. I just have to read some actuals into the record.

In 2014-2015 the government at the time, which would have been the Progressive Conservatives, funded \$11,574 per student. Certainly, I commend them, and I know the Transportation minister was certainly a member of that particular government. Then the following year, when the New Democrats, of course, had come into government – kudos to them – they increased it. They increased it, Mr. Speaker. They increased it from that \$11,574 to \$11,901. That's good. I mean, there was an increase there. That's good for students, and it's good for parents.

But then the following year, 2016-2017, there was a \$600 decrease, to \$11,371. Then in 2017-18 they decreased it again, to \$11,219, and then in 2018-19 to \$11,220, so an increase by a dollar. But, in the end, Mr. Speaker, it's a substantial decrease. In fact, under the UCP, when they come in in 2019-2020, it's increased, not decreased, to \$11,245. Neither party, of course, is at where the PCs were in 2014-15. However, the UCP is higher than that of the last year of the NDP. It's a bit of a stretch, we'll say, of the facts when it comes to the narrative that the UCP have decreased funding to these kids.

I just want to ask the Member for Brooks-Medicine Hat. You know, I certainly have some concerns regarding, we'll call it, exaggerations or stretching or certainly concerns regarding the truth in the Medicine Hat school board system or other school boards within the Medicine Hat region, this certainly false narrative that could be perpetuated in that area. Is there a concern in your area, just as in the area of Calgary, where we had this concern that there has been this massive cut to education when the numbers as provided by the Calgary board of education are completely to the contrary?

Mr. Speaker, thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Brooks-Medicine Hat.

Ms Glasgo: Mr. Speaker, if you'll indulge me, can I just get a time check, please?

The Speaker: A minute and 14 seconds.

Ms Glasgo: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

You know, in the short time that I have left, I would just like to say thank you to the hon. Member for Calgary-West and government whip for just bringing those numbers to the table. I know that in my own riding and in my travels with the Minister of

Education as well as in my quarterly meetings with my school boards in my riding, of which I have eight, I will say that there's a lot of fearmongering that goes on, and it's really unfortunate because who is hurt in that fearmongering is the children.

We hear countless stories of children hearing that, you know, their after school program is going to get cut or that this is going to get cut or that that's going to get cut. That's not the case. For these parents, it's adding one more stress onto their day that they really don't need. What we could be doing is that we could all be working collaboratively. I know the members opposite ask for that often. What we could be doing is that we could all be supporting parents in the choices that they make, but instead they choose to stoke fear and division. But I guess that is just one more play from their handbook.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: Hon. members, there is virtually no time remaining under 29(2)(a).

We are on the amendment. That's amendment REF1. Is there anyone wishing to speak to the amendment? I see the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. Schmidt: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and I want to thank all of my colleagues here in the House for their insightful interjections into the debate this evening. I want to thank, in particular, my friend from Edmonton-McClung for his lengthy discussion about Halvar Jonson, and I look forward to more discussion about Jonsons here in the Legislature, be they Halvar or otherwise.

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

I also want to take the opportunity to address some of the comments that the Member for Brooks-Medicine Hat made with respect to, let's say, some selective reading of the facts. I'm referring to a March 31, 2020, article that ran in CBC news. I know that the members opposite will already rule that source as untrustworthy, but I still trust the CBC, Madam Speaker. CBC reported that Edmonton public schools is facing a \$17.5 million cut this year. That comes from a \$13 million reduction in the base instruction grant and a \$3.7 million cut to transportation fees. So when the members opposite say that they haven't cut funding and have in fact increased it, let's just say that that's a rather interesting interpretation of the truth.

More to the point, Madam Speaker, I want to explain a little bit about why I support this amendment to refer Bill 15, the Choice in Education Act, 2020, to the Standing Committee on Families and Communities in accordance with Standing Order 74.2. I think there are three questions that the committee should consider, if this Legislature votes to send this bill to committee, about the subject matter that's within the bill. First of all, I think the first question that we should ask is: what does it mean to be a public school? Second of all, I think that we would want to task the committee to investigate whether or not charter schools have lived up to their mandate when they were initially introduced in Alberta. I also would like the committee, if it gets the opportunity to do its work, to look at the issue of how these changes that are proposed in the bill will affect home-schooling students and their ability to move on to higher education once they've completed home-schooling.

I want to start now with addressing why I think we need to tackle these three questions. The first question that I would suggest that the committee should ask, if it's given the opportunity, is: what is a public school? One of the things that we've heard on both sides of the aisle in this debate is the support for choice in the different types of programs that are offered for students. None of us here believe that education is a one-size-fits-all affair, and in fact all of the members

who have spoken to this bill, whether they've spoken in favour of it or against it, have talked about the impressive diversity of choices in different types of curriculum and methods of pedagogy that are available through the public system, through the Catholic system, through the francophone system, through the charter school system, that are offered through independent schools.

The members opposite seem to – they never come right out and say it – imply that public school is a system that doesn't offer the kind of choice that parents are looking for. And it may be true. It may be true. But there's no reason, Madam Speaker, that a public school system can't offer the kinds of choices that we're looking for.

You know, members opposite have often raised the issue of religious schools. In fact, I want to go on the record and say that I fully support the concept of religious schooling. But I also believe that it should be offered through the public system. So if I want to send my children to a Muslim school or a Buddhist school or a school run by the church of Satan, then I should have that choice offered through the public system. I shouldn't have to pay tuition for it. I should be able to get the kinds of teaching supports, educational supports, textbooks, resources that any other student in the province should get.

That's what I think a public school system is. There's no reason to say that a public school system, you know, needs to be supplemented with charter or independent schools, right? I believe that if we strengthen the public school system, we can increase the number of programs and the types of choices that are available to students.

10:00

The second question that I mentioned off the top that I think the committee should look into is whether or not charter schools have lived up to the mandate that they were assigned when they were introduced to the province in I believe 1994 was what my hon. friend from Edmonton-McClung said. When charter schools were introduced in Alberta, they were introduced for a specific purpose, and that was to allow for research into the effectiveness of different types of education.

I know from personal experience, Madam Speaker, that at least one charter school continuously conducts research on the outcomes of its students and whether or not their curriculum is effective. The Suzuki Charter School in my riding has been engaged in a multiyear research program with professors from the University of Alberta to study the effectiveness of its curriculum, the outcomes that its students achieve, and it then feeds those research results back into the Alberta education system. I don't know, though, if other charter schools are conducting that work. I'm not saying that they aren't, but I am saying that that was what they were initially proposed to do.

The charter schools were to function not just as educational institutions for our children but as research institutions so that we could understand what makes an effective curriculum and how we can improve curriculum and education more broadly so that those effects can be experienced and every student in Alberta can benefit from that research. So I think that it would be interesting for the committee to look at the question of what kind of research the charter schools have engaged in over the past 15 – forgive me; my math is failing me – 26 years that they've been around. What kinds of research have they done?

Mr. McIver: You should have gone to a charter school.

Mr. Schmidt: Calgary-Hays. Oh, my goodness.

Mr. McIver: It was too easy.

Mr. Schmidt: Yeah.

The committee should look into whether or not charter schools have continuously fulfilled this role as research laboratories to improve education, and I'd like to hear about the kinds of research they have conducted over the last 26 years and how students in all of our school systems have benefited from that research and whether or not it makes sense for charter schools to continue as those research laboratories that they were intended to be.

I think that if the committee had the opportunity to look into the research that's conducted at charter schools, they would probably find some promising results. I know that the staff and administration at the Suzuki Charter School share the results of the research that it's done. It's certainly encouraging to see that many of the educational programs that they've implemented at Suzuki Charter School have some positive benefits, and I would like all students in Alberta to be able to receive the benefit of that research so that their education can be improved as well.

The third question that I have is with respect to home-schooling. My friend from Edmonton-Glenora raised this issue around the section of the bill that severs that link between home-schooling parents and an associated school board, an anchor school I think is what she called it. Now, I have no particular affinity for tying home-schooling to a particular institution. I could understand why parents would choose to home-school and not want to be linked with a public school system that they feel is not meeting their children's needs. I understand that, but I also understand that those children will eventually graduate from home-schooling and want to move on to other levels of education.

In my time as Minister of Education I heard stories from many home-schooled students that their education was not recognized as equivalent to that of a graduate of a public school or a charter school or a francophone school or a Catholic school. So what is the government planning to do to make sure that parents who make the choice to school their children at home are not limiting the options of their children when they graduate and want to move on to higher education? It's incredibly important to me and I think it would be incredibly important to every MLA here in the House to make sure that our home-schooled students have the opportunity to go on to college or trade school or university, whatever their choice is. We want to make sure that what they're taught at home will qualify them to enter into the program of their choice once they graduate. That's why I think that it's important that the committee look into this issue of home-schooling and how we will ensure that students graduate with a qualification that's recognized by institutions of higher learning both in Alberta and outside of Alberta.

Madam Speaker, as I hope I've made clear, I have a number of questions about this bill. That's why I think it would be wise and prudent to send this bill to the Standing Committee on Families and Communities so that we can dig into some of these questions. I think it's important for the future of our education system here to understand what it truly means to be a public school, to understand what role the charter schools have played in our education system and what role they should play going forward, and also to understand how we can make sure that home-schooled students don't have their options limited because there is no longer that requirement to be linked to an anchor school, a local school board, some kind of entity that will validate the credential that they would get upon completion of home-schooling.

I'm certain that my colleagues here have many other questions that they would like the committee to consider if it were given the opportunity to study this bill in greater detail. Those are the three that I posed off the top of my head, and I look forward to further discussion from my colleagues here in the House about how we think we can use this bill as an opportunity to improve both our

understanding of the current school system and how we can improve the school system going forward.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

The Deputy Speaker: Standing Order 29(2)(a) is available. I see the hon. minister for the status of women.

Mrs. Aheer: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. As always, it's a very interesting conversation when our friend across the way stands up and gives his very, very interesting interpretations of the legislation that is before us, very interesting conversations; you know, great water-cooler discussions for later, certainly, around some of the discussions that we have here. So thank you once again for providing us with many, many discussion points here. Appreciate the questions, certainly.

I'd like to start off with the home-school piece. Quite frankly, I think there's always legitimacy in any style of education that kids are going to benefit or not benefit for many, many, many different reasons, each of those being a thumbprint. And to broadly create a spectrum based on anecdotal stories that paint an entire sector of the education system, as the member had mentioned, that somehow home-schooling will not provide the availability for students to be able to move on to secondary education is extremely, I would suggest, biased and untrue and completely uninformed.

I have had the privilege of being a music teacher for over 26 years, and one of the privileges I had while I was doing that was actually having many home-schooled students come through my studio. And you know what the amazing thing was about that? Their kids could come for music at noon. They could come for music at noon, do theory, history, voice lessons. You can roll your eyes all you want, Member over there. That's fine, but it was actually a really beautiful part of my day to be able to work with those students.

Not only did they take music lessons from me in voice and theory and history; they took violin from my friend down the street and cello lessons. In fact, one of the families that I had the privilege of working with are high-standing instrumentalists from Mount Royal college, probably at the top of their game, and all six of their children play string instruments and up until recently were playing all over the world at a level that is beyond most of the capacity of the people I know. Maybe the member is an excellent violinist. I'm not sure. I don't mean to in any way demean that you may be a phenomenal musician, so please don't think that I'm in any way judging.

10:10

However, having said that, these particular students were unbelievable. It changed my perspective on many things. My children were not home-schooled, and we've gone through every perspective. We've gone through charter schools, public, private, the whole gamut for various different reasons. For the member to demean home-schooling based on certain anecdotal evidence without actually . . .

Mr. Schmidt: Point of order.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar has a point of order.

Point of Order Abusive Language Imputing Motives

Mr. Schmidt: Yeah. Under 23(i) and (j), the member is imputing false or unavowed motives to another member and is using abusive or insulting language of a nature likely to create disorder.

