

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

Title: **Tuesday, April 25, 2006**

1:30 p.m.

Date: 06/04/25

[The Speaker in the chair]

head: **Prayers**

The Speaker: Good afternoon and welcome.

On the Holocaust remembrance monument located on the grounds of the Alberta Legislature are found the following words: "I swore never to be silent whenever and wherever human beings endure suffering and humiliation. We must always take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the tormented." These are words written by Elie Wiesel, a survivor, a poet, and a Nobel prize recipient. On this day may God provide all innocent victims of racism and genocide eternal peace. Amen.

Please be seated.

head: **Introduction of Visitors**

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of International and Intergovernmental Relations.

Mr. Mar: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is a great honour and a privilege for me to introduce to you and through you to members of this Assembly guests from and representatives of the government of the Philippines. They are in the Speaker's gallery. On an unofficial visit to the province of Alberta is Senator Edgardo Angara. Senator Angara is the longest serving Senator for the Philippines. He's accompanied by escorts Mr. Lito Rocque and Mr. Augusto Tugade. Also with Senator Angara is the Honorary Consul of the Philippines, Edmontonian Esmeralda Agbulos, and her husband, Virgilio Agbulos. The Philippines is a valued trading partner for Alberta. They have recently visited your offices, I believe. The Philippines is the heritage home of more than 36,000 Albertans. I ask this Assembly to give the Senator, Honorary Consul, and their escorts our very warm traditional welcome, sir.

head: **Introduction of Guests**

The Speaker: The hon. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Marz: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Royal Canadian Legion's Alberta-Northwest Territories Command takes a keen interest in promoting the values of good citizenship among young people throughout the province. The Legion is in partnership with the Legislative Assembly office in a program that reflects that good work. It's Mr. Speaker's MLA for a Day. We're very appreciative of both their financial support for and their involvement in this annual event, which began last evening and will conclude later this afternoon.

In your gallery, Mr. Speaker, are Mr. Don Orr, the Legion's command first vice-president, who is accompanied by his wife, Beryl Orr, and Darrel Jones, the Legion's chairman of the Mr. Speaker's MLA for a Day program, with his wife, Darlene. Mr. Orr and his Legion team have been instrumental in ensuring that participants have been well looked after so far. I'd like to invite our guests now to rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Deputy Chair of Committees.

Mr. Shariff: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to introduce to you and through you to all members 71 students from across the

province who are here today as participants in your MLA for a Day program. The participants have spent time with the Royal Canadian Legion, debated a resolution, visited in their members' offices, had lunch with you, and following question period they will receive a tour and briefing on the constituent elements of this House. The ultimate aim of the day's activities is to further develop an interest and an understanding of our parliamentary system. Our shadow colleagues are seated in both galleries today. They are accompanied by their Legion chaperones, Marilyn Brooks, Muriel and Walter Heselwood, and Gordon McDonald. I would now ask all of them to rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Stony Plain.

Mr. Lindsay: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to introduce to you and through you to the members of this Assembly two ladies who I had the privilege of meeting today at the Holocaust memorial ceremonies. They are Mrs. Gillian Horwitz, vice-president of the Edmonton Jewish Federation, and Dr. Frances Cyngiser, co-chair of the Edmonton Holocaust Remembrance Committee. They are seated in the members' gallery, and I'd ask them to rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Lacombe-Ponoka.

Mr. Prins: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my honour today to introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly eight outstanding teachers from the Lacombe composite high school. I think they may be playing hooky today from school. I promise that I won't tell their principal. They're on a tour of the Legislature and learning about government. I'd like to introduce them. They are Corvin Uhrbach, Steve Kabachia, Don Webb, Ron Thompson, Jason Petrie, Dean Zepick, Christine Parent, and Michelle Kline. I'd ask them to rise – they're in the public gallery – and receive the warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Lethbridge-East.

Ms Pastoor: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I take great pleasure today in introducing to you and through you to this House three people who had taken part in the PDD demonstration on the steps of the Legislature. I would ask that they rise: Shantel Timmerman, Derrick Seabrook, and Anita Ferri. Paul Bellemare is with Edmonton Skills, Shantel and Derrick are with the Edmonton self advocacy federation, and Anita is with the Gateway Association for Community Living. I would ask that the House welcome them in our traditional manner.

The Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Official Opposition.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I appreciate the opportunity to introduce to you and to all members of the Assembly a group of seniors who are touring the Assembly today, who I met earlier, and we spoke briefly. They are seated in both the public and the members' galleries. They're called the Probus Club, and I understand that they meet regularly at the Mayfair Golf and Country Club, which is in my constituency as well. I ask them all to please rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-West.

Mr. Liepert: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure today to

introduce to you and through you to members of the Assembly a class from one of the many fine private schools in my constituency, Calgary Academy. These are the winners of the grade 7 and 8 debate tournament, and they're accompanied today by their teachers, Danielle Hucaluk and Charles Brodeur. I see that they're in both the members' and the public galleries. I'd ask them to stand and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview.

Mr. Martin: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased today to introduce to you and members of the Assembly three guests. They are here today to call on the government to restore funding for persons living with developmental disabilities. These guests came for the rally for persons with developmental disabilities at noon today on the steps of the Legislature. I would ask that they rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly as I call out their names: Lindsay Caldwell, Alberta Association for Community Living; Wendy McDonald, Family Voices; Michelle Arkie, Abilities in Action.

1:40

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Cardston-Taber-Warner.

Mr. Hinman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure to introduce to you and through you this day a few people that I have visiting. To start with, I have 26 grade 12 students from Magrath high school. Their motto is Zenith, which is reaching for the top. I'm pleased to have them here. They have two great teachers that go to great lengths to bring the students for the third time now, Darryl Christensen and Roger Baldry. I'd ask that they all rise and receive the warm welcome of this Assembly.

It's also a pleasure, Mr. Speaker, to introduce to you a friend and a colleague from the Alberta Alliance Party. Kathy Rayner is the chief administrator of the Alberta Alliance Party, where she works to promote prudence and accountability in government. Kathy's dedication and service to the people of Alberta is not always fully recognized, but today I'd ask her to please rise in this Assembly and receive the warm welcome from the members here.

head: **Oral Question Period**

The Speaker: First Official Opposition main question. The hon. Leader of the Official Opposition.

Postemployment Opportunities for the Premier

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. From Peter Elzinga's consulting to Rod Love's lobbying to Murray Smith's board positions this government has turned conflict of interest into business as usual. Now the Premier has openly admitted to being courted by organizations unknown to fulfill positions unknown for purposes unknown. Unfortunately for democracy in Alberta, our Conflicts of Interest Act doesn't go far enough to ensure that public interest come before private enrichment. My questions are to the Premier. Given that the federal conflict of interest and postemployment code states that "A public office holder shall disclose in writing to the Ethics [Commissioner] all firm offers of outside employment that could place the public office holder in a position of conflict of interest," will the Premier commit to following these same open and accountable rules?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, I would reiterate and repeat: I am not considering any offers at this time. Maybe later. Secondly, the

Ethics Commissioner will provide me with a letter tomorrow, I hope – at least, I've been promised – outlining the legislative requirements relative to disclosure. Thirdly, I have received some job offers. Many of them I would like to table at the appropriate time. I don't have the documents here. But numerous letters – oh, thousands of letters – some of them asking me if I would assume running in Saskatchewan or Manitoba or Ontario. Those are job offers. I received another job offer that this hon. member would be interested in in that he's attracted to the media. One was to informally take over the CBC.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. He completely sidestepped the issue, of course.

Again to the Premier: will the Premier at least excuse himself from any cabinet discussions which may relate to or affect any of the organizations that have made offers to him?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, I will be very diligent and follow the letter of the law as explained to me by the Ethics Commissioner in his letter. I'll be glad to table that letter once I receive it. I will abide by all of the conditions relative to the ethics rules.

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again to the Premier: in the interest of democracy and accountability, given that the Premier stated yesterday that he doesn't care if the cooling-off period in Alberta is extended to 10 years, will the Premier follow the recommendations of the Alberta Liberals and at least increase it to one year?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, I will follow to the letter of the law, the law that was passed by this Legislative Assembly, including members of the opposition.

The Speaker: Second Official Opposition main question. The hon. Leader of the Official Opposition.

Workplace Health and Safety

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On April 28 workers and families across the world observed the Day of Mourning, a day to remember loved ones and co-workers killed on the job. Last year 143 workers were killed on the job in Alberta, almost three every week, the highest number since 1982, yet this government has a weak record in enforcing safe practices in the workplace through prosecutions and fines. To the Minister of Human Resources and Employment. While Ontario pursued 2,392 workplace safety prosecutions in the past five years, Alberta has pursued only 41. Why isn't this government getting tough on workplace safety violations?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Cardinal: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. That is a very good question and a very important question because any time there is an injury or a fatality, it's very, very unfortunate. We wish as the government in Alberta that none of that would happen, even with our hot economy. Alberta takes workplace health and safety very seriously. Inspections and orders have increased tenfold since 1997. Now listen to this: spending has increased \$7.2 million in 2001 to \$18.9 million in 2006-2007. Work Safe Alberta was introduced in 2002 specifically to reduce injuries. There are 152 workplace health

and safety staff, including 87 occupational health and safety officers, 80 workplace policy standard staff, and 12 partners in health and safety. Alberta has the second-lowest rate to Ontario of work-related injuries in Canada. I think Alberta is doing very, very well. In fact, Alberta also has the hottest economy in North America.

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given all those resources that he listed, why in five years have there only been 41 workplace prosecutions in Alberta? What are they doing?

Mr. Cardinal: Mr. Speaker, like I said before, we've increased our budget from \$7.2 million to \$18.9 million. Our priority is to make sure that the workplace, in fact, is safe, not necessarily to prosecute everybody that may have an accident.

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the same minister: will this government follow the lead of top major Alberta corporations and go for a target of zero workplace incidents, zero injuries, and certainly zero deaths?

Mr. Cardinal: Of course, Mr. Speaker, like I said in my opening comments, that is our priority: to have no accidents, no fatalities, and have a hot economy. Those people do not like the hot economy. It is challenging, of course. We work very closely with Workers' Compensation, who in fact have refunded hundreds of millions of dollars back to employers because we operate a safe employment record.

The Speaker: Third Official Opposition main question. The hon. Member for Lethbridge-East.

1:50 Persons with Developmental Disabilities Program

Ms Pastoor: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Albertans with developmental disabilities have made important contributions to our province's culture and prosperity. These citizens need the assistance of the community to reach their full potential. The government's approach to PDD funding is questionable. An increase in funding that fails to cover inflation and the increasing number of PDD clients is in fact a funding cut, and there are people here today to attest to that. My questions would be to the Minister of Seniors and Community Supports. Given that the Edmonton PDD community board is cutting community services by 3.4 per cent and the Calgary community board is cutting individually funded services by 2 per cent, why does the minister believe that insufficient budget increases won't result in reduced services? That is what is happening.

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mrs. Fritz: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I appreciate that question from the hon. member. As we were out today with wonderful people from throughout Alberta that have developmental disabilities and their advocates and stakeholders, I had the opportunity to meet for approximately an hour through the audience and talk to people about their concerns. I know that this member heard very much the same.

The facts are, Mr. Speaker, that the funding has increased 84 per cent over the past six years, which is significant. Also, the caseload has increased 30 per cent over the past six years, which is substan-

tial. When you have that kind of growth and that change in a program, there comes a time, which is now, to review it for effectiveness and for efficiency. We need to hear, as we did today, the voices of people that are experiencing the need for the services and what those would be and what those needs are and how we can continue to fund those.

I know that this issue is serious. I am concerned about it, Mr. Speaker, and I am looking very, very closely. We were here last night until midnight. You were here, hon. member, as we addressed the governance issue. I am looking very closely at how we can address what seems to be a disconnect or a gap in services and in funding with the eight layers of what funding has to go through in order to reach the client. So we're on the same page.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Pastoor: Thank you. Given the 10 per cent increase to family support for children with disabilities, why was the budget increase for adults with disabilities so minimal?

Mrs. Fritz: Well, Mr. Speaker, I can refer that question to my hon. colleague regarding the Children's Services budget.

Mrs. Forsyth: Well, Mr. Speaker, I think that we're talking about two different issues. We're very proud of what we do under Children's Services with family supports for children with disabilities. It's very unique in Canada; in fact, it's the only one in Canada. We believe that if you have the early intervention in dealing with children with disabilities, once they reach the age of 18 and go under PDD, it's a nice link.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Pastoor: Thank you. I know that this happened this afternoon on the Leg. steps, but will the minister commit to engaging with families and the front-line stakeholders in making future decisions about the funding and the structuring of PDD?

Mrs. Fritz: Oh, Mr. Speaker, that's so necessary. We do that now. In fact, we have the president from AACL here, who met with me in my office along with the members from Family Voices. When we hired the new CEO in Calgary, for example, we ensured that Family Voices was at the table in that hiring. We will continue to have members of the community. We'll have stakeholders. We'll have our regional board chairs. We'll have people work together as we move forward with this because we are making an important step here.

As I said, I do hear the concerns, but I want to really reassure people with developmental disabilities in this province that the services that are required, that are necessary, and especially those that affect their health and their safety will be in place, and that is not going to change, Mr. Speaker, just as the funding is not going to be reduced.

The Speaker: The hon. leader of the third party, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Nose Hill.

Mr. Mason: Thanks very much. Mr. Speaker, the Minister of Seniors and Community Supports spoke to the PDD community protesters today, telling them that she is their advocate. The minister has repeated in this House over and over that there are no cuts to PDD programs, yet the Edmonton regional PDD board says that it is facing a \$10 million shortfall due to inflation and increases in

caseloads and that service cuts are inevitable. To the Minister of Seniors and Community Supports: will the minister explain why she has been consistently telling this Assembly that there are no cuts to PDD programs?

Mrs. Fritz: Well, I will address that, Mr. Speaker. You're right, hon. member; I am an advocate for persons with developmental disabilities. I have reviewed this letter. I am understanding more and more about that information, that letter, why it was put together in the way that it was. A part of that is that it was next year's budget that people were looking at as they addressed this letter, and it's my job, my responsibility, as I said earlier. I will do this. The buck stops here. I will do this.

Mr. Mason: It hasn't so far.

Mrs. Fritz: Yes, it has.

If I find that there are essential services that affect the health and safety and well-being of individuals and that families are not being included in the discussions as the regional board chairs have told me that they are, that will be my responsibility to ensure that it changes, and I will.

Mr. Mason: Mr. Speaker, this minister tabled a budget that has cuts, and she knows it. When she told protesters on the steps that she would advocate on their behalf, why didn't she also tell them that her department's budget estimates for this upcoming year have already been passed in this Assembly and that they include the very cuts being protested today?

Mrs. Fritz: Well, Mr. Speaker, there aren't any reductions in the overall funding for PDD. There aren't. That is an inaccurate statement, and the member knows that. I'm beginning to learn as a minister that many times the preamble isn't quite being in a responsible way what is actual. That is not actual. There is an overall increase in the funding. More importantly, this whole area is under one ministry, which means that we have a better opportunity, as we move forward with this, with our regional board chairs, with the governance to address these issues, and we will. It's true.

Mr. Mason: Mr. Speaker, given that Denise Young, the director of community development for the Calgary Scope Society, wrote to the minister and said: "Let me assure you that agency budgets have been cut in the Calgary region. We were originally asked to plan for a 2.6% cut on contracts, but this was later changed to a 2.38% cut," will the minister take back that last answer?

Mrs. Fritz: Well, Mr. Speaker, you know that the budget has been increased overall by 4.6 per cent for PDD, don't you? You do. You know that. He knows that. I spoke with the regional chair, Alex Hillyard, for an hour yesterday about this issue, and he has assured me that he is working with families, that there are not essential decreases in services at all in Calgary.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Nose Hill, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods.

Tuition Fee Policy

Dr. Brown: Mr. Speaker, last year the government introduced the Access to the Future Act, which outlined a commitment to accessible, affordable, and quality postsecondary education in the province.

As part of that commitment, the government promised that a new tuition fee policy would be developed. However, we've yet to see any changes in that tuition fee policy, which is dictated under the provisions of the Post-secondary Learning Act. Meanwhile, Alberta has the second-highest tuitions in Canada. My question is to the Premier. Given the fact that the new tuition policy cannot be introduced until the present legislation is changed and that there may be no fall sitting of the Legislature, how does the government propose to implement a new tuition fee policy?

An Hon. Member: Good question.

Mr. Klein: No. It's an interesting question because it's a question that I was pondering.

I understand that our new Minister of Advanced Education is now preparing enabling legislation to be tabled this spring, not next spring but this spring, in this sitting, not the next sitting but this sitting, of the Legislature. Of course, this will pave the way for a new tuition policy to be implemented. I might add that it's not only tuition that is being considered but all other costs associated with achieving an advanced education.

2:00

Dr. Brown: My supplementary question is to the Minister of Advanced Education. Can the minister advise when the new postsecondary student tuition policy would be announced and implemented?

Mr. Herard: Well, thank you very much for the question. Of course, the Premier is bang on. I think he pretty much covered it. We will have a new tuition policy in place this coming fall, giving institutions a full year to put the policy in place by September 2007. As the Premier said, we are paying tuition increases this coming fall, and we are scheduled to have a new tuition policy in place for September 2007, but our institutions need to know earlier than that. They need to know by about January 2007 in order to get their prospectuses and so on in place, so as the Premier suggested, I am as we speak planning to bring forward enabling legislation this spring that will allow us to implement the new policy.

Dr. Brown: My second supplementary is for the same minister. Can the minister assure Alberta students that any new policy will ensure that the tuition fees are not increased under the new policy?

Mr. Herard: Mr. Speaker, as you know, there have been some reports that have been leaked that I'm not all that sure were the actual reports, and I hope that the member who leaked them will change his distribution list to put me on his leak list.

Dr. Pannu: I'll do that.

Mr. Herard: Thank you.

You know, there were 3,000 people that worked on this project, a Learning Alberta project, and I know that they are going to be presenting some very good advice to us. What I can say to you, hon. member, is that those recommendations that currently fit the policy framework we will act upon immediately, and those that we need to bring in and discuss through SPC, cabinet, and caucus, new policies, we'll take through the process.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods, followed by the hon. Member for Strathcona.

Children's Services Special Case Review

Mrs. Mather: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Last spring the Children's Services minister announced that she was going to release all reviews conducted when a child who has had contact with Children's Services dies. When asked in this House about a specific case, that of Nina Courtepatte, the minister replied, "We'd be pleased to provide our special case review recommendations on this particular file." Almost a year later the minister has yet to make good on these commitments. To the Minister of Children's Services: given that the minister has had almost a year to put this incredibly important process into place, can the minister explain why family members and the public are being forced to wait so long for this information?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mrs. Forsyth: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a simple answer. The particular case the hon. member is referring to is still before the courts.

Mrs. Mather: To the same minister: can the minister tell us if the special case reviews which were supposed to be made public uncovered any serious concerns with the safety of children in provincial care?

Mrs. Forsyth: Mr. Speaker, I'm not going to make comments on a specific case. I can tell the hon. member that any time we do a special case review and there are recommendations that come out of those special case reviews, we implement those recommendations.

Mrs. Mather: To the same minister: given that Albertans have a right to know that their children are safe in provincial care, will the minister commit to making the special case review information available to the public on the Children's Services website?

Mrs. Forsyth: Absolutely, Mr. Speaker. I brought that up. I mentioned that in the Legislature before. I said that under my ministry, which I took over in November of 2004, I have made it very clear that any time a child is seriously injured or dies in the ministry's care, we would be pleased to provide that special case review on our website. We have to make it clear: those reviews will not go on our website until they go through the judicial process and that is completed.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Strathcona, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Highway Safety

Mr. Lougheed: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Because of economic and population growth, highways have become much busier in Alberta. Highway 21 in my constituency is very busy, and there is also the potential for more collisions. In recent months we've had an increase in law enforcement presence on highway 21 thanks to a pilot project involving provincial sheriffs and the RCMP. Can the Solicitor General and Minister of Public Security provide us with an update on how the pilot project is working?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Cenaiko: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. That's a very good question. Yes, the pilot project began this past January. One RCMP officer is working with two sheriffs in each of the communities of Fort McMurray and Boyle and two teams in Strathcona.

From the information that I've received recently, the enforcement is of a substantial nature. They are educating individuals. They are issuing not just summonses but, as well, warning tickets to individuals for all violations, whether they're stop signs, seat belts, or speeding, and a number of other summonses as well. The project is moving along and probably progressing a lot more positively than we originally thought. Actually, we've received overwhelming support from the communities, a number of e-mails coming into our office and to various officers regarding their support for seeing the additional enforcement on our highways, slowing down the traffic, and making our highways safer.

Mr. Lougheed: Mr. Speaker, since there has been successful enforcement and increased writing of tickets, could the minister let us know who receives the fine revenue?

Mr. Cenaiko: Well, Mr. Speaker, the issue isn't about fine revenue. The issue is about traffic safety and the whole issue that the hon. Minister of Infrastructure and Transportation started two years ago with the McDermid report regarding looking at a traffic safety plan, vision 2010, looking at how we can make our highways safer throughout the province, what is required to do that, whether it's prevention and education programs as well as enforcement programs in the future, and how we can tie our enforcement capability together throughout the province utilizing sheriffs, utilizing transportation officers, utilizing the RCMP, utilizing the city police services in conjunction with the AMA to ensure that we have all those programs in place, including provincial checkpoint programs for impaired drivers, throughout the province.