The Member for Chestermere-Strathmore just said that I was demeaning home-schooling. I appreciate that she was paying attention at least a little bit to what I was saying, but I was in no way demeaning home-schooling whatsoever. I was simply asking the question based on my own personal experience, Madam Speaker, about how we can ensure that home-schooling students can see their way into higher education of their choice. I in no way demeaned home-schooling whatsoever, and for her to impute that I was demeaning home-schooling I think is a point of order. The fact that she was doing so in the manner that she did was abusive and insulting, and I demand that she apologize and retract her statement.

The Deputy Speaker: Hon. member, this is very clearly a matter of debate.

The hon. minister is rising under Standing Order 29(2)(a), which provides questions or comments, and I will now ask that she continue with the remaining two minutes of her time.

Debate Continued

Mrs. Aheer: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. To continue, the most important thing that we have going in this province is the choice for parents to choose the education for their children. Like I was trying to say earlier, I've had the immense privilege of being able to work with many students from varied backgrounds of education and have been absolutely blown away by the mechanisms that were in place, whether that was public or private and absolutely everything in between.

If you look at any documents about the way that they speak about Alberta, people long to come here. Again, I've been all over the country and various schools with the privilege that I have with the work that I did prior to being in this Legislature. People flocked here for jobs and many other things but also the education system because they have the choice. There's competition here, and it forces all school systems, every one of them right across the board, Madam Speaker, to do better by our children. To make an assumption that a child in home-schooling or other various forms of education is not going to be able to participate in a future, especially secondary education, is completely disingenuous to the system.

I would wager that if the member had the opportunity to talk to more parents that had the opportunity to home-school, especially children with various different needs and situations, it's unbelievable. I have actually had another family in my riding who home-schooled their children. They were a farming family, and they were able to incorporate the work of the farm, the ethic of that work and everything about animal husbandry and the farming bits, agrifood. One of their daughters is actually taking over the family farm. She's a rock star. The woman is just absolutely one of the most incredible, incredible agricultural – she's just the epitome of what we expect out there.

The Deputy Speaker: Are there other members who wish to speak under REF1? I see the hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood.

Member Irwin: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I haven't had a chance to speak in this House in a little bit. Before I share remarks, I would just like to give a quick shout-out to all those, both here in Edmonton and around the world, who are joining the fight for racial justice. As I walked into the Legislature tonight, I saw folks gathered peacefully to rally, with the message that black lives matter. Black lives do matter, and we stand with them on our side of the House.

Now, on to Bill 15. You know, I've spoken in this Chamber so many times about my love of education and about my background in education. I'm so proud of our education system here in Alberta, a proud product of the public education system in Barrhead, Alberta, born and raised, kindergarten to grade 12, in that small town, where I had the opportunity to have some amazing teachers who really broadened my horizons and inspired an interest in many things, not the least of which are a number of social studies teachers who inspired my love of politics and of history and of so many other areas.

So here I am. I've talked a little bit about my experience as a teacher. Just like another spoke about tonight, I too taught in the public education system. I started my career in Bawlf, Alberta. I try to say "Bawlf" as much as I can so I can get it into *Hansard*.

Ms Hoffman: Bawlf idol.

Member Irwin: Yes, I was a part of Bawlf idol at one point. The Member for Edmonton-Glenora is correct. I did not win with my Justin Timberlake performance, but I tried my best. Anyways, I digress.

Truly, I started my teaching career in Bawlf, teaching high school social studies and English. You know, I had just turned 21, and I had a couple of 19-year-olds in my class. It was quite the experience. Honestly, I learned so much teaching in that rural public school, and those experiences stick with me to today.

I'll talk a little bit more about my background in education. You know, after leaving Bawlf school, I went to Forestburg. I was a vice-principal there for a short time before the city beckoned me to work with Alberta Education. I took on a secondment working with Alberta Education in curriculum and stayed in that role for a couple of years and then ended up staying in a permanent position. I enjoyed that work so much because we got to engage with countless stakeholders, countless public education stakeholders, including teachers, including administrators but also including parents. Through the extensive engagements that I had the honour of being a part of, we heard so regularly how proud parents were of Alberta's education system, how much they support our publicly funded system.

In fact, I've been reading a little bit about some of the analysis of Bill 15, and of course, I've read the legislation myself as well. I know the president of the Alberta Teachers' Association quoted that 93 per cent of Alberta students attend public schools. Ninety-three per cent. You know, I won't get too nerdy here, but we have to acknowledge a public school in Alberta is not the same compared to other jurisdictions. A public school in Alberta means students in public, separate, which mostly means Catholic. Not always. In some circumstances the public district is actually the Catholic district.

Ms Hoffman: It used to be. Not anymore.

Member Irwin: Oh, that's true. Yeah. You're right.

Sorry, *Hansard*, I'm making this really confusing for you today.

Regardless, public includes public, separate as well as francophone school divisions. Again, 93 per cent of Alberta students attend these schools. We know from parent engagements, from previous stats that parents support this as well.

One of the most interesting things that I like to point to – and I think perhaps the Member for Edmonton-Glenora and a few others have spoken about this – is the diversity in Edmonton public schools. Of course, you know, my teaching experience is in two rural schools. We didn't have a lot of diversity of choice in programming. Students didn't have a wide range of options.

10:20

Although, we tried. Interestingly, you know, one of the things that we did in both schools is we connected with the Alberta Distance Learning Centre and offered some programming to kids. I had a student, I remember, in Bawlf who wanted to take Spanish. I have some Spanish. I'm not bilingual at all, but I had enough to help that student with Spanish 10, and that was with modules that we got from Alberta Distance Learning Centre and working with the ADLC, which, again, is another conversation but is one to consider when this government is attacking public education in a way that ADLC will be defunded, which will be a huge impact not only on school divisions across the province but also my hometown school division of Pembina Hills.

Anyways, getting back to Bill 15, I want to speak about Edmonton public ...

The Deputy Speaker: Hon. member, I hesitate to interrupt ...

Member Irwin: Yes.

The Deputy Speaker: ... but I just would like to remind you that we are on the referral amendment.

Member Irwin: Absolutely. I was getting there.

The Deputy Speaker: Perfect. Thank you.

Member Irwin: Thank you. What I'm getting to, Madam Speaker, is the fact that this does need to be referred to committee. It needs to be referred to committee because it needs a more robust conversation, and I'm going to point out why by explaining how Edmonton public schools has managed to have a great deal of diversity within the public system.

So many choice options: language options, sports options, faith options. A quick scan of some of the programs: my colleague mentioned the Amiskwaciy Academy Cree programming; dance and ballet program at Edmonton Christian schools – there are a number of those campuses across the city – French immersion, of course; the international Spanish academy; Logos; Nellie McClung, which my fantastic colleague from Edmonton-McClung spoke about; sports alternative programs. The list goes on. I won't read them all, but the list is exhaustive, and it shows that you can have the rich diversity of education programming within a public system.

So my caution with Bill 15 – and as has been said, I mean, there are some charter schools that arguably are doing great work for kids. I think about Boyle Street Education Centre, which I know does some really incredible work here in Edmonton. However, I know that there have also been conversations with some of the charter schools about their absorption into the public system. As a long-standing fan of public education, someone who will always advocate for public education I wonder why we can't push for those sorts of conversations so that we can have a strong, rich, diverse, well-funded public system. That's what I would push for.

Now, again, I've talked about the need to refer to committee because I think this merits further conversation. I think it also merits a conversation about what it is that this government is trying to push forward under this piece of legislation. There's a concern – and, in fact, I'm trying not to get too wonky on you. In fact, one of the things I did when doing graduate work in education is that I wrote a quite exhaustive paper on charter schools and analyzing them. I'm not going to read that whole paper to you. Although, maybe. The night is still young. I may be able to bring a little bit of that in if you would indulge me.

But I want to, again, speak to the referral. The concern, of course, is that – and we've seen this in other jurisdictions – an expansion of

charter schools leads to a diversion of funds away from the broader public system. So I'm concerned when we hear the Member for Peace River comparing education to the privatization of liquor stores. No wonder we're concerned about the approach of this government. I'm concerned when we hear UCP members stand up and say that we're fearmongering about what's in this bill, what's in the Choice in Education Act. You're basically asking us to trust you. Just trust them, they say. Just trust them. Trust them? Trust them like they asked us to trust them on their Premier's promise to avoid divisive social issues during their campaign, instead to focus on jobs, economy, pipelines. Yet what was one of the first things that this government did?

Ms Hoffman: Bill 8.

Member Irwin: They introduced Bill 8, Bill Hate – right? – which immediately stripped away protections for LGBTQ2S-plus students, and it's Pride Month, so the irony there is not lost on me.

Trust them, they say. Trust a government that claims to support funding in education but fires 20,000 education workers, many of whom were EAs who were supporting their students as they grappled with the transition to online learning? No, it's not as simple as saying: we will just trust you. I could go on for hours about why we have no choice but to be suspicious of this government, that tells us just to trust them. We will fight for a strong, publicly funded education system, not just today but every day.

This is why I think it's really important that we take the time to analyze closely what exactly is in this bill and look at potentially the unintended consequences of what's in this bill. As has been stated multiple times tonight, we have such an effective public education system in this province. We are truly the envy of so many jurisdictions, so the question is: why mess with it, right?

Hey, you know, somebody talked about the fact that I was involved with curriculum development. Certainly, there are improvements that need to be made. I am the first one to stand here and say that an arts curriculum that is older than I am is not acceptable. We need to move forward, and we need to update our curriculum documents, absolutely. That's why I was so proud that it was the NDP government in 2016, under our Member for Edmonton-North West, who moved forward, finally, with curriculum development. Our kids deserve a 21st-century education. Absolutely, they do. I'm not saying that we can't be moving forward and that we can't be changing our education system, but we need to be changing it in a way that's evidence based, that's based on broad consultation with stakeholders, that will benefit all students, and that won't leave students behind. This is the fear – this is the fear – about Bill 15.

We can look at America. I know that there have been questions from the members opposite around our claims of the potential Americanization of our education system. Well, I tell you again, we're not just fearmongering. [interjections] We're not. Hey, you know what? I said the same thing – the members opposite mock – when I stood in this House and spoke about Bill 8 and about my fears of students being denied GSAs. I'd love to share with some of those members opposite about how there's been a chilling effect on young people in school. There's been a chilling effect on teachers, staff, and administrators who want to support their queer and trans students but are afraid of repercussions. So, please, mock me, laugh at me; that's fine. But I want to put on the record my concerns because I'm sure proud that I did in the past.

Now, I am concerned and I am fearful because we can look at other jurisdictions where they've expanded charter schools, where they've endorsed greater privatization of their public system, and

we can see – again, I'm not saying that this is Alberta, but there are a number of jurisdictions in the United States; I don't have them all off the top of my head, but I can pull them up for you in due course – that as funds, public funding, are diverted away from the public education system to private schools, those public schools suffer, right? Of course, the United States, in certain jurisdictions, has voucher systems that are a little bit different, but I do think we need to be wary. I do think we need to be wary.

There is research to support that, you know, charter schools – there are a number of researchers that I can point to who've talked about charters – can be viewed as the gateway to further degradation of the public system. In fact, Alberta Education wrote a paper in, I believe, 2009 that spoke to some of the concerns that they even had in 2009. I'll give you a history lesson there. You all know, of course, that there was a PC government in place. Under the PC government a paper was written that actually outlined some concerns around the charter system, right? Again, it's very new. We've had a publicly funded education system in Alberta since our inception as a province. Yet, charter schools, relatively in the course of time, are a new development, as my esteemed colleague from Edmonton-McClung noted, from 1994, so relatively new.

10:30

The Deputy Speaker: Hon. members, Standing Order 29(2)(a) is available. I see the hon. Member for Red Deer-North.

Mr. Stephan: Thank you. I've just been sitting and listening to the Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood. I've heard a lot of discussion about school systems. I think it's important for the members opposite to appreciate that, again, this bill is student centric. It is about the children. Our Education minister loves the children that she has the opportunity to serve. She is a mother of seven. This bill is about the children. I think there has been some confusion by the members opposite because they keep referring to this being about an education system. This is about giving the parents the right and the support to choose what they deem is in their children's best interest.