So, yes, these funds do come to the province of Alberta, which goes into our revenue but will be extended back out into the community regarding programs such as this from which we're seeing a real benefit, and we'll see those numbers of fatalities decrease.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Lougheed: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Since there has been some positive reports and the minister has outlined some steps, could he elaborate on what the next steps will be throughout the province?

Mr. Cenaiko: Well, Mr. Speaker, another very good question. The next step, as I mentioned, is that we want to see a reduction in the number of fatalities and the number of serious injuries on Alberta's highways. Obviously, this has a huge impact on our health care system. If we can reduce the number of fatalities on our highways by one – and I'm hoping we can do it by at least 10 to 15 per cent – the additional enforcement that we provide will provide that education that we want to go to. But this pilot project is one where we're looking at a new model of service delivery, tying ourselves in with the RCMP, freeing up the RCMP to strengthen their time or add to their time on criminal investigations, allowing sheriffs to do traffic enforcement and allowing them to do traffic investigations up to injury accidents, working in a stronger partnership throughout the province in an integrated fashion. We will be looking in the future at those serious highways in the province like highway 43, highway 8, highway 1A, highway 21, and possibly highway 22 down south that have been and have proven to have been very dangerous to drive on.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar, followed by the hon. Member for Wetaskiwin-Camrose.

2:10 Sale of Surplus Crown Land in Edmonton

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In January 2002 two numbered companies purchased 11 acres of land from this Progressive Conservative government in the new Cameron Heights subdivision for \$55,000 per acre. These same two numbered companies also purchased land in 1999 in Cameron Heights from the Galfour Development Corporation for \$21,600 per acre. Galfour Development Corporation got the land from this Progressive Conservative government for pennies per acre in 1988. My first question is to the minister of infrastructure. Given that this government sold land in the very same neighbourhood for \$55,000 per acre in 2002, why did this Progressive Conservative government sell this land for pennies per acre in 1988?

Mr. Lund: Mr. Speaker, you know, talk about mixing apples and oranges. In 1988 the value of land was very depressed. In 2002 the value of land is up. So it's very, very plain to see why you would have two different prices.

Since we had difficulty yesterday getting the member to understand, I do want to add a couple of things about the sale of land. The process starts when a department declares land surplus and does not have use for it. The first step, of course, is to canvass the rest of the government whether, in fact, there is another department that has use for that land. I didn't mention that one yesterday. There is another case, Mr. Speaker, where occasionally you may have a parcel of land where access is nonexistent once we take what we need. We will then offer that land to the adjacent landowner. And there are times when we have sold land for \$1. A good example is CKUA: we sold the building and land to them. In Red Deer at Michener Centre we sold the building that was damaged plus land to the regional health authority. In Wetaskiwin we sold the old courthouse, an historic site, to the city of Wetaskiwin for \$1. So that is the range of things.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again to the same minister: given that this land is worth at least \$12 million today, why did this government not act as a land bank, hold onto the land? Why did you sell it? [interjections] I'm sorry?

The Speaker: The hon. member has the floor. He's got a question. Proceed.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you. Why was this land not held onto until 2002 and then sold after the Anthony Henday Drive was announced? That drove up the value of the land, and people are willing to pay \$55,000 per acre for it. Taxpayers lost \$12 million.

Mr. Lund: Mr. Speaker, I guess that, once again, it is wonderful to have hindsight. Wonderful. None of us would ever make a mistake if, in fact, we knew that these things were going to happen. It's terribly unfortunate that the hon. member obviously has never dealt in land or anything else substantial. He would understand the way that prices go up and down, and it is extremely difficult to forecast. Really, is it a sole role of government to bank land until eventually the price goes up? I think not.

Mr. MacDonald: Again, Mr. Speaker, to the same minister: given that taxpayers have lost \$12 million in this neighbourhood alone because of this Progressive Conservative government's bumbling incompetence, when will you initiate a full, independent judicial

inquiry into this deal, which has turned out to be a very, very bad deal for the taxpayers?

Mr. Lund: Mr. Speaker, this is getting almost to the point of being ridiculous. To talk about a judicial inquiry over the legitimate sale of land I find almost unbelievable. I wish that the hon. member would really take a close look. He would see that, in fact, the process has been open, transparent. We attempted to get the best value for the government at the time. We're not going to end up trying to imagine what the value of land would be 10 years from now and then not sell anything up to that point. That makes no sense.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Wetaskiwin-Camrose, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Varsity.

Battle River Water Supply

Mr. Johnson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The city of Camrose in my constituency is a lively, growing community. As it continues to grow, there is a concern that in time development will be constrained by its water supply, which comes out of the Battle River and Driedmeat Lake. The concern centres on quantity and quality of water from the Battle River source. My questions are all to the Minister of Environment. What is Alberta Environment doing to ensure that reliable water supplies exist in the future for Battle River water users such as Camrose and surrounding villages and communities?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Boutilier: Yes. Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Our Water for Life strategy obviously is a very progressive strategy, and it's more than just a strategy and a policy. It is a strategy that has teeth. It has \$172 million that has been committed to it. It really is so important in terms of water usage in bringing us all together, working together. Of course, right now, as I speak, watershed planning management is going on in the area, which is so important, bringing all of the users to the table because when we have all of the users at the table, we have to first determine what will be required to protect the ecological basin of the Battle River.

Second of all, then, is: what is required for its users? By working together in a plan under the Water for Life strategy, that's what we're doing so that we can protect well into the future, to allow our economies to grow but at the same time protect our basin.

Mr. Johnson: The second question to the same minister: given that the Battle River is facing increasing demands for its water, how will the minister ensure that the many groups competing for a water supply from this river will all have their voices heard?

Mr. Boutilier: Mr. Speaker, that's a very good question. Having everyone at the table, as I mentioned in my previous answer, is so important, also balancing the environmental concerns, ecological concerns with economic development. So as we go forward, it's important to recognize in our Water for Life strategy – did you know that one of the goals of our Water for Life strategy in terms of conservation is to in fact improve water usage among the existing users as well as the new users who are coming to Alberta? One of those objectives is, in fact, to have a 30 per cent increase in terms of water usage by the year 2015, and we're on plan in order to achieve that objective in our Water for Life strategy.

Mr. Johnson: Again to the same minister: why don't you simply pipe water from the North Saskatchewan River, where it's not fully used, to the Battle River so that it can be fully used for the benefit of the people of the area?

Mr. Boutilier: I think, hon. member, that certainly could be one of the solutions, in fact, once we clearly understand the water usage, how it's being used, how we can improve the usage of the water. We also want to look at potential water supplies and alternatives. Some of that is off-stream storage, some of that potentially could be on-stream storage, and one of them is also potentially the transfer of water from the North Saskatchewan River, all of those options. All of the people at the table will be participating in that with that knowledge to get the right answer to protect the environment and also to ensure that our growing economy can in fact accommodate that.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Varsity, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview.

Provincial Parks Infrastructure

Mr. Chase: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The mismatch of government spending and the priorities of Albertans is made clear by the recently released survey of visitors to the network of parks and recreation areas. Victims of shortsighted cutbacks, the basic infrastructure of everyday parks is in a poor state. My questions are all to the Minister of Community Development. Given that almost half of all campers surveyed had negative comments about facility conditions, will the government commit to rebuilding parks infrastructure across the province and not just in a few specific campgrounds?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Ducharme: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Alberta's parks attract 8.5 million visits a year; 1.5 million of those are from out of province and contribute \$1.3 billion annually to Alberta's economy. Budget 2006 responds to the feedback that we've received in regard to our infrastructure deficiencies. Twenty-four million dollars in capital funding will renew aging park facilities, and another \$1 million will help to operate four new interpretive centres and monitor water quality.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Chase: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again to the Minister of Community Development: given that campers are dissatisfied with the value of the camping fee as it is now, how can the minister justify increasing the fee in the future, as the former minister stated in his press release?

2:20

Mr. Ducharme: Mr. Speaker, for 2006 fees for basic campsites range from \$5 to \$20 per day depending on the location and the amenities that are being provided. Camping fees are dedicated revenue for Alberta parks and do not go into general provincial revenue. Those dollars are then reallocated back into the ministry to do further improvements.

Further, I'd like to comment, Mr. Speaker, that Alberta is one of the few jurisdictions that does not charge any fees for day use, and the majority of our visits are for day-use facilities.

Mr. Chase: Mr. Speaker, my third question, again to the Minister of

Community Development: will the minister commit to improving park information services and improving the park reservation system to address the high levels of dissatisfaction with these services?

Mr. Ducharme: Mr. Speaker, I can assure you that the Ministry of Community Development will do whatever is in their power in terms of the proper things to ensure that the experiences in our parks are enjoyable for our visitors and for all Albertans.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Lougheed.

Temporary Foreign Workers

Mr. Martin: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The federal government has to give the final rubber stamp to admit temporary foreign workers. However, the entire rest of the process is controlled by the provincial government and employers such as the division 8 designation for the Horizon oil sands project and setting up a special group process for assessing qualifications. The Advanced Education minister admitted yesterday that out of 941 applications received, 836 temporary foreign workers have already been approved. My question is to the Minister of Human Resources and Employment. Why are these 836 jobs not going to Albertans or Canadians, including aboriginals, youth, legal immigrants, or refugees already here?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Cardinal: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. That's a very good question. For a number of weeks and months now, in fact, the issue of the temporary foreign workers has been brought up. When I look around this House, I see lots of foreign workers. In fact, I'm probably the only member that might not be. That's even questionable. What makes Alberta and Canada strong is that we are a multicultural society. Jobs are open to various nationalities, but our first priority is to hire Albertans, Canadians, aboriginals, persons with developmental disabilities, older workers that may be displaced. We have a hot economy out there. There are jobs for everybody.

Mr. Martin: Well, Mr. Speaker, I wish some on the other side were temporary foreign workers.

Mr. Speaker, my question is to the minister. The minister repeated again that his first priority is Albertans, aboriginals. He goes through this particular line. My question is again: why, then, have these 836 jobs not gone to these people he's talking about and gone to temporary foreign workers?

Mr. Cardinal: Mr. Speaker, this member knows – he's been around the House a long enough time – that any approval of temporary foreign workers or immigrants is done by the federal government, not the province.

Mr. Martin: Mr. Speaker, that's exactly the point I was making.

Why does this minister refuse to admit that it is his government, not the federal government, that is leading the parade when it comes to setting up special rules through measures such as the division 8 designation for the CNRL Horizon project and through such measures as fast-tracking the assessment of credentials of temporary foreign workers? That goes against the people that he's talking about.