This bill is only five pages long. It's not that complex. The preamble of this amendment states that "parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that may be provided to their children." What a wonderful thing to affirm. I can tell you that in the last election a major issue, frankly, was the fear that the prior government was going to subordinate the freedom of parents to choose what they felt was in their children's best interest. They wanted to substitute their ideology and to have the state subordinate the rights and freedoms of parents. That is why our Education minister felt that it was important to affirm what should be a self-evident right as indicated in that UN declaration, that parents have the right to choose the kind of education that they deem in the best interest of their children.

The best security for our public education system is to provide an effective education for their children. Alberta is a meritocracy as our public systems seek to serve their students in love, have a culture of excellence. They will be successful in serving the public interest and aligning with the goal of parents to provide the best education possible for their children.

I had asked the Member for Edmonton-Glenora whether or not the other key change in this act is that it confirms that parents are the gatekeepers of their children's education. When I asked the Member for Edmonton-Glenora whether or not she agreed with that, she didn't actually answer the question. This government trusts parents as the gatekeeper. We trust parents as the gatekeeper. That is their stewardship. We are supporting it. When the Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood speaks only about school systems,

I think the members opposite are missing the point. This is about serving Albertan children, supporting parents, who are the primary educators of our children.

Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: Any other comments under Standing Order 29(2)(a)? The hon. Member for Edmonton-Manning.

Ms Sweet: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I just wanted to follow up real quick actually on the comments from the Member for Red Deer-South, and I'll maybe elaborate on this when I speak later to the bill. I appreciate the comments around parents having, you know – they do have the choice. It's actually very clear already in the legislation under section 32 that a parent has the "right to choose the kind of education that shall be provided to the parent's child." That already exists in the legislation.

But my question to the member – and at some point I hope we can discuss this – is: what happens when these children don't have guardians or their guardian becomes someone else? We're now talking about a different issue. The reason that the legislation is written the way that it currently is written is because at some point the authority changes, and if the government becomes the guardian, the whole conversation becomes something different. There are pieces of this that there are actually legal ramifications when you look at children in care and foster care and whether or not changes to this piece . . .

The Deputy Speaker: Any other members wishing to speak to the referral amendment? The hon. Member for Drayton Valley-Devon.

Mr. Smith: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I rise to speak to the referral amendment. You know, as do all members of this Legislature, that a referral motion asks this Legislature to refer a bill to a committee, and in theory this is because this Legislature as a whole would look at this bill and see if there are problems with the bill, that perhaps there hasn't been enough appropriate consultation or study or that stakeholders have been missed in the production of the bill and that therefore there is a valid reason for going to the committee to do further study. We've heard various reasons given by the opposition to this point this evening about why they believe that we should support this referral motion.

Madam Speaker, I am rising today to speak against this referral motion. We heard the Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar posit three questions that he thought would be good to send to the committee, the Standing Committee on Families and Communities. You know, when I listened to his arguments, I was pleased that he was able to articulate three reasons why he believed that it should go to the standing committee, but I would draw to his attention that a referral motion sends it to committee to address the bill. It doesn't send it to committee to debate the validity of a particular style of education. Yet all of the three questions that he brought forward were dealing with whether or not there is a validity to the choice in the education, not to the bill itself, and to whether there was an appropriate amount of consultation or study or stakeholders that were consulted in the production of the bill.

I'm very happy that the Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood stood up to speak to the bill. It's always nice to have another educator stand up. Even though we may disagree on some of the things and the vision that we have for education, I respect the fact that as a fellow educator she was capable of articulating a position, again, in favour of this referral motion. But, you know, she wanted to ensure that we had broad consultation, and I agree with her. I guess I would just agree that we've had that broad consultation.

I know that prior to the election and during the election and in the first year that we've been in power as a government after the election, our party and the hon. minister have met with all of the major stakeholders across this province in all of the various diverse choices of education that we have and have had those conversations about how they could move forward with the Choice in Education Act, 2020, and how we could improve that. Madam Speaker, I know that if the opposition were to take a look at the document that I have before me here – it's Survey Highlights: Choice in Education, published by Alberta in May 2020 – and that if we take a look at page 5 of this document, it says that there was a survey that was put forward to the people of Alberta where 57,000 usable responses were presented to the Minister of Education. That seems to me a pretty broad range of consultation with the people that really count in this province, the people, the people and the parents that are accessing our education system.

Madam Speaker, I would refer to page 8 of this same document that looks at the respondent profile.

The Deputy Speaker: Hon. members, I can appreciate you're sitting further away from each other than normal, but perhaps if you want to have a type of conversation, you can do so in the lounge behind us.

Will the hon. Member for Drayton Valley-Devon please proceed.

10:40

Mr. Smith: Thank you Madam Speaker. If you refer to the same document, on page 8 it gives a respondent profile, and when we take a look, we can see that 38.9 per cent of the people that responded to this survey by the minister were aged 35 to 44, the prime age for people that would be having kids in school; that females made up 70 per cent of that profile; and that 74.2 per cent lived in urban areas, predominantly Calgary and Edmonton; that 72 per cent had been residents in Alberta for at least 20 years; that speakers of English as their first language made up 90.7 per cent of the survey respondents; that parents of children attending public schools made up 40.7 per cent of this survey and separate 20.5 per cent. I think we're seeing that we're getting a wide cross-section of Alberta public that are actually well engaged in this process of consultation.

If we took a look at page 13 of this document, you would see that 40.7 per cent of the respondents have children – or the type of school or program that their children attend were public schools; separate, 20.5 per cent; francophone, 3.6; charter schools, 4.8 per cent; private schools, 9.7 per cent; alternative programs, 8.4 per cent of the respondents; home education, 5.3 per cent. It seems to me that all of the major areas of education in this province had significant response through this survey to the Minister of Education as she was building this piece of legislation.

If we turn to page 14, again, income by type. When we take a look, we can see that of the 23,239 respondents from the public school system, 10 per cent had an income under \$60,000 whereas 26 per cent had an income of over \$150,000. We can work our way down through the separate, francophone, charter, private, alternative, and home education programs, and we can see a wide demographic of those that had the low of \$60,000 and those that have above \$150,000, so economic income and capacity were well represented in this survey.

If we take a look at page 18 of the survey results, we see satisfaction by type of school or program, and we can see that within the public school system overall satisfaction with the amount of choice available within the public school: 60.9 per cent was the result. When we look at the separate, they actually scored the highest in the province, with an overall satisfaction with the amount

of choice available of 70.1 per cent. When we took a look at charter schools, they came very close with 67.5 per cent. Alternative programs within the public school system: we're looking at 69.8 per cent.

Why do I read these statistics, Madam Speaker? A referral motion is to refer to a committee to have further discussion about, perhaps, stakeholders or consultation that hasn't occurred. But I think we can show you that the Minister of Education has done the appropriate amount of consultation. She has reached out to the stakeholders across this province. She has reached out to the most important of the stakeholders, the parents. We have copious amounts of data with regard to the response of the parents.

Madam Speaker, I think it's clear from the evidence that a referral motion to send this to committee would not be an effective use of this Legislature's time or the members of this Legislature, so I will be voting against this referral motion.

The Deputy Speaker: Standing Order 29(2)(a) is available. I see the hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenora.

Ms Hoffman: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker, for the opportunity to engage in questions and comments. I'm going to start by saying – the member talked about 57,000 usable responses. There were, in fact, 74,000 people who actually filled out the survey. Many parents who've already reached out to me fear that their responses were eliminated because it said that duplicate responses were eliminated. A number of parents filled out the survey together because they wanted to do it in a co-ordinated, thoughtful way, and they had things that they wanted to amplify as a message that would be heard, so the fact that nearly 20,000 responses were taken out I think is very troubling. Having been trained as a math teacher, I imagine that anyone who studied math would also be questioning the confidence of removing such a substantial number of responses from a sample. That is one of the things that I wanted to point out, that there were actually 74,000 responses.

I also want to point out the fact that the member said, you know, that everyone had an opportunity to be consulted, that the member consulted with all Albertans. I don't think so. I know many Albertans that feel that their voices haven't been heard through this process and who are frustrated with where things are at today.

I want to highlight some of the other results from the survey because I really appreciate the analysis of, you know, who filled it out and socioeconomics and so forth, but I also want to talk about the content of what they said. In terms of people who identified as being satisfied with the type of school or program, the breakdown is as follows. It was broken down by public: overall satisfaction with information available, 64 per cent; overall satisfaction with the amount of choice available, 61 per cent. Majority. Separate: 66 per cent and satisfaction with choice, 70 per cent. And it goes on. In fact, the 60.9 per cent, which I rounded to 61 per cent, is actually the lowest level of satisfaction, and that is already an overwhelming majority, Madam Speaker.

Given that already a significant number of responses were eliminated, still the vast majority spoke to their satisfaction with the model. The fact that the hon. member spoke to his pride in the Alberta education system when he was representing Alberta at an international conference, I think, speaks to the fact that we have an excellent education system and that we shouldn't be coming into this place and ramming through changes that have the potential of doing great harm, and that indeed, Madam Speaker, is why I have moved this referral to a very capable committee that engages with families and communities, and what is more important to families and communities than the education that their children receive in

those communities? I think not much. Never before has there been a more perfect alignment, in my opinion, of a committee to refer this to.

I also want to touch on home education: overall satisfaction, 57 per cent; overall satisfaction with the amount of choice available, again, 65.4 per cent. There's a lot of satisfaction with the choice. I appreciate that the title is around choice, and I think that if the government wanted to reflect on the feedback that they actually heard through this survey – and, again, almost 20,000 responses were eliminated. I think that it would behoove them to have a bill that aligned with the survey data that they release on the same day if they actually wanted the survey to validate what they were doing in the bill. In my opinion it doesn't. This bill doesn't align with what was heard through this feedback, through this survey. It doesn't align with what Albertans have been telling us over and over and over again about their pride in the education system, including the Member for Drayton Valley-Devon, who spoke about his pride in the current education system.

Again, I have to say that I find this incredibly troubling, and I think that's why it's so important that this go to committee for a full and proper engagement with Albertans before we scramble an egg that can never be unscrambled. I think that we should be really proud of the systems that we have in place and how they support children and families and parents in exercising their right to choose. Parents are telling us overwhelmingly that they feel supported in their choices, so why would we erode that? Why would we change it? Why would we move it backwards? That is certainly what we're hearing through a lot of media reports in response to this legislation, Madam Speaker.

Let's have a chance to actually go out and engage Albertans, the people that the member speaks so confidently in wanting to engage. Let's do it openly and transparently. Let's tear up that award for being the most secretive government in Canada, and let's do something in a new and transparent way. Let's uncover those 20,000 responses that were already eliminated from this survey feedback, and let's talk about what Albertans have truly been communicating to their government and to all members of this Assembly. I think we owe it to one another.

The Deputy Speaker: Any other members wishing to speak to the referral amendment? I see the hon. Member for Edmonton-Manning.

10:50

Ms Sweet: Thank you, Madam Speaker. It's a pleasure to rise and speak to the referral to committee. I'm going to take a bit of a different approach from what my colleagues have been speaking about in regard to other pieces of consultation outside of just parents. I recognize that, you know, as the hon. Member for Red Deer-South was mentioning, this is about choice of education, and it's child focused and it's parent focused. I appreciate that. I get that. I'm not quite sure where we've deviated away from parents having a right to choose where their children go to school. I'm not sure what the barrier is. My understanding is that parents have the right to access whatever form of education they so choose that makes sense for their children. We clearly see that in all of the lists of different options that have been provided and are available across the province to parents that have answered the survey. So maybe there's something that's missing that would be great to hear at the committee about, what it is that isn't providing the satisfaction that the government feels is the issue for parents.

But I want to speak a little bit about why I think it's important that this bill goes to referral. Part of it is that I do see in this bill very clearly in the back that there were co-ordinated amendments that

were made, specifically in regard to red tape reduction and some of the changes that are going to be made here. What I do not see in this bill is any other co-ordinated work with any other pieces of legislation that currently exist. Obviously, this is amending the Education Act, sections of it. But Children's Services and the Child, Youth and Family Enhancement Act is an act that is significantly impacted when we start working on other pieces of legislation.

I'm curious. You know, through all of the consultation and all of the information that's been provided, I haven't seen or heard from, let's say, parents who have had children in care and whether or not their experience about having their voices heard was beneficial. We haven't heard from advocates in regard to whether or not this piece of legislation will make an impact or create issues for children who are currently in care and whether or not they will be having to move from school to school depending on placements or depending on if one parent has the authority versus another parent that has the authority. We haven't been able to hear from schools and how that will impact children in care and, you know, them maybe being impacted by this piece of legislation, how that will impact schools. I appreciate that there was a focus on parents with this piece of legislation. I appreciate that this was a focus on making sure that there were choices available that the government feels parents haven't had access to.

What I'm worried about is that – here's an example. Let's say that a child is brought into care, and they were attending a charter school, and the charter school happens to be in a smaller community that may not necessarily have a caregiver that can provide care to that child in that community. There are no foster parents, there's no group home, and there's no kinship care provider. There's nobody in the community. This child is going to a charter school by parent choice at that time and was brought into care for whatever reason. Now that child can't go to that charter school, let's say, because there's nobody to care for them in that community. So the child is placed, let's say, in a smaller community or in the city of Edmonton or a neighbouring community, but the charter school isn't available in that community, the programming isn't available necessarily in that community.

Who gets to make the choice of where that child goes to school? Well, typically parents. Typically, if it's under a temporary guardianship order with Children's Services, the worker will work with the parents and try to make sure that there's consistency around those choices. I've done that. We try to keep kids in the same school because the last thing you want to do is start moving kids from school to school when they're in the middle of, you know, a session or a school session or whatever. But let's say that they don't have access to that school. There are two things that could happen. The first could be that the government could find a way to pay to transport that child to that school, back and forth every day – it happens, I mean, for various reasons, whether there are special needs or different issues with that – or the child gets moved out of the charter school.

So then the question becomes: would this piece of legislation trump the authority of the government to make the choice of whether or not that child moves to a different school? At some point it would be interesting to hear from the Minister of Children's Services or the Minister of Education about whether or not this is an unintended consequence of this legislation. [interjection] The minister is saying, "No, it's not," so I would love to hear her stand up and explain that to me. Ultimately, it gets very complicated around authority when it comes to children in care, and I've experienced it.

I think there are also other pieces when you talk about ultimate priorities and looking at choices around programming access. You may see that there are varying opinions about what a parent's choice

is in different relationships. These are things that I think would be nice to talk about at a committee, to get more clarity, to really make sure that these pieces are being addressed. Ultimately, typically within Children's Services, obviously, you want to work with the parents, and you want to try to make sure you're supporting those choices, especially under temporary guardianship orders. Things change when there are permanent guardianship orders. There are different dynamics there.

There also become issues when you start talking about kinship care and supervision orders, but I'm not going to get into that. Now I'm nerding out, so I'll stop. Those are things that I just think would be important to talk about and to refer to committee.

The other piece that I'd like to refer to committee. Although I appreciate, you know, the survey that happened, I do believe and I have heard from individuals that are part of organizations that submitted feedback around some of the concerns they had about these pieces of legislation that they feel were excluded from the survey. If the survey is the only tool that was used, I think that asking those organizations to present to the committee and explain why they feel like they were excluded would be a benefit.

Now, there have also been some comments around – you know, I struggle with this. I've heard from the government members, when we're talking about this, a lot around the NDP and when we were in government and this idea that this is about religious schools and that this is becoming "we support religious families and the NDP doesn't." So I will stand in this House again, and I will explain that that is not the case.

My cousins were home-schooled. Part of the reason for that was because they lived in southern Alberta. They worked on the farm. They needed to be able to help out, so they were part of a home-schooling program. They came to Edmonton for conventions and for conferences of faith when they were available, and they did home-schooling up until about grade 10, grade 11, when it became clear that some of the things that they wanted to do when they graduated they needed to have a different curriculum for. They needed to actually go into town and access some of those classes because if they didn't, they wouldn't have the criteria to be able to go to postsecondary.

That was identified earlier in their schooling, so they didn't face the same concerns that the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar mentioned, that there are some cases where when people home-school, they may not have the criteria to go to postsecondary. That is true, and I think that's an important conversation to hear from universities. I mean, maybe that would be something we could talk about at the committee. You know, what are the barriers? If this is something that becomes an issue, can we look at making sure that parents are aware of the requirements in the future around supporting their children to go to postsecondary?

Going back to my family and the fact that, you know, they did go to home-school, I don't understand what the government feels is missing with this. Obviously, my family was able to access – my cousins went to home-school. They were able to access the faith community through schooling. They received all of their classes through the Alberta education system. Eventually they got the Internet. They got to do it online. That was good. I mean, at some point rural Alberta gets the Internet. That was good. So they were able to do those things.

11:00

I still need an understanding from the government as to what they feel is actually missing that this bill is addressing, because I don't understand what's missing. I don't understand how there is a direction here around parents not having access to choice. My cousins were able to access home-schooling. They were able to still

help out with seeding and doing all of the things that they needed to do and do their education. In fact, all of my cousins went to CBC, the Columbia Bible College, in Abbotsford. Had I gone there, maybe my life would be different, too, but I didn't. So there are pieces of this that I don't understand. They're educated. They're all working professionals. They're very smart people that were able to access what my family believed were both their religious needs for education as well as the academic needs.

Again, the government can stand here and say that this is about an attack on religion and that we don't support religious communities, that we don't support religious schools, that we don't understand it. Well, I think that generalizing our party in saying that – it is not the case. I don't know how many times I have to stand in this House and have this conversation about my family background, but at some point it would be really great to talk about facts and what is happening in these pieces of legislation instead of trying to keep bringing religion into the debate and making it about the government versus the opposition and who believes in faith and who doesn't, because it does happen, and it's not respectful. To be continuously making it sound like there are people within our party who are not religious and do not believe in faith is disingenuous.

So I will put that out there. As we continue to have this debate, it would be beneficial to talk about what is missing that this bill is actually addressing when it comes to parents' choice while respecting the fact that there are many people of faith in this Legislature that may not necessarily be part of the conservative values. We can all have this conversation respectfully without it turning into something where it removes the values of different individuals in this House.

Again, I will go back to that. I will again speak to the fact that I think that this referral is important. I think I highlighted the fact that it's important because of the fact that I haven't had the answers addressed around the potential impacts for children that may potentially be in care and also the fact that I still haven't really heard from the government as to what it is that they feel is missing around parent choice and where they are hearing this from when I see a survey that directly indicates that the majority of Albertans feel like their needs are being met. There's something missing in this conversation.

If it's about making sure that there's more money provided to charter schools, then let's just be honest and say that that's what this bill is about. Or if it's providing more money to other resources, that's fine. Be honest about it. If that's what this is about, if this is giving a mechanism to the government to do these things, then that's fine. Just be honest about it. I may not necessarily agree that it's a good idea, but at least there's honesty and transparency, and this isn't being used as a tool to just create divisiveness, because that's what it appears to be in the context. You know, some of the language in here could easily have just been changed in regulation. Some of the things in here, I think, already exist, but it's just a matter of, you know, a one-word change here, a one-word change there.

Oh, and the other thing, too, that I just want a point of clarity on, because I think the minister might actually respond: there's a piece in here that says, "A person's residence is the place where that person ordinarily lives and sleeps and to which, when absent from the residence, that person intends to return." That is the part that I'm concerned about when it comes to children in care. Is that ultimately meaning, then, that their place of residence is where they intend to return? If that's the case, then what we're saying is that the government ultimately needs to make sure that every child gets to go to the school wherever they reside. If that's the case and they get moved out of their community, you're going to be transporting

kids. If that's what the government wants to do, absolutely. Okay. Like, I don't actually necessarily disagree with that. I think that kids should try to stay in their home communities and their home schools as much as possible when they are in care. Consistency is very important. But if you're looking at clause (b) . . .

The Deputy Speaker: Standing Order 29(2)(a) is available. I see the hon. Minister of Transportation.

Mr. McIver: Well, thank you, Madam Speaker. I appreciate the opportunity to respond to the previous speaker. The previous speaker said lots of things that were interesting, went into some detail about her own background, which I thought was interesting. But then what I found kind of odd is that the hon. member seemed to suggest that our party has been making this about religion while I think the hon. member, while she was on her feet, could have taken the opportunity to disavow herself from Gil McGowan's remarks.

Now, Gil McGowan is part of the management of the NDP Party. If you look at their constitution, the Alberta Federation of Labour has a couple of seats that they control for their party. He took to the airwaves on social media and called parents who put their kids in religious schools nutbars, so essentially called all religious parents nutbars. The hon. member says that she's not against religion, but I haven't heard her or anybody else in her party disavow Gil McGowan, somebody that helps manage their party, call him out for his bigotry, his offensive comments against parents of any religion that want to raise their kids in a school where they can pass on that faith to their children. He called them nutbars.

Nobody over there is looking; they're all looking at their shoes. I'll tell you what the problem is, Madam Speaker. It's that they're not prepared to call out that bigotry, so they shouldn't be surprised that families that put their kids in schools to pass on their faith to those children are offended. Those parents should be offended because they were offended by Gil McGowan, an NDP operative. Yet the NDP won't call him out. The NDP won't call out the bigotry, the terrible, offensive remarks that he made, so they shouldn't be the least bit surprised. When they stand up and complain, like the hon. member just did, that's pretty disingenuous. It's shameful. It's sad. It's inconsistent. It's, frankly, letting it go on as if they believe the same thing that the guy that helps manage their party said.

So I'm sorry; I just don't buy what the hon. member just said. Even if she is sincere somehow – I don't know whether she is afraid to call out Mr. McGowan. I don't know whether she agrees with Mr. McGowan. You would wonder whether she does or not by her remarks. She sure didn't distance herself from them. Nobody else in her party has distanced themselves. Nobody has said: these remarks were unfortunate and wrong, and we totally reject them, and we apologize to any parent that has their child in a school where their faith gets passed on to that child. No, the hon. member did not do that. The hon. member had 10 minutes or so, whatever she spoke for, to do that, and the hon. member chose not to disavow and distance herself from and reject and call out the bigotry that a person that helps manage their party publicly went with this week.

Until that happens, I think every parent should actually believe that the NDP doesn't believe in their right to raise their kids and teach their kids and pass on the faith that they have in the school system in Alberta, because that's what one of the managing people of the NDP Party publicly went out with in a very aggressive way, called those parents nutbars. I guess you've got – I don't know – probably Christian nutbars, Sikh nutbars, Jewish nutbars. He called them – I'm sure there are a lot of them – Hindu nutbars, Muslim nutbars, whatever faith school. That's what that managing person

from the NDP has called all the parents, nutbars, because they want to raise their children in the faith that they have.

Now, in fairness, part of religious freedom is the freedom not to have religion. That's just a fact. Actually, when you defend religious freedom, you defend the freedom not to have religion. But the person that has a management role in the NDP Party called parents that want to pass on their faith to their children nutbars. There are about 10 or 12 people – there are I don't know how many in their party. There are 36 or something in their party. The fact is that none of them have stood up and said: we reject that; we call out this guy; this is not our party's position. So what's the public to think except that it is their position?

The Deputy Speaker: Are there any other members wishing to speak to the referral amendment? The hon. Member for Edmonton-Decore.

11:10

Mr. Nielsen: Well, thank you, Madam Speaker. I appreciate the opportunity to rise and add some thoughts about REF1, which is the referral amendment of Bill 15 to the Standing Committee on Families and Communities. I just want to speak to a couple of reasons why we should support this going to committee here. I do want to, well, to some degree, thank the Member for Drayton Valley-Devon for pointing out some of the great statistics that came out of their consultation around this. He kind of only quickly glossed over one little area which I wouldn't mind highlighting here.