Mr. Cardinal: Of course, Mr. Speaker, again, this is what makes

Canada strong. We are open. We are in a world economy now, and we have to share some of the benefits we have in Alberta. But when it comes to workers, Albertans, Canadians, persons with developmental disabilities, older workers like me, and aboriginal youth come first, and that's one very important area. There are 200,000 aboriginal youth between the ages of 15 and 24. With minor changes by the federal government – I have said this over and over again – we could have those 200,000 aboriginal youth working in those darn jobs in Fort McMurray.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Lougheed, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Assistance for Alberta Athletes

Mr. Rodney: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. While it's true that Alberta athletes have enjoyed tremendous success on the international stage, including the Olympics, Paralympics, and Commonwealth Games recently, many of these athletes continue to struggle to make ends meet even as they're representing our country and dedicating themselves to be their absolute best. My question is to the Minister of Community Development. I know that these athletes currently receive some funding from Sport Canada through the athletes' assistance program, but what is this province doing to support its athletes?

Mr. Ducharme: Mr. Speaker, as the hon. member alluded to, these athletes who compete for Canada are supported through Sport Canada, an organization of the federal government. I'm unable to speak to their funding levels as it's not in the jurisdiction of this House. However, with Sport Canada responsible for funding national athletes, it allows this government to focus on two priorities. One, in supporting the development of provincial-level athletes, last fiscal year this government provided \$12.8 million in funding to provincial sport associations and to sponsor the Alberta Games and Team Alberta at interprovincial and national events. Two, we are working with partners to provide exceptional training and competition facilities in our province for Canada's national athletes.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Rodney: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I only have one supplemental question for the same minister. There's some good news; I'm hoping there's a little more. Over the years I've spoken with a lot of athletes at all levels across the province, and there's a common theme about this stretching of resources. My final question is: can they look forward to increased support when it comes to sport development programs and renewal of facilities that need renewal?

Mr. Ducharme: Mr. Speaker, we recently addressed these issues. The Alberta Sport, Recreation, Parks & Wildlife Foundation will be receiving an additional \$2.8 million to their annual operating budget this year, bringing that to \$15.6 million for sport development. A portion of the increase will go to developing athletes by strengthening programs which have already produced many talented competitors who went on to become international stars.

Our second priority is to strengthen and renew our existing facilities, many of which are legacy projects from the 1988 Olympics in Calgary. These facilities are 20 years old now, Mr. Speaker, and need to be renewed to continue to be effective. The government is doing its part. We committed over \$23 million this past year for the renewal of the Canmore Nordic Centre in time to host the first

World Cup event in 16 years. The centre is also home to the national cross-country ski and biathlon team. We also provided \$600,000 to upgrade the ski jump at Canada Olympic Park, ensuring that athletes can continue to train in Canada, and we will continue to work with our partners to see what else can be done.

The Speaker: As the hon. member had a preamble in his second question, I gather that he's waiving the third. Correct?

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Health Care Reform

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Alberta spends only 5 per cent of its provincial GDP on health care, the lowest of any province in the country. Other measurements, like health spending as a per cent of government revenue or as a per cent of government expense, show that the numbers are declining. What we need from this government is fewer myths about health funding unsustainability and more answers about their real intentions. My questions are to the Minister of Health and Wellness. Given the evidence that health care spending is not unsustainable, why does the minister only quote the total spending and ignore all other measurements?

Ms Evans: Mr. Speaker, one of the things that will happen tomorrow is that we will be able to provide not my view but the view of the people that did the actuarial analysis on modelling sustainability in terms of health care expenditure. I'm confident that then it will become clearer that our projections of doubling the number of people that are 65 and over, who currently consume about a third of the health care expenditure – when we double those in 2025 to about 18 per cent of Albertans that are 65 and over, if that same record holds true, we will have considerable pressure on continuous care, from long-term care, from pharmacare, new technology on the health care expenditure. It doesn't matter how much money you earn; it matters how responsible you are in the spending. So, quite frankly, I think we have to look to the future about sustainability.

2:30

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much. Again to the same minister: well, given that Aon Consulting found that private insurance models are not an affordable way to deal with health care pressures, is the minister planning to create or assist the private market for private insurance by delisting publicly insured services?

Ms Evans: Mr. Speaker, yesterday there was an inquiry from the leader of the opposition, a member of the hon. member's own team, about if there was an intent to delist service. I identified at that time that neither in the policy document nor any other statement by any member of this government has there been any assigned delisting of service. I regret and I feel somewhat frustrated that people are attempting or that this member is attempting to scare or concern people about things that are absolutely not true, absolutely not planned, absolutely not the intention of this government.

Mr. Speaker, if I may go back to the point about how much money, today we spend about \$400 more per man, woman, and child in Alberta than anyplace else in Canada. How much more should we spend to get to the right number for the hon. member opposite?

Ms Blakeman: Back to the same minister: given that upcoming legislation will "establish a process for determining essential

services,” is it the minister’s plan, as a way to save the government money in the future, to withhold public health care insurance coverage for any new procedures, technologies, or pharmaceuticals?

Ms Evans: Mr. Speaker, when the legislation is tabled, then we can have the conversation.

Vignettes from the Assembly’s History

The Speaker: Hon. members, before calling on the first of several members to participate, our historical vignette of the day. On this day we commemorate the remembrance of the Holocaust. I would like to quote directly text found on pages 213 and 215 in the book *The War that United the Province: 1939-1945*, volume 8 in the series Alberta in the 20th Century. This text that I’m going to quote is written by Steve Weatherbe, and I will quote the text in its entirety. I begin now.

Aberhart, despite his own Germanic background, was unflagging in his support for the postwar dismemberment of Germany.

This did not stop his critics from hinting at secret Nazi sympathies; no populist radical was safe from such libels. It was all the worse for Aberhart because his enemies were willing to take his fights with Ottawa as evidence of sedition. National commentator C.S. Burchill warned readers of the *National Home Monthly* that Alberta was rife with Nazi sympathizers and that Aberhart led the pack. Burchill cited the Germanic ancestry not only of Aberhart but also of his civil servants; 250 of their names began with “K,” he noted, while a further 46 opened with the even more sinister “Sch.” Clearly, Alberta was “ripe for treachery.”

As the war progressed and Hitler’s extermination of European Jewry came to light, anti-Semitism became more disreputable, but it thereby became a convenient weapon to be used against one’s political foes. To the embarrassment of Aberhart and his senior cabinet minister Ernest Manning, their ideological inspiration, Britain’s Major C.H. Douglas, grew increasingly anti-Semitic during the war years. Aberhart shared Douglas’s conspiratorial world view, but considered the ethnicity of the “Big Shots” and international financiers to be irrelevant. Whereas Douglas (like Hitler) swore by the Protocols of the Elders of Zion, a phony document whipped up by the Tsarist secret police and purporting to detail a Jewish plot for world domination, Aberhart and Manning denounced them as a fabrication. Incredibly, Douglas came to believe that Hitler himself was part of the Jewish conspiracy and was faking the final solution in order to spread Jewish agents, disguised as refugees, throughout the world.

Many of these ideas were transmitted to Alberta through the Social Credit Board, which at one point had sought, almost successfully, to overthrow Aberhart. By 1940 the board’s chief representative was L.D. Byrne, one of two Social Credit experts Douglas had sent to Alberta to guide the province in instituting Social Credit doctrine. In 1942 Aberhart’s many Jewish supporters demanded he purge the anti-Semites in his party and repudiate Douglas. He responded that he lacked the power to oust members but promised to do what he could “to put the brakes on this foolish spirit of anti-Semitism.” Both Aberhart and Manning made statements denouncing anti-Semitism. Through the Bible institute’s publication *The Prophetic Voice* Aberhart declared that any nation that harmed its Jews was cursed before God.

head: **Members’ Statements**

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Stony Plain.

Yom ha-Shoa, Holocaust Memorial Day

Mr. Lindsay: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As you mentioned, today marks a very important day, Holocaust Memorial Day, or Yom ha-

Shoa. In recognition, Albertans are encouraged to join communities around the world today to remember and reflect on the persecution of over 6 million people of the Jewish faith as well as millions of others who have perished in acts of genocide.

Through our remembrance we mark our respect and extend our compassion to the Jewish community. In addition to raising awareness and understanding of the Holocaust, ceremonies around the province give Albertans a chance to show their understanding and compassion for those who have suffered and continue to feel the repercussions of the Holocaust.

While this is a day of remembrance, Mr. Speaker, I would also suggest that it is a day for action. I would urge all members of this Assembly and all Albertans to actively promote acceptance of all people and to protect their rights and uphold our way of life in this province.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-West.

Canadian Transplant Association Transplant Games

Mr. Liepert: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Albertans are among the most generous people in Canada. We know this because we boast the highest levels of volunteerism in the country. Yesterday in this House the Minister of Health and Wellness recognized that this is national organ donation awareness week. I don’t want to repeat the excellent comments made by the minister, but I did want to share with the House a unique event taking place in Edmonton this summer.

I’d like to invite Albertans to continue with this spirit of giving by getting involved with the national Transplant Games, which will take place in the city from August 8 to 13. The national Transplant Games is Canada’s largest organ donation awareness event, in which transplant recipients of all ages gather to celebrate the active, healthy lifestyle possible for many following transplantation. The games offer transplant recipients an opportunity to say thank you to their families and health care professionals for the care they provided and continue to provide. The games also send a message of thanks to the many donor families who made the difficult decision to donate their loved ones’ organs, and they send a message of hope to the thousands of Canadians who are still waiting for their second chance at life.

I encourage all Albertans to continue with their spirit of giving and to volunteer their time to the Canadian Transplant Association for this very important event. More details can be found at www.cta-alberta.com.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Lougheed.

Wilderness Association Climb for Wilderness

Mr. Rodney: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I’d like to congratulate everyone at the Alberta Wilderness Association on an extremely well-organized event that was held this past Saturday. During the annual Earth Day climb and run for wilderness almost a thousand athletes climbed all 802 stairs of the Calgary Tower, right to the top. They raised more than \$100,000 for wilderness and wildlife protection in Alberta.

The top climbers on a team were Luke Way, who matched his record of 30 ascents, and Rosemary Gerspacher, with 28. The youngest climber was only two years old – that was little Madelaine – and if that’s not impressive enough, Mr. Speaker, I’m pleased to report that the most experienced climbers were also the top individ-

ual fundraisers. Phyllis Hart is 91 years old. She raised \$2,700 and climbed the tower twice, while Ward Neale, who's 82 years young, raised \$970 and started the day with a one-kilometre run and a trip to the top of the tower, topped it off with another eight climbs of the tower.

2:40

Mr. Speaker, our hon. Liberal colleagues challenged our PC caucus in the event, and despite great efforts they couldn't quite beat us in the number of team climbs. Let's just say that we were able to reach just a little bit above and beyond in terms of fundraising in the midst of our friendly rivalry.