When it comes to the overall satisfaction with the amount of choice available – and the numbers that I'm going to point out, Madam Speaker, when speaking about the referral motion, will make a little bit more sense here in just a moment – in northern Alberta, we had an overall satisfaction with the amount of choice available at 60.1 per cent. We've seen that in the Edmonton area it was 62.3 per cent, in the Calgary area it was 62.5 per cent, and in southern Alberta it was 62.1 per cent.

Now, the reason I point out those statistics, Madam Speaker, and why we need to refer this bill – and I'm pretty certain I mentioned it earlier when I was speaking to the bill, before the amendment – is that the government members and the government caucus side members have lectured us at great length here in the opposition about the unprecedented mandate that they received in the last provincial election, which was 57 per cent, and that the members of the opposition should be heeding that number as, you know, what the will of the people is.

So when I look at these numbers from that engagement that the government has done on Bill 15 and why we need to refer it to committee, it seems like there is an overwhelming direction being given to the government. As I look at the language – and I'll be coming back to that as well in one of the other reasons why we want to refer it to committee – if that is indeed the case, where we have that kind of satisfaction going forward, are those numbers incorrect, or are you ignoring them? By sending it to committee to find out if that is indeed the case, well, then I guess we'll find out.

I have to commend the Member for Edmonton-Manning for bringing forward a bit of a perspective that, to be honest, Madam Speaker, I hadn't actually thought of around kids in care, their education, how that is handled. By referring it to committee, we would get the opportunity to speak to stakeholders that work in that area to be able to get their feedback and guide us as to whether Bill 15 is appropriate to be able to fulfill those needs. We've all heard in this Legislature – the Education minister has very, very clearly said it – that every child matters. By referring this to committee, we

get to find out how to best serve those children that the Member for Edmonton-Manning was mentioning.

Now, the other thing that I wanted to look at very quickly – and again I'm going to thank the Member for Drayton Valley-Devon for bringing this up. He was speaking, and unfortunately I don't have the Blues in front of me, so I am unable to quote him exactly. I'm hoping I'm paraphrasing correctly here, Madam Speaker, that the minister will be working with school boards around any charter school applications. So if we get the opportunity to refer Bill 15 to committee, we can then start to bring those school boards in to ask around that question.

I would just quickly quote. Being an Edmonton MLA, I get the opportunity to work on a regular basis with the board chair, Trustee Estabrooks. You know, she is able to provide to me a lot of great insights, so I'm very, very grateful for that. When I hear her say that there should be consultation, there should be conversation with local school boards, why is that significant, Madam Speaker, in why we need to refer?

Again, the Member for Drayton Valley-Devon said that the minister would be working with those school boards. But when I look at page 2 of the bill, right near the bottom, section 7:

Section 24(2) is repealed and the following is substituted:

(2) On receipt of an application under subsection (1), the Minister shall...

Just for the benefit of the Member for Edmonton-South West and our conversation around those three words of "will," "shall," and "may," I must say that I'm very pleased that that word is in there because there's actually direction in there. If you'd had "may," then that may or may not happen. "Shall" means that it's going to happen.

... in accordance with the regulations, provide notice of the application for a new charter school and the proposed programming to

- (a) every board of a public or separate school division and Francophone regional authority operating within the geographic area in which the charter school is to be established, and
- (b) the operators of any other charter schools as determined...

We're going to come back to that, Madam Speaker, and why that could be important in why we want to bring this to committee through the referral.

... by the Minister.

The language in here says that the minister shall provide notice. There's no reason to consult any further; it's just simply notice. This is what's going to happen. Based on the comments from the Member for Drayton Valley-Devon, that's in conflict because he was mentioning that they would work with the minister. By referring to committee, we can find out if that is indeed the case or not the case and if we need to make changes to this language to make sure that that actually does happen, that it's not just notice, that it's actually consultation, which Chair Estabrooks says needs to happen within this framework.

Again I have to ask: are we purposely ignoring the statistics that we're seeing around the choice in education and the level of satisfaction, or, you know, are we dismissing it? What are we doing here? Because I'm seeing one thing; I'm hearing another. The actions, the language in the bill are in conflict. I think that by referring to committee with this referral motion, we'll get the opportunity to hear from all the various stakeholders, schools, boards, and how that will actually sort of roll out.

You know, we've always talked about the unintended consequences. I heard that over and over and over again in the 29th Legislature. So here we are as the Official Opposition saying that we think that there are some unintended consequences potentially

going to take place here. It would be in our best interest to move this to committee, make sure that that's not the case. Then, if it is, we'll get the opportunity to change it, fix it; no big deal. No harm, no foul, as they say. But if we don't and that is the case – what was the line here? – the opposition are here to help. We're trying to prevent egg on the government's face here. We want this to work. Right now as written, this is not going to work because the language says – and remember how I'd mentioned earlier, Madam Speaker, that we may know what's going on right here at this moment in time with the language, but later on down the road somebody's going to look at this, and they're going to say: well, all I have to do is give notice; I don't have to do anything else. That's not how we want to bring in language.

11:20

So we have the opportunity, by referring this to committee, to be able to analyze that, call in the appropriate stakeholders, get their feedback, incorporate then, potentially, recommendations for changes that the Assembly could make if necessary, fix this, and we may have a strong piece of legislation. Right now that's not the case.

Now, I did happen to mention about that one part in (b) where I said “the operators of any other charter schools as determined by the Minister.” Again, that's kind of leaving the language very wide open, a little bit like how, you know, when we talked about other language here around: in the opinion of the minister. They could create legislation, amend legislation, delete legislation without any consultation. That is a problem. We've even heard now – there is some admission – that that wasn't what we were trying to do here.

So here I am trying to point out some potential flaws that could come back to impact this negatively, and the referral to committee will give us the opportunity to explore that, get the proper feedback, recommend any changes, possibly make those changes when it comes back here, and then we really are potentially protecting the choice that parents apparently want to have when it comes to education.

I think we're throwing up some roadblocks here. We might be putting in some pitfalls, some detours that we don't want to take. I've always said that it comes down to the language and how it affects things: what we leave out, what we're saying, what we're doing, things like that.

So I'd be curious to find out, again, whether those statistics, then, are indeed true about the satisfaction level of the choice that's available within the province of Alberta. By going to committee, we'll be able to double-check that and be confident moving forward around some of the indications that we're hearing of what we should be doing. Right now I don't see it being reflected within Bill 15. Like I said, having been in the past lectured on the amount of the mandate that the government has received, which I think was – correct me if I am wrong, Madam Speaker – 57 per cent, these are considerably higher numbers for that. So there seems to be a very, very clear direction being made from just the folks that responded here. The Member for Edmonton-Glenora also mentioned that there was a lot of segregation of some of those. By sending it to committee, we'll be able to clear that up and possibly inform the government of a potential mistake that they could be making.

So I do look forward as this bill goes forward and we get a chance to answer some of these questions – I really hope we manage to get this to committee and get that proper feedback so that we can put forward legislation and be confident that it is actually addressing the needs and, for that instance, the will, I guess, of the people of Alberta based on the statistics that I'm seeing and that, you know, my friend the Member for Drayton Valley-Devon had mentioned.

I guess the last thing I just want to point out is that, again, these survey results: it's not the world according to the Member for Edmonton-Decore. You thought I was going to use my name.

The Deputy Speaker: Standing Order 29(2)(a) is available. I see the hon. Member for Calgary-East.

Mr. Singh: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I'm opposed to this amendment for many reasons. I stand to express my support for Bill 15, Choice in Education Act, 2020, which amends the current Education Act. Firstly, I would like to commend the minister for coming up with this bill to honour commitments made to Albertans and, most importantly, to protect parental choice when it comes to their child's education.

This is a response to many concerns that were raised by the education system partners in regard to improving the provincial education system for the betterment of all Albertans. Bill 15 seeks to reaffirm our adherence to international laws and the Alberta Bill of Rights, which have been in practice for a long time now, the right of parents to choose the education for their children. The universal declaration of human rights states in article 26(3) that “parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children” while the international covenant on civil and political rights, to which Canada is a signatory, states in article 18(4):

The States Parties to the present Covenant undertake to have respect for the liberty of parents and, when applicable, legal guardians to ensure the religious and moral education of their children in conformity with their own convictions.

And section 1 of the Alberta Bill of Rights provides:

It is hereby recognized and declared that in Alberta there exist without discrimination by reason of race, national origin, colour, religion, sexual orientation, sex, gender identity or gender expression, the following human rights and fundamental freedoms, namely . . .

(g) the right of parents to make informed decisions respecting the education of their children.

Madam Speaker, it is important to understand that parents have the full right and are the primary decision-makers of their child. This amendment will ensure that the rights of parents with school-aged children are being protected and supported.

Also, the bill emphasizes that all aspects of the education system, whether they be public schools, separate schools, francophone schools, independent schools, charter schools, home education, are equal.

The creation of charter schools will be more simple, with certain requirements to meet, and the bill allows as well the establishment of vocation-based charter schools.

It is also important to acknowledge the significance of private schools in our education system, Madam Speaker, and as such Bill 15 recognizes private schools as an integral part in providing education to students within our education structure. Parents will be provided an option to allow an unsupervised, notification-only, and nonfunded home-education program. Annual notification of the intent to home-school will be required as well as submission of a home education plan that demonstrates sufficient opportunity to achieve an acceptable level of appropriate learning outcomes.

I have heard some arguments in second reading of the bill that were made by some members of the NDP about education funding or cuts thereto, reallocation of the budget to private or independent schools, and the firing of educational assistants. Madam Speaker, I am dismayed to hear that they relate to topics that do not directly talk about Bill 15. Bill 15 does not in any way impact the K to 12 funding model for the education system. The affirmation of the right of every parent to choose the education for their children does

not reduce funding. Neither does the allowance of creation of vocational, charter, or nonfunded home-schooling. We ought to protect the status and funding of independent schools in legislation given that they save the public education system \$168 million annually.

As for the matter of firing educational assistants, instead of looking into its causes and reasons, Madam Speaker, the NDP members have dwelt on a position wherein it would add more frustrations to Albertans. I just wanted to remind them that the government has ordered the temporary closure of schools.

11:30

The Deputy Speaker: Hon. members, that concludes Standing Order 29(2)(a).

I will now recognize the hon. Member for Calgary-East.

Mr. Singh: I just want to remind them . . .

Mr. Hanson: Whoa, whoa, whoa.

The Deputy Speaker: No. Sorry. We are back on the referral amendment, and I'm recognizing the hon. Member for Calgary-East.

Mr. Singh: I just want to remind them that the government has ordered the temporary closure of schools in order to protect and ensure the safety of our children from COVID-19. In-home study guidelines were provided, and they are still being implemented from then until now. Teachers are mainly tasked to continue to deliver lessons and appropriate learning needs while schools remain open with limited administrative functions while maintaining the necessary safety steps.

[Mr. Hanson in the chair]

As they blame the government for the temporary layoff of educational assistants, they have forgotten to look at the reason for this. It is imperative to act on this situation whereby efficiency would be met by making adjustments in the education system while we are observing in-home learning, which correspondingly entails modification to funding. The savings realized from this adjustment, about \$128 million, will be reallocated to support Alberta's COVID-19 response. An e-mail was recently sent by the chief superintendent of Calgary Catholic school district to parents stating that educational assistants and other support staff that were impacted by the adjustments will be coming back to work at the beginning of the new school year, Mr. Speaker.

Having said that, Mr. Speaker, I would recommend that a proper understanding of the situation should be appreciated by the NDP members rather than continuously dealing with arguments that have not been proven. Budget 2020 for Education was maintained at about \$8.3 billion until the pandemic came. This legislation will build a healthy and trusting relationship with families that have been frustrated for many years with the lack of support they have received from the previous government.

In closing, Mr. Speaker, I just want to repeat that this legislation will not only give parents the right to choose their child's education, but this act will make it easier for partners to engage in identifying gaps within the education system. I just hope that every member of this Chamber respects the rights of the parents and provides the privilege to educational partners to provide education within our curriculum. Again, I commend the minister for having made this bill into a reality for the benefit of Albertans.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Acting Speaker: Standing Order 29(2)(a) is available. The Member for Edmonton-Glenora.

Ms Hoffman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker, and to the member for his comments. I'm going to take the opportunity, as his 29(2)(a) related to the Member for Edmonton-Decore, to instead respond to the Member for Edmonton-Decore because that clearly was a continuation of the actual speech. With regard to the comments that were raised by both the Member for Calgary-East and the Member for Edmonton-Decore, I want to say that I respect parents, and clearly they both have talked about their respect for parents.

I want to further talk about that even with the very flawed elimination of nearly 20,000 responses from parents, it's clear that of those that the government deemed appropriate to be counted in the survey results, the vast majority were very satisfied with the education choice options that exist and, I think, for a good reason. I think that we've worked really hard to find lots of good ways to honour choice.

One of those ways, growing up in the rural north, where I went to a small public school with about 300 kids, kindergarten to grade 12, was through support through ADLC. The Alberta distance learning consortium headed out of Barrhead was one of those lifelines to honouring the choice that I wanted to make to study math 31. That was a choice I wanted to make. There were three of us in our high school at the time that wanted to take it, and it wasn't an option that was available there, so we chose to work with the school counsellor to get the support resources through ADLC and be able to continue our education within a public system with the support of another school district and the ADLC.

And one of the things that I find rich from this government is they talk about respecting choice, but they're eliminating choices at the exact same time. So the choice to eliminate ADLC over the next two years really is an affront to what is often rural students, but not exclusively. There are many students in other settings who choose to access their supports as well.

So another choice that parents regularly talk about is the choice to have their child, who might have a special need, learn in an inclusive environment, have the ability to be a full and active participant in their school program. And then the government at the same time eliminates over 20,000 education workers, the majority of whom work with students who have special needs.

So I really do hope that the Member for Calgary-East and all members of the government caucus think about choice and what it means in its facets because here we have a bill that is working very quickly to expand charter and home-schooling authorities. But that's not the only choice that parents want to make. Most parents tell me they want to choose a public school, and they do with their alignment of where they enrol their children, even in places where we have a vast number of choices. But they want to do so in a supported way, where their child can reach their full potential with the inclusion of government supports for things like special-needs education, which, again, I believe is a Charter right, and I think the courts have ruled on this, too, that children should have the right to an inclusive education.

So whether it's ADLC or whether it's firing educational assistants, if we really do believe in this value of supporting educational choice, I think we should live those values in this Assembly every day and not just say them in response to a piece of legislation, Mr. Speaker.

Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: Standing Order 29(2)(a) is still available if anybody else would like to join in.

If not, the Member for Calgary-Buffalo.

Member Ceci: Thank you, finally, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to address REF1, referral number one, that's before us that, you know, looks at referring this to the Standing Committee on Families and Communities in accordance with Standing Order 74.2.

And just having the opportunity to listen to the debate on both sides of this argument and the interesting perspectives that are shared, says to me that a referral to a standing committee would be even more of that, Mr. Speaker. There would be the opportunity to really dig in to the views, the evidence, research that both sides are purporting to say is important and to have somewhat of a, you know, claimed primacy of.

Mr. Speaker, along with my colleague from Edmonton-Gold Bar, I think that there are many important questions that could benefit from further investigation at committee. He posed three questions. I wrote them down. Briefly: what does it mean to be a public school? Have charters lived up to their mandates? These are my kind of interpretations of what he said. How do home-schooled youth do comparatively to youth schooled in other settings? I think that last question would be shown to us with some longitudinal research with the outcomes and achievements of youth who have been schooled in different settings. I would add to my colleague from Edmonton-Gold Bar's questions a few others.

11:40

Just before I do that, you know, the other reason a referral would be very, very curious and interesting is – I just heard from my colleague, who was a public school board trustee and then a chair of a public school board in this province. Of course, the Minister of Education was also a trustee, I think, and a chair, probably spent time as a trustee before she became chair. And a debate in a committee setting would – again, I think I'd learn plenty and maybe view things in different lights than the opportunity we're given here through bill debate to view things.

I just wanted to add a couple other questions that I would have that I think merit going to a committee, and the one brought up by my colleague and other colleagues on my side and also talked about, I think, extensively by the Member for Drayton Valley-Devon was the survey that was released – I think he said in May 2020 – and we know as the choice in education engagement survey. So the opportunity in a committee to review the results and interpretations made from that survey would be really useful because it seems that a great deal of the bill is riding on the results of that survey. You know, charitably, we're seeing it in different ways, seeing criticisms of it, and the other side is seeing the merits of it that kind of give full-steam-ahead direction to this bill, but I would say that some time should be taken to review the results of that survey.

There are some concerns, of course, with over 20,000 responses being eliminated from it, and what does that tell you when, you know, like, 30 per cent of the respondents are kicked off to the side. Examining the results of that survey is something that would be useful. If the results are unassailable, they should stand on their merits, and further discussion would give us that opportunity to either agree with that or not agree with that. I think there are 62 per cent of people that believe that there's an adequate choice already in education. So, really, why is this coming up at this time?

The other thing that I would have a question on is the whole issue, the whole policy change of unencumbering home-schooled children from anchor schools and school boards. You know, currently they are encumbered; they have to go through an anchor school. The benefit of that, of course, is that there are educators and resources in that anchor school and that school board to help the home-schooling family out with the education of their children. The policy change identified here is that it will be made easier, I suppose, for families to be unencumbered, so that they can provide

the education to their children that they believe is necessary. They have to submit, if I remember from reading the bill, a plan for how they're going to do that and the educational outcomes their children will learn as a result of the home-schooling.

That policy change is, frankly, a big one. Do we want to support it or not support it? That would be the discussion that would happen at committee. Is it ultimately better in terms of the children's achievement to do that, or is that perhaps putting the children at risk of not achieving, not having the educational resources from the anchor school and school board that they do now? That's a question that I think deserves more examination. Are there best practices that this policy change is being made on, and what are the results in those areas that have that current approach that this bill endorses? We could speak to people on both sides of that issue and find out from them if they think young people's educational futures and achievements are ultimately better if this policy change is adopted as is proposed in this bill.

And that should be evidence-based information. I think we can all agree that if there are best practices in other places and they can be reviewed, and we can, you know, look at the evidence that is brought forward, then that's what a committee is for. That's an opportunity to have that discussion, a fulsome examination of the information is a subject of committee work, and committee work is something that takes place in a different way than this sort of debate, which is often jousting related. I think that the three questions my colleague from Edmonton-Decore brought forward and the two that I've put forward speak to reasons why a referral to a committee is necessary.

Another additional reason, just looking at the information from Alberta Education: they talk about three-quarters of a million children in 2019-2020, projected, are in our K to 12 school system – three-quarters of a million children. That's the student population. About 500,000 of those are in the public education system, and just under 200,000 are in the separate school settings. That's, you know, 50,000 short of all of the children in this province in terms of education. So, again, the current system as it's deployed in this province, the settings that children are in and getting education in, almost all of them are in the public settings or separate school settings, with about 50,000 being in other settings, a variety of choices.

I did bring forward the concern that, you know, if most parents are gravitating to those systems and finding ways to make do and see their children proceed along, the policy changes that are in this bill aren't backed up in terms of the results of the survey and where people are choosing to have their children educated at this point in time. So a committee would give us the opportunity to look at all of that.

Another kind of question I would have, too, is: are there financial implications to doing the things that are built into the bill? We would have an opportunity to find out more about that. Certainly, I heard somebody say the funding model won't have changed, but, you know, I guess we have to take that on the person's word. I don't know if it would change or not.

11:50

I was told that about \$8.3 billion is what the current Education budget is, and I know that about 32 per cent – I think it's going to be an increasing proportion – of that \$8.3 billion comes from municipalities. They collect it on behalf of the provincial government. Would we find that the education system would get more expensive with changes that are purported to be in Bill 15, and if it would, would municipalities have to collect even more money for the provincial government? I know that they're not pleased with doing the 32 per cent that they do, and if they have to do higher

proportions to make up that \$8.3 billion or more budget, would that be something that would be unsustainable, ultimately, in the long run for municipalities?

The number of questions, I guess, that both Edmonton-Gold Bar and I've kind of come up with just as a result of listening to the discussion and thinking about what potentially could happen with Bill 15 I think merit it being examined on a committee basis.

I would just also indicate that, you know, I've looked at the results of the survey, and those are not ringing endorsements for change in choices in education, particularly when the results of about 20,000 people are thrown out. I wonder what they would have said and if these results would be different if they had been counted; would we see less support for choice in education and more satisfaction with the current system? That's speculation, of course, but potentially that's what would be here as facts and figures on that survey.

Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you.

Standing Order 29(2)(a) is available. I recognize the Member for Lethbridge-East.

Mr. Neudorf: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I've been listening to the debate on and on all evening, and I just thought I'd jump in at this point in time and address some of the issues that had come up from previous speakers from the opposition. When I read a piece of legislation, I not only read the new amended part, but I also try to read the existing legislation and get a bit of a framework to create a context for what's really being changed here. When I read through this proposed legislation, I find that it's really a very straightforward piece of amendments.

Unfortunately, it seems that the opposition is focused on the question of transparency. Why? It just seems that when there is a lack of some nefarious motive on behalf of the government, they instantly jump to suspicion and fabrication of what-if scenarios. What about those 20,000 missing parts in the survey? Who knows? They may have submitted a comment only and nothing else, and that's why that number wasn't included. I'm sure that there's a fairly straightforward and reasonable answer to that question. That suspicion often goes to that transparency when, in fact, it could simply be that this was a platform promise on behalf of the UCP and a platform promise to affirm the parents' right to choose their children's education.

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

When I read the existing portion of the preamble, it says:

Whereas parents have the right and the responsibility to make informed decisions respecting the education of their children.

That is amended to simply:

Whereas parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that may be provided to their children.

That's exactly what I read. We're fulfilling a platform promise to parents across Alberta that they get to choose the type of education that they want for their children.

Again, it's a very simple piece of amending legislation. It clarifies language. The second part of the existing bill says:

Whereas the Government of Alberta believes in and is committed to one publicly funded education system that provides a choice of educational opportunities,

and so on and so forth. It is changed to the new amended version, where it says:

Whereas the Government of Alberta recognizes public schools, separate schools, Francophone schools, private schools.

Very obviously just clarifying language, simply stating in clear terms that every Albertan can understand the choice that parents

have, the different options that they have to choose the education for their children.

This legislation in section 3 talking about residence. There were questions about that brought up earlier. As much as I respect some of the members of the opposition, the existing notes say "residence." That's the full description in the legislation. So for the purposes of this act, for our minister to bring forward an amendment that changes it.

4.1 For the purposes of this Act, the place of residence of a person is governed by the following:

a little bit more description than residence;

(a) a person is deemed to have only one place of residence,

fairly straightforward, clarifying language;

(b) a person's residence is the place where that person ordinarily lives and sleeps and to which, when absent from the residence, that person intends to return.

Again, very, very straightforward, very helpful. So defining what a residence is.

There is a definition and clarifying of:

(i) learning style . . .

adding some clarification and some names,

. . . that is not [just] . . . a board of a public or separate school division or Francophone regional authority operating within the geographic area in which the charter school will be located, or

(ii) vocation-based education.

Again clarifying language, simply stated so that the people of Alberta know what their choice means.

Again, it seeks to clarify and provide a provincial standard for home-schooling, that there wouldn't be regional standards of home-schooling, in one region by this board and that region by that board, but that the ministry would set guidelines and expectations across the entire province so that whether you home-school your child in the south, Lethbridge, where I live, or far up north where members of this Assembly would have their residence, they would have the same standards set out by the same ministry so that the children have the same opportunities and expectations put forward to all of them.