I'd like to thank my colleagues and our Calgary-Lougheed PC Association for their support and acknowledge my fellow climbers, including Joey Redman, who's here today as part of your MLA for a Day program; my web page designer, Thaddeus Brasok, and his little son, Harrison; Jim Hoey of TV's *The Dimestore Fisherman*; and the ever impressive Member for Calgary-Foothills as well. Perhaps you'll join us next year in the climb, Mr. Speaker.

Thank you very much.

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

Centennial of Labour Organizations

Mr. Backs: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On August 6, 1906, the Edmonton Trades & Labour Council was issued its first charter. This document recognized the council as the voice for labour in Edmonton and northern Alberta. This year, 2006, marks 100 years of labour council activity in Edmonton and northern Alberta.

The first council has grown and developed and given us the northern Alberta building trades council and the Edmonton & District Labour Council. It is the centennial year for both organizations, and for those 100 years I present the thanks of all Albertans. I present the thanks from the people of our great province for building much of Alberta. Many of the great buildings, the oil sands plants, the power plants, the technical institutes, the universities, the schools, the roads, and so, so many things that we call and recognize as our Alberta were a result of the sweat from the brows of workers proud to be members of these councils. Our Alberta workers are truly the real Alberta advantage.

Nursing us back to health, clearing the snow, administering our governments: so, so many things have been done by these Alberta workers. There is so much more that we must thank these councils and their members for: weekends off, overtime pay, fair wages, safety legislation, child labour laws, and the many things that have built up and grown the fabric of Alberta society. These were a result of the work and pressure from these labour councils and their members. These councils have pushed us to build and strengthen medicare for most of the last 100 years and continue to make it part of the Alberta advantage.

Members of their affiliated unions have been elected as Members of this Legislative Assembly for almost every party that has stood in this House. They may have had different perspectives, but they all knew the value of work, the value of working people, and the progress that the union centrals have worked for and won.

I congratulate both the Edmonton & District Labour Council and the northern Alberta building trades council for their first 100 years, for all that they have accomplished, and for all that will come in the future.

Thank you very much.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview.

Persons with Developmental Disabilities Program

Mr. Martin: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In the past month the Minister of Seniors and Community Supports has repeatedly stood in this House and denied that cuts to PDD programs and services were taking place in the province. Well, a number of people took time out of their day to come to the Legislature today to protest the government's funding plan, and the hundreds of letters received by my colleagues and I demonstrate that these cuts are an immediate reality for many Albertans. The minister attempts to hide behind a small increase in the dollars allocated to PDD but refuses to acknowledge that inflation and the costs of rapidly increasing caseloads have far outstripped this meagre increase.

As the minister knows, an inexcusable number of disabled Albertans live on or below the poverty level. Even those families who have higher incomes face challenges that result from managing the individual needs and health complications of loved ones. Regardless of income, disabled Albertans and their families face particular obstacles and barriers to full participation in society. If the government doesn't have a role to play in supporting people past these barriers, then who does?

I find it striking that in most of the phone calls, e-mails, and letters I have received, the main emphasis is on supporting people's participation in the communities: finding work, doing volunteer activities, socializing and engaging in activities which many of us take for granted but which pose challenges for many PDD clients. These are not unrealistic demands, and indeed funding such programs ought to have a higher priority than providing \$360 million in corporate tax cuts and \$400 million lost to a shift to income trust. Ultimately the demands being made are more than reasonable. The government should make a strong commitment to improving the wages of PDD staff and protecting those wages from inflation. It should also ensure that none of the PDD's clients or their families have services reduced. The services are an important part of ensuring that all Albertans are able to be contributing and happy members of our community.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-McCall.

Immigrants of Distinction Awards

Mr. Shariff: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to take this opportunity to showcase the Calgary Immigrant Aid Society. The organization lists their mission as being dedicated to immigrants and their families in order to ensure that they have the opportunity to become full participants, both as beneficiaries and contributors, in Canadian society. Their vision that equal and open participation by immigrants and refugees is possible and should be strived for is certainly something that I believe in as a member of this Assembly.

I am mentioning this fine organization here today in recognition of the 10th annual immigrants of distinction awards, that were held on Thursday, April 20. The Calgary Immigrant Aid Society holds these awards as a means to recognize the exceptional achievements and contributions of immigrants and refugees within the city of Calgary.

Specific awards were given in the categories of arts and culture, business, community service, and distinguished professional. Of course, it's difficult to choose a winner in competitions of this nature, especially considering the great accomplishments of many new Calgarians. Proof of this lies in the fact that the award of distinguished professional was shared by both nominees, Margaret Styczynska and Sinisa Sonny Tomic. Winners in the other categories included Nashir Samanani of Elluminate Inc. for the business

award, Tsenden Dhogonpa for the area of community service, and Alexandra Haeseker in the arts and culture section.

The Calgary Immigrant Aid Society is committed to equity, inclusion, diversity, and accountability. The award recipients personify these attributes, and I hope that this Assembly continues to uphold and strengthen these principles through our words and actions. The efforts of the Calgary Immigrant Aid Society and the winners and nominees of the 10th annual immigrants of distinction awards contribute to the strength of this great province every day, and I'd like to thank them for their great work.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: Hon. members, might we revert briefly to Introduction of Guests?

[Unanimous consent granted]

head: **Introduction of Guests**
(*reversion*)

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Gaming.

Mr. Graydon: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Because of the distance from the capital I very seldom get guests. It takes considerable effort and time and money to come and visit us, so I'm very pleased today that I do have a group. I hope that they're still upstairs. I think they are. They're from the Living Springs Christian school in my constituency of Grande Prairie-Wapiti. There are 12 students and seven adults in the group. The teacher is Miss Amy Bueckert. The parent helpers are Mr. Lynn Isaac, Mrs. Nancy Isaac, Mr. Galen Loetkeman, Mrs. Glenda Loetkeman, Mr. Tim Toews, and Mrs. Starla Toews. I would like us to show our welcome to them in appreciation of the effort they made to come and visit us today.

Thank you.

head: **Presenting Petitions**

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Dunvegan-Central Peace.

Mr. Goudreau: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would like to table a petition to the Assembly that I recently received from 103 staff members and students of Fairview's St. Thomas More Catholic school regarding a smoke-free Alberta. This is to curtail the substantial increase in teenage smoking as reported by Health Canada.

I've got the necessary copies. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

Mr. Backs: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have a petition from 208 Albertans asking for the maintenance of universal public health care and our medicare system.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Lougheed.

Mr. Rodney: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'll be tabling tomorrow.

head: 2:50 **Introduction of Bills**

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Infrastructure and Transportation on behalf.

Bill 38

Livestock Identification and Commerce Act

Mr. Lund: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise today to request leave to

introduce Bill 38, the Livestock Identification and Commerce Act, for first reading. This being a money bill, His Honour the Lieutenant Governor has been informed of the contents of this bill and recommends the same to the Legislature.

This bill consolidates and revises provisions of the Brand Act, the Livestock Identification and Brand Inspection Act, and the Livestock and Livestock Products Act. The bill seeks to facilitate fair commerce, increase the protection available for livestock buyers, and promote the integrity of marketing practices within the livestock industry.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[Motion carried; Bill 38 read a first time]

head: **Tabling Returns and Reports**

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview.

Mr. Martin: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have several documents to table today. The first is a budget planning document from the Edmonton PDD board. Despite small funding increases the board predicts a sizable deficit that will necessitate cuts to the PDD services.

I also have a letter from Denise Young, the director of community development for the Calgary Scope Society. The letter and accompanying sample contract illustrate the harmful impacts of the 2.38 per cent reduction in agency budgets caused by a PDD funding shortfall.

I also have two samples of the 200-plus letters I've received on this issue. One is from Derrick Seabrook, who is very concerned that they will lose the excellent staff at his home.

The second is writing on behalf of Joanne Visser, who is her sister. She points out that thanks to PDD and other services her sister has moved from institutionalized care into a community setting, where she has thrived. She is thoroughly disheartened that her sister and others like her will have their funding slashed by \$500 per month.

Thank you.

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

Mr. Elsalhy: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have two tablings today. The first one is the program for the 2006 Food for All Seasons: Feed Edmonton's Food Bank gala, which took place on Thursday, April 13. It was a wonderful evening in support of a great cause, and I thoroughly enjoyed visiting with the outstanding volunteers and benefactors, listening to the keynote speaker, Ms Paula Simons, and the live auction by Mark Cunningham. I felt welcomed and appreciated as not only . . .

The Speaker: We're just going to table it, okay?

Mr. Elsalhy: Okay. Thank you.

The second one, then, is a letter from an Edmonton-McClung constituent. Her name is Dr. Minnan Liu. She's really concerned about allegations that the Chinese government is harvesting organs without consent from living Falun Gong practitioners in concentration death camps, gives examples, and wants us here in the House to condemn this brutal persecution.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Varsity.

Mr. Chase: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm tabling 10

letters from families, staff, and residents of long-term care expressing their concerns. The letters are from James New, Herta Duncan, Denise Ryan, Hope Pennock, S.M. and N.L. Tomlinson, Mary Pasula, Marilyn Slemko, A.M. Rennie, Raminder Gill, and Carlene Lewis.

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

Mr. R. Miller: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. In light of the fact that I'm still receiving letters from constituents regarding the third way, I've made a commitment to those individuals to continue to table their letters. I have one from a constituent by the name of Mr. Ronald Goss, who says no way to the third way; one from constituent Valerie Moore, who says that "it is time for this government to listen to the people"; and one from constituent Dorothy Tovell, who says, "Please do not support legislation that threatens our public health care system."

As well, Mr. Speaker, a number of tablings. I made a commitment last night during debate to table copies of newspaper articles showing Conservative MLAs handing out cheques, representing them as if they're coming from the MLAs themselves. I have a copy of the *Nanton News* showing the Minister of Sustainable Resource Development handing out a cheque for \$600,000, with his name on it as if it were written by himself; a copy of a newspaper clipping showing the MLA for West Yellowhead handing out a cheque for \$1.35 million; a copy of the *Cold Lake Sun* showing the Minister of Community Development handing out a cheque for \$300,000; and lastly, a copy of the *Ponoka News* showing the MLA for Lacombe-Ponoka handing out a cheque for \$734,000, once again very clearly with his personal signature on it, representing it as if this money is coming from himself.

Thank you very much.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Lethbridge-East.

Ms Pastoor: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm tabling 10 letters today. These letters are from families, staff, and residents who are involved or are dependants within the continuing care system with their concerns. These letters are signed by Joyce Prosper, Phan Wu Yuan, Rani Anand, Dorothy Butte, Asmeret Tekie, Bella Chin, Linda Song, Virginia Capicio, Cindy Fung, and Dorothy Chand.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I have two tablings today. This is information supporting my question today in the Legislative Assembly. The first one is from the city of Edmonton, the tax assessment and collection property tax search summary for 11 acres of land that's described as plan 0024559, lot A, in Cameron Heights.

The second is proof from the *Alberta Gazette* from January 31, 2002, of the sale of this land for \$614,400 to the numbered companies.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods.

Mrs. Mather: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have eight letters that are from family, staff, and residents who work with or are dependent on the continuing care system. They are signed by Awetash Terere,* Dalida Tobar, Pamela Burgess, Jeanne Jensen, Jean Jackson, Elizabeth Csunyagh,* Liberty Pestano, and Karen Molloy.

head: **Tablings to the Clerk**

The Clerk Assistant: I wish to advise the House that the following documents were deposited with the office of the Clerk. On behalf of the hon. Ms Evans, Minister of Health and Wellness, pursuant to the Health Facilities Review Committee Act the Alberta Health Facilities Review Committee annual report 2004-2005, April 1, 2004, to March 31, 2005; pursuant to the Dental Disciplines Act and the Health Professions Act the Alberta Dental Association and College 2004-2005 annual report; pursuant to the Health Professions Act the Alberta College of Medical Diagnostic and Therapeutic Technologists 2005 annual report; annual report for the College of Hearing Aid Practitioners of Alberta 2004-2005.

head: **Orders of the Day**

head: **Committee of Supply**

[Mr. Shariff in the chair]

The Deputy Chair: Hon. members, we'll call the committee to order.

head: **Main Estimates 2006-07**

Education

The Deputy Chair: As per our standing orders, the first hour will be allocated between the minister and members of the opposition, following which any other member may participate.

The hon. Minister of Education.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman and colleagues in the Legislature, for this opportunity to present our estimates for the Ministry of Alberta Education for kindergarten to grade 12 programs and so on.

I want to begin, Mr. Chair, by just briefly introducing some folks who are here, who help serve the interests of K to 12 education in the province. Sitting in the members' gallery are my deputy minister, Keray Henke; assistant deputy minister Mat Hanrahan; assistant deputy minister Lois Hawkins; Jeff Olson, executive director of finance and strategic services; George Lee, senior manager of corporate budgets, finance and strategic services; Brad Smith, senior manager of school budgeting and funding, finance and strategic services; and Bob McManus, assistant director of communications. Listening somewhere, with a brief eye ailment, is our director of communications, Kathy Telfer, and my executive assistant, Pam Boutilier, is working away listening in as well. I wonder if they would just rise and receive the warm thanks and welcome of the House for their outstanding service. Thank you, all.

3:00

Mr. Chairman, let me begin by explaining that the mission of Alberta Education is to show leadership and to work with our stakeholders to make sure that students attain the knowledge and skills they need for lifelong learning, work, and citizenship. Seven basic principles are at the centre of our business planning for Alberta's kindergarten to grade 12 education system. Those principles serve to inform us that we are student-centred and that our highest priority is the success of our students, that every student has the right of equitable access to a quality education consistent with their needs and abilities, that we are collaborative, that we are innovative, that we are accountable to Albertans, and, finally, that parents and students have choices because the education system is flexible and responsive to student needs.

*This spelling could not be verified at the time of publication.

That's the opening, Mr. Chairman, that will guide the rest of this afternoon's discussion.

With that, I hope I am able to move these estimates at this time and continue on with the permission of the chair.

The Deputy Chair: Yes, you may.

Mr. Zwodzesky: Thank you very much. In that vein, then, I would like to move specifically to the 2006-2009 business plan, which identifies strategic priorities that the government of Alberta supports in our three-year business plan. That includes support for the healthy development of Alberta's children and youth, success for First Nation, Métis, and Inuit learners, preparing Albertans for lifelong learning, ensuring the financial stability and accountability of the kindergarten to grade 12 education system, and of course keying in on school infrastructure needs.

Albertans expect our education system to prepare our students to succeed in a future of unlimited possibilities, and with this in mind, Mr. Chair, I am both pleased and honoured to present these budget estimates and the business plan for '06-07. However, before we examine the budget estimates in any great detail, I want to specifically note for everyone's attention that there are seven programs that will be referenced in the budget this coming year. This aligns with the seven programs of the Alberta Education income statement. The breakdown of those different programs begins on page 135 of the budget document.

The budget estimates before us today will provide a 6.7 per cent increase, or an additional \$330 million, in program support toward the K to 12 education system, for a grand total of \$5.3 billion in the 2006-2007 fiscal year. Our voted estimates begin on page 133 of the 2006-07 government and lottery fund estimates book, and as questions come my way, I would appreciate it if people would mention a page number and perhaps, if it's available, an element number, which will make responding to questions much more efficient.

Before we get into the nitty-gritty of the budget, I also want to explain that the Ministry of Education budget has two primary funding streams. The first stream is what we call voted government and lottery fund estimates, which total \$3.82 billion and comprise about 70 per cent of our budget and which we will be voting on today. The second stream of funding comes from education property taxes, which total about \$1.48 billion and comprise the remaining 30 per cent of our Education budget for K to 12. About \$1.3 billion of that \$1.48 billion resides in what we call the Alberta school foundation fund, which, as we all know, is governed by statute. The remainder, or about \$169 million, goes directly from municipalities to those local separate school boards that choose to collect their education property taxes in that manner. When we combine the \$3.82 billion in voted estimates with the \$1.48 billion in education property taxes, it brings the total support for kindergarten to grade 12 education to the \$5.3 billion for government's '06-07 fiscal year which I mentioned a few minutes ago.

Now, with respect to the programs. Program 1, ministry support services, is the corporate function of our department. Support to this area will actually decrease by \$1.2 million, primarily due to funding for one-time initiatives for technology that were generously provided in 2005-06. Because they were one-time, they weren't carried forward, so there's an explanation for that decrease.

Program 2, operating support for public and separate schools, will increase by \$185 million, or by 8.2 per cent, up to \$2.45 billion. This money will go almost entirely towards increased grant funding for 62 school jurisdictions and 13 charter school operations. This \$185 million increase represents only the general revenue fund

portion of support to school boards. Another \$1.3 billion in support comes from education property taxes, as I mentioned previously. In total, government and education property tax support to public and separate school boards increases by \$194 million, up to \$3.9 billion for 2006-07. This represents an increase of about 5.2 per cent for this fiscal year, not for the school year, which starts September 1, or five-twelfths of the way through our fiscal year.

Operating support for public and separate schools includes grant dollars for our renewed funding framework, which will be going into its third school year of implementation this September. This framework is very important to school boards because it provides them with both per capita funding and credit enrolment unit instructional grants that give locally elected school boards flexibility to meet local priorities. Plus, that renewed funding framework also provides differential or additional funding for cost differences that are beyond the control of an individual school board. These differences take into account factors such as large changes in enrolment, differences in the number of special-needs students, the requirement to operate small schools in remote areas, and/or higher costs of doing business as a result of geography, and so on.

Now, with respect to the school year, as opposed to the government's fiscal year, base instruction grants will increase by 3 per cent for the 2006-07 school year. All other grants will increase by 2 per cent.

The Education budget also anticipates and will provide funding for increasing numbers of children with special needs and for students who require English as a Second Language programming whether they are Canadian-born or foreign-born. In fact, Mr. Chair, grant rates will increase in these areas by 2 per cent, and there is also an allowance for a 7 per cent increase in the number of children receiving early childhood services, ECS, funding for mild and moderate special needs, a 10 per cent increase in the number of children requiring program unit, or PUF, funding, and a 12 per cent increase in the number of students requiring instruction for English as a Second Language.

This budget also carries forward support for high-speed networking so that schools can take full advantage of the SuperNet and of the transportation fuel subsidy to address the continued high cost of fuel for school busing.

Under the banner of provincial initiatives where we actually specify where and how dollars may be spent, the budget also provides increased grants to school boards for our class size reduction initiative. That will be an increase of \$16.6 million, up to \$126 million in other words, which represents an increase of 15.1 per cent.

At the start of the class size initiative it was recognized that lowering the class sizes in kindergarten to grade 3 would be the most challenging task. Now that the 2005-06 jurisdiction class size reports have been reviewed, we know that all grade groupings are at or below the guidelines set out in ACOL, or virtually all of them are, with the exception of kindergarten to grade 3. By the end of the 2005-06 school year, which is rapidly approaching, all school boards were to have an average class size in kindergarten to grade 3 of 18.5 students. In fact, 38 school jurisdictions will not quite meet that target if something is not done, and this is a concern.

3:10

At the same time, we have also heard that some school jurisdictions are having difficulty continuing to meet next year's guidelines due to challenges such as availability of classroom space and recruitment of new teachers. Therefore and because of these reasons, school boards will be given additional flexibility and a little more time to plan for and to reach the average class size guidelines

that were recommended by Alberta's Commission on Learning. That recommendation suggested that those jurisdiction averages be met in a five-year time frame. We have done our best to try and get them accomplished in the three-year window, but through my discussions with school boards, we encountered what some of their challenges were, so we've allowed an extension of time and flexibility to help address the situation.

For the 2006-07 school year funding will be focused as follows. One, all school boards will receive a 3 per cent increase to their 2004-05 class size reduction funding initiative to ensure that they can retain the 1,685 teachers they have hired over the past two years as part as our class size reduction initiative. Two, the 38 school jurisdictions that have averages in kindergarten to grade 3 above 18.5 students will in fact receive the funding necessary to reach a jurisdictional average of 18.5 for kindergarten to grade 3.

Obviously, this will require about another 250 teachers – new, additional teachers, I want to stress – who will need to be hired, and this budget will help provide the funds to help accomplish those new hirings. To ensure that school jurisdictions can attract and retain the 250 teachers required to get to that guideline of 18.5 students per class, funding will be allocated based on \$70,400 per teacher. This, Mr. Chair, is the midpoint of the teacher salary grid.

This budget also provides a 6 per cent increase to another important area, which we refer to as student health initiative partnerships. We have 15 of these that provide integrated health, therapy, and emotional and behavioural supports for identified children with special health needs.

Funding for the AISI project will also increase; that is, our Alberta initiative for school improvement. That increase will be 2 per cent, and it will go up to \$71 million for local innovative programs and projects. Mr. Chair, these projects include things like professional learning communities in schools, early literacy, math skills, and stay in school programs that support student learning. I might stress that this money will fund the first year of a new cycle of three-year projects for this highly successful AISI initiative.

Program 3, which is support for teachers' pensions, will increase by 6.3 per cent, or by \$20 million, up to \$339 million. Of that amount, \$152 million will address government's responsibility for the unfunded liability of the Alberta teachers' pension plan, and \$187 million will go towards government's share of the current service payments.

Under current legislation, Mr. Chair, government is responsible for two-thirds of the unfunded pension liability for teachers and for one-half of teachers' contributions for current service; in other words, for service earned as a teacher after 1992. The increase, of course, is due to higher contribution rates that were implemented in September 2005 as well to teacher salary and grid movement increases and, finally, to additional pension costs associated with hiring more than 250 new teachers starting this coming September under the small class size initiative.