This simplifies the parameters of an audit committee. If you go in there and read about the audit committee, what it was before:

(2) The audit committee shall comprise at least 5 individuals and shall include at least one of each of the following individuals:

(a) a member of the business community . . .

(b) a member of the adult learning community who is not a trustee; [and]

(c) a trustee.

What if those volunteers . . .

The Deputy Speaker: Are there any other members wishing to speak to the referral amendment on Bill 15? The hon. Member for Edmonton-Meadows.

Mr. Deol: Thank you, Madam Speaker. Once again, it is my pleasure to rise to speak on Bill 15, and this time it's an amendment to Bill 15, Choice in Education Act, 2020. I'm rising to speak in favour of this amendment. In the beginning of my comments I just wanted to refer to some of the comments made by the hon. Member for Calgary-East. He referred to the UN declaration in his comments. I would really like to read this article 26 of the UN declaration, on education, which Canada is party to. Article 26 says:

1. Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory. Technical and professional education shall be made generally available

and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit.

2. Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups, and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace.
3. Parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children.

12:00

The UCP government are claiming in this bill and stressing and focusing more on number 3 of article 26, affirming that parents have primary responsibility for the education of their children, as similarly stated by my friend the Member for Calgary-East. The two components of article 26 are very important. Component 3 of this article follows number 2 stipulated in article 26.

The Member for Calgary-Hays mentioned that the majority of members of this House have already voted for choice in education before. As is stated in article 26, education is a right. That is something that we are discussing when we see the draft of this piece of the bill and some of the aspects that we are trying to argue in this House. Yet so far whoever I have listened to did not speak against choice in education. Rather, we are worrying that education itself would become a choice. I think that is very reasonable, a reasonable point, and the aspect or issue to discuss.

The members in this House have collaboratively, I would say, been stating many times, as referenced by many members, my colleagues from Calgary and Edmonton, that the people of Alberta, a majority of Albertans, from every area of the province, I would say – from the south, from the north, from the central part of Alberta to the big cities of Edmonton and Calgary – are satisfied with the choice in education, the education system providing a choice to Albertans right now. So what is this bill trying to propose or trying to make better? We don't see it.

On the contrary, why I'm speaking in favour of this amendment is that if some of the information, actually, was available, it would have made it better. If that is somewhere, I'm willing to listen, to learn. Where in the engagement sessions, if engagement sessions happened or would have been conducted on this very issue, are the results of those sessions? What made the government members act to draft and move this bill? Where did they get the results of the recommendations? Then we have surveys, where there are equal numbers. The member said 62 members of the House, and then the survey says 62 per cent of the people of the province. Why are we drafting this bill, then?

Our argument that we are making is not based on what we believe in; it's more based on what we see. It's an evidence-based argument. If you have answers to these, I'm happy to, you know, freely listen to the answers.

For the sake of the record, I just wanted to bring up a current issue, a call that I got today from my constituents. They have two young children. They sold their house. They moved to another area. They thought: this is next to the school; that will be a help. The young children can go independently to the school, and that will help the parents to keep up with their jobs and provide some flexibility to the family. Now, the school said that they don't have enough capacity, that the capacity is already full. Because the school could not cater to the demand within the community, now they're accepting these students by a lottery system. The family took a big step, sold their house, and added cost to their life moving close to the school, and now the children are not being accepted because the school doesn't have the capacity to do that.

So these are the issues. On one side we say that we have a public education system. The members of the government caucus – I appreciate that, you know – shared some of their experiences, how proud they are of the public education system, but at the same time we have been experiencing for the last whole year the big – I don't know. I'm just trying to find some nice words. Every time I just speak about cuts or the negative impact of any program, so I wanted to come up with some parliamentary and good-mannered words.

I was in this school during Read In Week, and the children, the grade 6 students, asked what an MLA is: what do you do? I told them that I represent my riding. The electors in my riding vote for their candidates, and whoever gets more votes gets elected as MLA. The MLA's job is to listen to his constituents and take those issues back to the House, where all of those members elected, from political parties of all stripes, can sit together, can discuss, can address those issues.

Then I said that the students, their class, can tell me what they're thinking of, if they wanted to share any information with me. One child, one student, innocently stood up, and she said: "You know, I want to say something. I just wanted to say to you that last year we were in a different room. Now we are in this class and must sit together, and every time I just stand up from my desk, I hit my back because now it's too congested here. Can I ask you to give us some more room?" These were the impacts. This is how it's impacting those little ones.

Every time I just, you know, step up, it's the first time for me. I'm willing to learn. There's a long way to go. It's not always for the sake of opposition to things. The worst part is that I think we are too divided along political lines. I remember going to England and learning about some of the mechanisms of the Westminster parliamentary process and procedures with a government House member from Calgary – I've forgotten the riding name. We were so excited by some of the information, some of the knowledge we were gaining there. We were thinking: how useful can we make this House so it can serve the public way better and more easily? We were excited. We were learning a lot. We will be going back. More than me, the other member also penned her experience and sent it back to the House of Commons.

12:10

I think that excitement probably has gone. It didn't stick around very long because it seems like the House is divided too deeply along party lines. What worries me is that we are losing the hope of people to sometimes even address or discuss the very genuine issues of the people, the ordinary people in our ridings and in the province, across party lines.

If somebody can convince us, I'm happy to support choice in education. How is this choice when we see hundreds of millions of dollars in cuts that the government has approved for high schools in the province? I'm thankful to them that they realize that there are areas where there is a huge demand for those schools. As I said, we're one of the densest ridings in Edmonton, and we're not part of their capital project. When they know that there are more students coming to the school, the budget does not afford it. I will not say the budget but that it was their choice of budget. Those schools needed to cater to new students coming to school. Then the government, you know, let go thousands and thousands of staff in the public school system, and when the school boards . . .

The Deputy Speaker: Standing Order 29(2)(a) is available. I see the hon. Member for Edmonton-Decore.

Mr. Nielsen: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I was very much enjoying the Member for Edmonton-Meadows' thoughts on why

we want to refer this to committee. One of the things I did notice: you were making mention about, shall we say, the will of the people through the survey the government performed. But I've also heard comments around how this was a major piece that they were hearing about during the election as well. I'm just wondering, being a new MLA, what you were hearing about choice in education during the election. How would the referral to committee maybe be able to amplify some of those comments? If you wouldn't mind sharing some of those thoughts, I'd appreciate that.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Meadows.

Mr. Deol: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I think that every time we iterate about democracy – Canada, Canada and Alberta, I would say, is such a democratic place. We feel so proud around the globe. Listening to the people is a key component.

What I feel was missing – and I was listening during the election to my constituents during door-knocking that the election was a more important issue to them than a number of other things. Not only in my riding, but the majority of Albertans are speaking about how they feel about the education system, the public education system in our province. The majority of people are satisfied, and so are my constituents.

When government somehow feels that they need to do more to provide choices in education, they are still, you know, convinced by the idea that they're going to provide a fair, level playing field, giving people choices. And as I, you know, referred to the UN article 26 and adhering to that article, as they said: education is a fundamental right; education itself is not a choice.

So this referral to the Standing Committee on Families and Communities I think will provide great assets to stakeholders, community members, families, parents, and the school boards, I will say, that have been seen missing. But I have seen so far in Bill 15 the school boards, the responsible authorities not having been provided the full opportunity to contribute to this very issue.

I have something that has been said by the Alberta Teachers' Association president. His view is that the proposed Choice in Education Act does very little to improve education for the vast majority of students. These are the views of professionals working within the education system. It seems like when we are seeing – there are a number of things I can go through: the voices coming from school boards, the voices coming from the teachers. It seems like the bill has been drafted without their input. So referring this bill to provide not only the opportunity but also, I will say, if this bill is brought in with good intent to provide choice in education, those opportunities and those voices will also strengthen this bill and provide the opportunity the members sought.

Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: Are there any other speakers wishing to speak to the referral amendment on Bill 15?

I see no one. I will call the question.

[The voice vote indicated that the motion on amendment REF1 lost]

[Several members rose calling for a division. The division bell was rung at 12:18 a.m.]

[Fifteen minutes having elapsed, the Assembly divided]

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

For the motion:

Ceci	Hoffman	Nielsen
Dach	Irwin	Sweet
Deol		

Against the motion:

Aheer	Madu	Rutherford
Dreeshen	McIver	Sawhney
Ellis	Neudorf	Schulz
Fir	Nicolaides	Sigurdson, R.J.
Glasgo	Nixon, Jason	Singh
Hanson	Orr	Smith
Horner	Rehn	Stephan
Hunter	Rosin	Walker
Lovely	Rowswell	Wilson
Luan		

Totals: For – 7 Against – 28

[Motion on amendment REF1 lost]

The Deputy Speaker: We are back on the main bill. I see the hon. Minister of Transportation.

Mr. McIver: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I would like to move that we adjourn debate.

[Motion to adjourn debate carried]

Bill 4 Fiscal Planning and Transparency (Fixed Budget Period) Amendment Act, 2020

[Adjourned debate June 1: Mr. Dang]

The Deputy Speaker: Are there any members wishing to speak to Bill 4 in second reading? The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenora.

Ms Hoffman: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker and members, for the opportunity to speak to the Fiscal Planning and Transparency (Fixed Budget Period) Amendment Act, 2020. I am pleased to respond to the bill as proposed by the Minister of Finance and President of Treasury Board. This was indeed one of the budget bills that was brought in just prior to what became the global pandemic of COVID. Certainly, much has changed in our province and in our world since then, but one thing that hasn't changed is the government's attempt to – I don't even want to say fulfill, because the MacKinnon report was very clear in its recommendation around a fixed date and now the government is coming forward with a period, not a date.

It is interesting, Madam Speaker, that here we are supposedly responding to a recommendation made by a hand-picked, quote, blue-ribbon panel, but the response isn't actually what the panel recommended. The panel set a date; the government is responding with a period. That's interesting. Okay. The period, if we're to assume that this is the right way to move forward, which I'm pretty sure – I'm very sure that members of the Wildrose, when then Premier Alison Redford brought in an election period bill, were very outraged, very concerned because, of course, she talked about an election date, not an election period. But instead they had – I think, actually, she called it an election season – a three-month window.

Certainly, that's what's happening here: Wildrose members now in the government caucus being told to vote for something that is definitely counter to principles that they brought forward not so long ago.

An Hon. Member: Maybe they'll speak up.

Ms Hoffman: Maybe they'll speak up. Maybe there will be an amendment to this by members within the government caucus. That would be an exciting opportunity and turn of events to reflect the

values that were once so dear around transparency and democracy for members of the now government caucus, who are certainly listening intently.

There are some concerns that I have, of course, around the budget period as opposed to a budget date. One, it was said that this was going to create more certainty and confidence for folks who rely on a budget to be able to function and be able to anticipate what was happening. Instead, what we have is a range of possible dates and no actual enforcement. When we pass bills in this place, we often look at: okay; a bill is a testament of your values, but there are, of course, checks and balances – trust but verify – accountability measures.

12:40

So no accountability measures, no carrot, no stick for actually following this bill. We've seen that even when there was fixed election period legislation in this province under a former Conservative government, that was broken by about a year, with an election called a whole year outside of the law. Here we have something calling for a range of 28 possible dates but no actual enforcement or accountability measure with regard to those actual dates.

Those are my initial comments. I tried a referral amendment to the committee for children and families just a few minutes ago. That one didn't fly. Let's try another committee. Madam Speaker, I have a referral motion amendment here that I'd be happy to read out once it has made its way to the table.

The Deputy Speaker: Thank you very much.

Hon. members, this will now be known as REF1.

Please proceed.

Ms Hoffman: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. May I have a time check? I didn't start my timer earlier; sorry.

The Deputy Speaker: My apologies?

Ms Hoffman: May I have a time check?

The Deputy Speaker: You have 10 minutes, 37 seconds.

Ms Hoffman: Great. Thank you so much, Madam Speaker. I'll begin by reading the text of this amendment. I move that the motion for second reading of Bill 4, Fiscal Planning and Transparency (Fixed Budget Period) Amendment Act, 2020, be amended by deleting all of the words after "that" and substituting the following:

Bill 4, Fiscal Planning and Transparency (Fixed Budget Period) Amendment Act, 2020, be not now read a second time but that the subject matter of the bill be referred to the Standing Committee on Resource Stewardship in accordance with Standing Order 74.2.

The reason why I think this belongs there is that it definitely doesn't flow from the recommendations of the, quote, blue-ribbon panel, so where does it come from? Where does this desire to have a period come from? It definitely wasn't something that I heard a lot of in the year leading up to this bill coming in. It definitely wasn't something that was in the platform, and it wasn't something that the hand-picked panel wrote about in their recommendations, a budget period, a 28-day period. [interjections] Oh. I can't wait for the Government House Leader to get on the record and respond to these questions that I'm asking.

So it is, in the current incarnation, I believe, a bad bill. I think that there is merit to the concept of having a fixed budget date. I think that there also should be consequences for a government that fails to comply with its own laws. I think that that is only fair and reasonable, that if the government chooses to break their own laws

or any laws, they should be held accountable and have some kind of consequence. I think that that would be fair and reasonable. These are some things that definitely this Committee on Resource Stewardship could engage one another on as well as with calling folks forward to testify. Perhaps the contributors to the blue-ribbon panel report would have something to say about whether or not this actually fulfills the recommendations outlined in that report. [interjections]

The Deputy Speaker: Hon. members.

Ms Hoffman: Thank you, Madam Speaker. That report definitely has a number of recommendations in it that the government is choosing to move forward on full speed ahead when it comes to cutting funds, for example, to postsecondary institutions, cutting funding for physicians, who are keeping Albertans healthy throughout the province. The government seems to use the blue-ribbon panel recommendations as justification for moving forward on pieces of their agenda that they want to blame somebody else for, but they are completely ignoring the recommendation around a date and, rather, moving to a period. So I think that that would be something that would be fair and reasonable, for this committee to have an opportunity to engage in and determine whether or not it did indeed fit with the recommendation as outlined in the blue-ribbon panel report.

Again, the Fiscal Planning and Transparency (Fixed Budget Period) Amendment Act, 2020, doesn't fit with the platform, doesn't fit with the blue-ribbon panel recommendations, and doesn't actually hold the government to account. So why are we debating this? Why is this coming forward? Great question. Perhaps the committee can get to the bottom of that, because it certainly hasn't been done in this House to this date. I even feel funny saying the word "date" in this place when the government has done everything they can in this legislation to actually avoid a date.

There are a few dates that seem very common sense. Actually, when I saw this when I was in the budget lock-up, I thought of two possible dates, and when we asked, they said: "No. It's going to be a period, 28 possible dates." Okay. Then we said, "What is the consequence if the government fails to comply?" "Well, there isn't one." Okay. "And what if the government chooses to call an election during the period?" "Oh, well, then, of course, there wouldn't be a budget until much later because there would be an election period that would supersede the budget period." All the levels of complexity and guise to pretend that they are implementing something that they said they would when they received the blue-ribbon panel recommendations yet did no such thing. Really, this budget does suggest a window or a period, about a month, 28 possible dates.

While the government is certainly moving forward on a significant number of layoffs, more than 20,000 educational workers, for example, the budget for this year I believe was actually passed in the period. But that doesn't mean that it was complied with, because this government worked immediately, within two weeks, to actually undermine the budget that they had to rush through in such a swift fashion, something that we haven't seen, really, in any jurisdiction in Canada, moving that quickly before, Madam Speaker. You know, we believed the government when they said that they were doing this because of COVID. Then immediately after they got their budget through, which had many concerns already in it, the cuts became even deeper, \$128 million in education, for example.

So, again, if there aren't any accountability measures in this to actually ensure compliance with a date or a period or even a budget, what is it that we're doing here with this piece of

legislation? For that, I find that this bill in its current form doesn't meet the nod test when it comes to considering what's important to Albertans, what's important to ensure that we have fair accountability, fair transparency. This government has already been given a national award for being the most secretive government in Canada, and now we have a piece of legislation that only furthers the potential of loopholes and opportunities for the government to continue to be secretive in even their budget date and their budget presentation.

A couple of questions I have. Of course, I've mentioned the not having any sanctions. What about incentives? That's something that sometimes gets done in legislation. If the government isn't willing to sanction themselves, maybe they'd consider an incentive. I don't see it in this bill. It is absolutely a very short bill. It was, again, tabled the same time as the main estimates, which were rushed through quite quickly in this House. However, again, the platform didn't commit to a fixed period; the platform did say that there would be a fixed date. So it seems like another promise made and then a promise broken, Madam Speaker. It's becoming a bit of a theme.

12:50

Of note also is the fact that the government didn't even issue a news release on this bill, something that usually the government is very quick to congratulate themselves on, creating legislation, bringing forward legislation. But this was something that was hidden on the eve of the pandemic and buried with, of course, the budget bills that directly related to the MacKinnon panel recommendations. This definitely did not.

There are other jurisdictions that do have a date. We wouldn't be alone if we actually implemented the UCP platform in this place around having a date, not a period. For example, British Columbia has a date. Why wouldn't we be able to do that here? The government claims that this piece of legislation – I think the government knows that this piece of legislation isn't in line with recommendation 25 of the panel. If they thought it was, I think they would have referenced that in the title or the preamble or something. Definitely, this does no such thing.

So it doesn't implement the panel recommendation. It doesn't implement the platform commitment. It is most definitely a broken promise on multiple fronts, Madam Speaker, and for that I want to give the government an opportunity to right themselves and actually keep their word, keep their promise to Albertans, and that's why I'm moving this recommendation to the very capable Committee on Resource Stewardship in accordance with Standing Order 74.2.

Thank you very much, Madam Speaker.

The Deputy Speaker: Hon. members, if you would like to continue to have conversations, I would encourage those members to exit the Assembly and do that in the respective members' lounges so that all members of this Assembly will have their opportunity to speak when they are standing.

I am looking for anyone wishing to speak under Standing Order 29(2)(a), and I do see the hon. Member for Edmonton-McClung.

Mr. Dach: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I'm pleased to rise to speak under 29(2)(a) to the speech that the hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenora has recently made. I know that one of her major interests in questioning the need for this legislation in the first place and also for bringing forward the amendment was to give the government ample opportunity to, in a committee setting, really lay out for members and the public the reasoning for them settling on a budget period rather than a fixed date, as they seem to be lined up to do given recommendation 25 of the panel.

It is a little bit unusual, in my own view, that this government would choose to force itself into a fixed date or even a period when, in fact, it had the option of calling a budget date whenever they wished. That's the traditional practice, yet for some reason they seem to think that a period of time or a fixed date was something that would be an option that they'd pursue, and they've settled on this period of time, a 28-day period, which doesn't seem to fit their pattern of wanting to control things precisely or at least to give themselves the option of keeping everybody in the dark as to what actually they might be wanting to do or what the timing of a particular move might be.

Yet, indeed, this government has settled on a window of time for a budget period, and it's a bit of an unusual move, in my view, on their part. However, I haven't heard exactly what benefit this Legislature would receive, what benefit the province has, what fiscal benefit there is to the province, why it is something that government would like to adopt now and why, in the future, it's something that's going to benefit future governments and the province and this province's fiscal situation. Why would future Finance ministers – because something as important as the budget period or a date for a budget or the government's ability to choose when to bring forth a budget: that's a pretty serious piece of government policy and tools. They should actually be able to come forward and explain to Albertans why they've come up with this solution to what they see as some kind of a problem, but they haven't really actually attempted to explain to Albertans what they're trying to solve by implementing a budget period.

The amendment that's before us is something that begs the government to answer those questions in another forum, where other proponents or opponents might be able to come forward and make representations to perhaps affect the government's decision whether to go forward with this proposal or not. The referral will give them an opportunity in committee to perhaps at least explain, if not maybe have some sober second thought, about whether they really want to go forward with a 28-day period or perhaps leave things as they are or perhaps have a fixed date, as the panel recommended they do.

I think most Albertans expect that when a government makes a decision to come forward with a change in policy that's as important as this, there will be an explanation that's reasonable, that most Albertans would be able to understand and say: okay; well, the government wants to accomplish X, Y, or Z out of this change, and they argue it's going to be a benefit for future Finance ministers, and it'll help the process of budgeting down the road. But we've heard none of that at all, Madam Speaker, from this government, nothing about why they're proceeding with this, and it doesn't really make a whole lot of sense. It doesn't have any real point.

I'm not exactly certain whether they'll be more forthcoming in a committee format, but at least they will be faced with proponents who would register to come forward and bring their concerns forward. Committee members from this Legislature would also be able to ask questions of those proponents and perhaps get some answers.

The Deputy Speaker: Are there any other members wishing to speak to referral amendment 1? The hon. Minister of Transportation.

Mr. McIver: Well, thank you, Madam Speaker. I appreciate this opportunity. Just let me say that it's only the NDP that would talk about how a bill is secret when it's on *Hansard*, it's on the official record, and it's on television. When it comes to secrets, the folks across there, I guess, just have a hard time telling what's a secret

and what's not. If you say it on television and it's in *Hansard*, it's probably not a secret. That's just a pro tip for them across the aisle.

Now, I'll tell you what a secret is. A secret is what you have to keep when one of the people that run your party, Gil McGowan, insults every parent in Alberta that sends their kid to a school to raise them in the faith that they have and they get called names. The real secret they're keeping is: are they afraid of Mr. McGowan? Are they somehow beholden to this person, the puppet master, that insults every parent in Alberta? That's what's a secret, when someone won't answer that question and won't stand up for Alberta parents that have been called names by a guy that runs their party, Gil McGowan. Not a one will say a bad word about him when he's insulted every single parent in Alberta that raises their child in the faith of their choice and sends them to that school. That's a secret. I only say this, Madam Speaker, so that the folks on the other side know the difference between what a secret is and what it isn't.

So now that we've completed that lesson for now, I would like to move to adjourn debate.

[Motion to adjourn debate carried]

The Deputy Speaker: I will recognize the hon. Member for Calgary-East.

Member's Apology

Mr. Singh: Thank you, Madam Speaker, for giving me this opportunity to rise today to say a few words in relation to the Report of the Investigation under the Conflicts of Interest Act by the Ethics Commissioner, dated April 27, 2020. The report is regarding the request made by the Leader of Her Majesty's Loyal Opposition

requesting the commissioner to conduct an investigation relating to Bill 22, the Reform of Agencies, Boards and Commissions and Government Enterprises Act, 2019. The commissioner concluded that I have breached the Conflicts of Interest Act, in particular section 2(2), and has recommended that I apologize to the Assembly.

1:00

I have a lot of respect for the commissioner and for the Assembly, its rules, leaders, and members. During second reading and in the Committee of the Whole's consideration of Bill 22 I was not able to stand and advise the Assembly of my recusal in accordance with the Conflicts of Interest Act. I regret my omission, and with kind indulgence from all the members I hereby take this moment to apologize to the Legislative Assembly for breaching the act. The occurrence of the same will not happen again in the future.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Transportation.

Mr. McIver: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I would at this point, pursuant to Standing Order 3(1.2), wish to advise the Assembly that there will be no morning sitting tomorrow, Wednesday, June 3, 2020.

Madam Speaker, with your permission, I think we've had a full evening. There's been some good debate on all sides, and at this point I move that the Assembly adjourn until 1:30 p.m. on Wednesday, June 3.

[Motion carried; the Assembly adjourned at 1:01 a.m. on Wednesday]

Table of Contents

Government Bills and Orders

Second Reading

Bill 18 Corrections (Alberta Parole Board) Amendment Act, 2020..... 1011

Bill 15 Choice in Education Act, 2020..... 1011

Division 1040

Bill 4 Fiscal Planning and Transparency (Fixed Budget Period) Amendment Act, 2020..... 1040

Member’s Apology..... 1043

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