Program 4, which is program delivery support services, is a program that provides help for delivery and development of curriculum standards, governance, achievement and diploma testing and rewrites, technology support to develop and deliver print and electronic learning resources for teachers and students, and, finally, for corporate administration such as financial reporting and budgets. This program will increase by 1.1 per cent, or by \$667,000, up to \$59.7 million.

I should point out, Mr. Chair, that about one-half of this program is related to ministry salaries. The increase will support negotiated salary increases for staff. The other half of this program is related to bringing in expertise for assistance, such as contracting teachers

to mark diploma exams or to assist in curriculum development and so on.

Program 5, quickly, is basic education programs. In this envelope we provide support for teaching and learning resources, and we provide technology support, such as high-speed networking connectivity. Support for this program will decrease by 5.5 per cent, or \$4.5 million, due to a \$6 million projected decrease in sales of learning resource materials and a \$0.5 million decrease for one-time funding provided last year related to student transcripts, that will not be required this year. This is offset by a \$2 million increase to support high-speed networking.

I also want to clarify, Mr. Chair, that last year our Learning Resources Centre experienced exceptionally high sales volumes due to a special agreement we have with the B.C. government for learning resources. In fact, we saw \$6 million in one-time sales toward the very end of the year as a result. This was an initiative where the B.C. government provided one-time funding to their school boards in 2005-06 for textbooks and learning resources, which they ordered through our Alberta Learning Resources Centre. We do not expect that same level of sales from B.C. again this year, and that accounts for the bulk of the decrease, for those members who were asking or were wondering about it.

Technology support for high-speed networking will actually increase under this envelope by about \$2 million, up to about a total of \$8 million.

Program 6, Mr. Chair, provides support for Alberta's accredited private schools, private early childhood services operators, and for designated special education private schools. This program will increase by 5 per cent, or \$6.4 million, to \$135.5 million.

I see that the time is ticking away on us quickly here, so I'll just jump to program 7. I'll come back and answer questions in more detail on program 6 if anyone wishes. Program 7 provides support for school facilities or infrastructure, which, I think everyone here would know, was officially transferred April 1, 2006, to Alberta Education from the Ministry of Infrastructure and Transportation. Therefore, funding for school facilities now resides entirely within Alberta Education's budget, and there are three envelopes there: one for school construction or school capital, the other one is for infrastructure maintenance renewal, and the third one is for plant operations and maintenance. Perhaps we'll get into some discussion as to those amounts in specifics; however, suffice it to say that the total amount being transferred from the Ministry of Infrastructure and Transportation over to the Ministry of Education will be about \$734 million this particular year.

Mr. Chair, I'll just conclude by stressing that with the money that we're getting into Education under the infrastructure banner from Infrastructure and Transportation, we will conclude 21 school capital projects this year. In other words, 21 new projects will be completed. We will also have built and placed about 109 modular classrooms, and together we'll be providing more than 10,000 brand new spaces for Alberta students.

We're very proud of our education system. We're very proud of our teachers, of our students, of our administrators, of our trustees, and together we will continue providing the best education system in all of Canada as we strive to become one of the best in all of the world.

I will look forward to some lively questions and answers now, Mr. Chair, and I would just remind hon. members to please cite a page number and an element number if you could. That would help facilitate speedier answers.

Thank you for your kind attention.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for St. Albert.

3:20

Mr. Flaherty: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I may not be able to follow the format that the minister has set for me in terms of pages and so forth. Our team will comment on different parts of the budget. I believe I heard the minister say that the transfer of funds – and maybe you could just nod to me if I'm on the right track – for infrastructure was April 1, '06. Was that correct, Mr. Minister? Thanks very much.

From what I'm able to gather, Mr. Chair, professional people across the province – trustees, teachers, the ATA – refer to this as a hold-the-line budget. With this in mind we're going to go through it, if the minister doesn't mind, on some topic areas, starting by raising the issue of infrastructure because our mail and phone calls and delegations tell us that there is a serious infrastructure problem or deficiency across the province. We look at that as about a \$400 million infrastructure deficiency. There are hundreds of new neighbourhoods across the province that have no schools: 40 neighbourhoods in Calgary and 75 in Edmonton.

The other thing that bothers us terribly is that there doesn't seem to be an acknowledgement of the community school concept in our urban centres, and that concerns us.

The government has met with school districts to discuss off-budget spending for schools. Considering that each school district provides capital plans to the minister, and therefore the minister knows what the capital priorities are and could have included these priorities in this budget, why is there no money in the budget for new schools? It seems to me that we're here in '06-07 discussing the budget, and we are not clear why there is no money for new schools in the budget. We look at the media and press releases, and we hear that there will be new funding announcements just around the corner.

My question to the minister is: where is democracy in a system that relies excessively on off-budget spending? Why weren't these schools, the capital projects that school boards have submitted to the minister, in the budget to enable us to discuss these issues presently while we go through this budget? Why won't the minister commit to debating the budget for new schools in the Legislature with other budget estimates? Quite frankly, it smells a little bit like a political agenda, but he'll probably straighten me out on that.

What is the plan to address the problems of infrastructure in schools in Alberta, Mr. Minister? Maybe you could tell us that. How can the minister talk about the best education system in the world when the schools are literally crumbling around students' feet. We have heard of the problems in Grande Prairie and some of the issues there. We have heard even my own colleague talking about the Ellerslie campus, about the water problem. So we think one of the biggest issues in the budget that bothers us is that there's no clarification about what's going to happen with schools across Alberta. Trustees are saying to me: "Why doesn't the minister listen to our plans and discuss them with us? Do we not have priority? Why is he taking up all this administrative time getting us to submit these plans to the minister and not doing anything about it?" I think one of the biggest areas is the Calgary public school board. They have a number of issues. I've certainly read some of the letters that the chairman has written; they've been well written and well documented. So that's the first big issue, Mr. Minister, that maybe you could clarify for us.

The next one we look at is students with special needs. We raise the issue of students with special needs. One significant concern is funding for students with severe disabilities. This group receives about \$20,000 a year when they require a full-time aide costing \$50,000 a year. The business plan states that there is more money for children with special needs. I guess what we're asking, Mr.

Minister, if you could help us, is: where is this described in the budget, this more money for this particular group of pupils? Is the specific problem of funding for aides, teachers' assistants, going to be addressed by this budget or something down the line that we don't know about? What exactly are the increases in special-needs funding? How is this budget going to change conditions for children with special needs in Alberta schools? We'd like some clarification if we can get it on that, sir.

The next issue – and the minister talked about it in his good summary at the beginning – is the class size initiative. The class size initiative received, I believe, in the budget \$126 million this year, or an increase of 15.1 per cent. We are concerned, sir, about how slowly class sizes are being reduced, the link between class size and infrastructure, and how the class size is calculated. Class sizes are becoming smaller as mandated by the class size initiative; however, the utilization formula has not changed. The utilization rate for the school is calculated by dividing enrolment by capacity with complex adjustments for special cases. Smaller class sizes lower the utilization rate, making it more difficult to gain funding for new infrastructure under existing practices, sir.

How is the minister addressing the conflicting demands of the class size initiative and the school utilization formula? Will the class size initiative provide capital funding for schools or just funding for more teachers? We're not sure about that. For example, in my constituency we have a problem with infrastructure and space as we try and get more teachers involved. Is the funding sufficient to meet the class size targets described in the Learning Commission report? That is 17 students for K to 3, 23 students for grades 4 to 6, 25 students for grades 7 to 9, and 27 students for grades 10 to 12.

The Learning Commission recommended average class sizes for school jurisdictions rather than legislated, hard-and-fast rules for maximum class sizes. Considering that we have received reports of teachers with classes of over 35 students despite the class size initiative – and I think you talked a little bit about that in the percentage that you mentioned; you may want to bring that in here – would the minister consider measures other than jurisdictional averages to assess actual class sizes? Or will the minister acknowledge this weakness and take steps to address the calculations of average class sizes by removing abnormally small classes from the calculation? I'll be interested in hearing comments on that, sir, because I found this difficult to understand. Maybe you can clarify this for me. That's why I raise these questions.

The other issue that we'd like to address, if we can, is plant operation and maintenance, sir. If we understand it, PO and M increased by \$19 million, or 5.1 per cent. This increase is barely above the 3.5 inflationary increase, and I think the increase went up a quarter today, if I heard correctly, but I may be wrong about that. PO and M has been an area where the government has requested supplementary supply of \$24 million in 2005-06. We recognize that in that I think there was money for diesel and that kind of thing. So we understand the issue there, but maybe you'd like to clarify a little bit more if this is going to be adequate. Will the budget increase of 5.1 per cent be sufficient to provide the boards with the stable, sufficient, and predictable funding they require to plan for the whole year, or will boards need to come cap in hand for another allotment in mid-year? In other words, will there be enough money to carry on with plant operation and maintenance in the budget as you see it, sir? Maybe you can give us some insight on that.

Then we move to – and we may be wrong on this one – staffing of the department. It's my understanding – and I could be wrong in these figures – that presently there's an increase from 691 to 696 staff in the central office. We would like to know what this staff will be used for and what divisions or branches of the department they

will work in. We'd like to have some insight into that. We'll look forward to your answer to give us some clarification on that.

3:30

Now, one of the areas – and I haven't got the necessary background on this – is the funding model and audits, and one of my colleagues will speak more in depth about this. The government completes audits of a school in a jurisdiction. If overspending is discovered, funds are clawed back in future years. The clawback takes funding from future students, who were in no way involved with the overspending. As such, this process seems to be unfair to future generations of students. If the minister is aware of clawbacks as a result of audits based on credits taught, such as those in St. Albert Catholic high school, why is the minister allowing this practice to continue?

Now, you know, many times I'm asked: is criticizing the good minister about what he's doing all you can do? I think that's a good point. In terms of asking the minister if he has a vision down the line, I would just like to spend a few moments talking about what we would do as a government if we were to form the government, what we would do that's different than what's presently going on.

One of the things that we would do as a Liberal government in Alberta: we would look at full junior and full-day kindergarten right across the province. We would also look at diagnostic testing for K to 3. We would get rid of achievement testing at the grade 3 level and maybe carry it on at 6, 9, and 12, but certainly we would do more remedial work at the elementary level. We would do more screening with students. We would do more helping them prepare for learning. We think this is very, very important. We think the government is remiss by spending a lot of money foolishly at the elementary level.

We think that having access to specialists in schools such as social workers, guidance counsellors, and psychologists is crucial. We think that there's a need for a vocational thrust through the system, not only in the sense of saying that we're going to do something about the vocational thing but giving it some credence, giving it some prestige, and having a program for vocational students with a diploma in vocational education or a diploma in career education, something of that nature, to recognize the importance of that stream and to meet the manpower needs of the province of Alberta.

We hear constantly about this wonderful apprenticeship program. We have difficulty as a group across the way finding out how many students are in this program and how many complete it. We think the number of kids completing the apprenticeship program is a lot less than we're hearing about although I must commend the minister that in Fort McMurray their program is, I think, one of the best in the province. Of course, that fits in well with the oil industry and what they do.

Money to fund established techniques to improve the dropout rate. We think there are enough innovative situations in the province right now that if they had some unique funding, like the teacher-counselor concept, like the teacher assistant concept, these kinds of things, different stimulating ways of keeping kids in school. They could be unique and doing things that are very, very interesting.

The other thing we'd look at if we were government: we would look at the whole question of system-wide school nutrition programs. I want to compliment the hon. Member for Calgary-East for his good comments yesterday on that. He showed me a lot of insight into some new thinking that he proposed. We need funding to address the community use of schools because we think that in a lot of communities this could be the key for helping adult education, senior events, and so forth. We need to look at that whole thing and see if it's viable.

I think that another thing we would do is look at the resolution of the unfunded liability problem. What was very interesting to me – and I know the minister should be commended on going back to local bargaining, but I thought he would tell us a little more about local bargaining that he was proposing with a different flavour. We've studied this very carefully, and we think there are some different things that should be done with this. One of the things, Mr. Minister, is this whole business of the tripartite system that the Alberta teachers are proposing. I think it has some merit in looking at ongoing ways of dealing with things like unfunded liability, problems that come up within school systems on an ongoing basis. I think also that we would look at, hopefully, allowing school boards to become more involved in policy and more involved in planning.

Maybe I could just say three other issues before I sit down, Mr. Minister. Could you tell us what the status of the DARE program in schools is, and are there any plans to look at it in junior high school? We don't hear anything about the drug problem. I just got back from British Columbia, and I can tell you that in the Kelowna area this crystal meth thing is out of control. Schools there are just pulling out their hair. I'm just asking: has the minister got any initiatives or any thoughts on this that could give us some idea about what could happen?

Has he got any thoughts and further thinking about the whole question of junk food in schools and where that's going? That will be brought up later on, I believe.

One more issue. Current funding for new schools only provides funding for the bricks and mortar of the buildings, not for the items inside the school such as textbooks, science equipment. Will this be addressed? Is it addressed in this budget, or do you have plans down the line to look at this matter?

So with that, Mr. Minister, I'll thank you for allowing me to speak to your budget. I'll sit down, and maybe you'd like to address some of the questions.

Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you very much to the Member for St. Albert for raising some of the important issues before us today. The first comment was with respect to the transfer of responsibility. That's correct. That happens as of September 1, but of course it'll officially occur once this budget is endorsed and embraced within a few weeks. Suffice it to say that on the three envelopes of funding that I mentioned, school capital funding – that's about \$258 million – is coming our way; the plant operations and maintenance budget, which is about \$395 million, is coming our way; and the new infrastructure maintenance and renewal funding, which is \$81 million, is also coming our way. I believe the three together would total \$734 million.

You know, it's interesting to hear the comment about hold-the-line budgeting. I read those headlines as well, hon. member. It might be true in a couple of the very many, many aspects of the budget, but let's not forget that we're increasing the budget overall by 6.7 per cent. That's a very significant increase, I think. It takes us up to \$5.3 billion and gives us an additional \$330 million to work with, but that's the key part of the phrase: to work with. We rely on locally elected school boards to do their best to work within those budgets, and it's certainly generous. It could always be more, I suppose. But we rely on them to do what's correct at the local level and also to be accountable back to the taxpayers of this province for those budgets.

The comment with respect to off-budget spending, I think you called it, and how it relates to capital priorities and capital plans that are submitted by school boards is also an interesting question. I'll respond this way. I think the specific question was: why is there no

money for brand new school announcements in the current budget we are discussing? The answer is that we could have held back on the \$207 million of new school construction projects that we made last September, in '05. We could have held that back until now, but, you know, my experience in government is: when you need money and some is available, you take it. You receive it and you employ it because you know it's needed. So we took the money that came available from unanticipated surplus dollars, and we used it to fund dozens of projects across the province.

In fact, that money has been melded in with some of the amounts I referred to earlier today. Some of it is spread out over a couple of years, granted, but the fact is that we will be able to complete 21 new-school projects, which I alluded to earlier in my comments. What I didn't get to because time ran out was the fact that we will begin or continue 51 additional projects with those monies. So there's a tremendous amount going on.

3:40

But it's important to realize, members, that what we are working on right now with the school boards is this new plan for the working title project which we've called schools for tomorrow. As part of that, I've asked school boards to please provide me with their revised or updated capital plan submissions by not later than June 2 so that we can get on with this as quickly as possible. I've asked them to provide their information in a slightly more strategic way. I've talked with several school boards already, and they understand fully what I'm asking them to provide.

The first part is to provide a complete list of their new-school construction requests, which can be comprised of new schools that add capacity for more students because of increased enrolments, or it can be new schools that are replacement schools and simply continue the existing capacity.

The second part is a list of school preservation construction requests. This is everything to do with expansions, modernizations, upgradings, rightsizings, and so on.

The third part would be a list of emergent modular needs. Now, modulars are the new steel-frame construction units, typically housing up to about 25 students, with much better ventilation systems and sound systems and wired capacity for new technology, computers, and so on and so on. They really are a godsend, you might say, because they are helping us replace many of the old portables that are out there right now.

You were asking questions about: where is the democracy in the system that relies sometimes on off-budget monies? I can tell you that there isn't a school board out there that doesn't welcome off-budget monies. There isn't a school board out there that doesn't welcome monies, period, when they have a need for them. So I will continue to press as hard as I can for additional monies, and if they happen to crystalize in a formal budget, perfect, but if they happen to come off budget, well, we'll take the money however we can get it when we know that it's necessary.

You asked the question: why not debate new schools now? Well, we are asking first for a plan to be arrived at. You may recall that there was a major plan done in 1999-2000 called the new century school plan, and literally billions of dollars were rolled out or contemplated at that time. It took about three or four or five years to actually deliver the majority of that plan. There's some planning that goes on every year, obviously, but as we inherit the responsibility for more and more of this planning to occur, I can assure you that we will be talking more about what those new school needs are right across the province. We were fortunate to receive that \$207 million, but I also understand that it wasn't enough to address all of the needs, quite obviously, throughout this great province. There are more needs that exist today.

You mentioned: how can we talk about having the best education system in Canada when certain things aren't right? You cited Grande Prairie and Ellerslie. Well, I can tell you that just last week we did make an offer to the Grande Prairie public board with respect to a school project that they brought to my attention a year ago and re-emphasized again in September, and we're just waiting now to see what they want to do. We've offered them 20 brand new modulars to replace 13 out-of-date and otherwise lacklustre portables that, frankly, just need to be replaced. I've told them that that was a priority, so we've made them that offer to help get that done.

The interesting thing, hon. member, is that should they choose to take up that offer, then we would begin with them. They would do it, and we would help them do site preparation immediately on July 1, moving forward so that come September 1 or in time for their school start-up, we hope we would have those 20 modulars in place, fully hooked up, and so on. Now, I don't know what their response will be to that.

Now, with the Ellerslie situation that has been mentioned two or three times, I just want to politely but bluntly say that we're really waiting on municipal hookups there for their water and sewer capabilities, but the fact is that fresh water is trucked in there every day. It's a system that is working as well as it probably can under the circumstances. As soon as the city runs the lines up there, which is their responsibility to do, then those hookups will occur.

You mentioned something about the minister not listening to your plans and not doing anything about school infrastructure and whatever else it was. I am listening to the plans, and more particularly I'm listening to the plans that are being enunciated by the school boards because they, too, are elected officials. As you know, I've met with them three times in the space of a year and a bit, and I hope to continue meeting with them as long as they want to continue meeting with me because we do get a lot of good work done. There's no question about that. Can we do more? Sure we can, and we're trying our best to do that.

You mentioned Calgary public's needs in particular. It might interest the hon. member to know that just last week I met for over two hours with Calgary public. I met for almost two hours and a bit with Calgary Catholic. We started looking at their infrastructure needs in great detail. I'll be doing this with the two Edmonton metro boards here as well very soon and with other boards as we look more closely at their particular needs.

The needs of some communities, as we would all know, are completely different as you go from one part of the province to another. Province-wide we have rather a flat enrolment – rather flat – but in some areas we have burgeoning populations, Fort McMurray for example, but not necessarily equally burgeoning student populations. There's an interesting phenomenon there. In Grande Prairie we have both unarguably occurring. We have a burgeoning student population that is reflective of the burgeoning general population. Now, Fort McMurray is experiencing some of that as well, and I don't want anybody to misunderstand that, but it's a slightly different phenomenon.

In other places we might simply have aging infrastructure. We might have very, very old portables, such as is the case at Alexander Forbes in Grande Prairie, or we might have a lot of older, even sandstone structures that were built decades ago in Calgary. They're very famous for those, as you would know. Some of those are historic sites. There's a series of things that have to be looked at here.

With respect to your questions about special needs I can tell you that special-needs funding has increased almost every year that I can remember, but for this particular budget year that we're talking about now, there will be an increase of \$34 million, or about 9.7 per

cent. That will take us up to \$373 million for special needs. I think that's a very generous and significant one.

What we typically try to do, hon. members, is ensure that we have enough money built into the budget, based on our jurisdictional profiles and other information, that accommodates both increased volume for special needs as well as increased price. By price I simply mean that the complexity of the students might be changing, and therefore the cost of providing the services changes, as it would do also with the aides and other staff members, if you will, teachers and so on, who are involved in helping out. So there is quite a bit of that happening.

I don't have the exact page in the budget. That was your question. Does somebody have the exact page for special needs in the budget? I would just convey it to you if I knew it off the top of my head. I don't. I'm sure that if you looked at maybe page 146 or thereabouts, hon. member, there is a general summary. I'm not sure that the detail is there, but we'll try and get you the page number where special needs is particularly cited.

Moving on with respect to the class size initiative, you're correct. There is about \$126 million this year. It is a significant increase in the amounts you mentioned. The class size reduction initiative had an increase of \$16 million, which is about 15 per cent, and that will allow school boards to hire well over 200 new teachers. Now, remember that we're averaging this, and I mentioned in my opening comments that I think the average costing that we've put into the budget is about \$70,400, in that ballpark, but I know that there will be a number of teachers hired for far less than that, and you know that as well, and there will be some hired at a little bit higher than that, but as an average that should allow us to accomplish that goal.

3:50

I realize that time is moving on here. I just want to mention this quickly though. When the class size reduction initiative was first ushered in two Septembers ago, it was thought that the entire jurisdictional averages recommended by the Learning Commission could and would be met within a three-year time period. Enormous dollars have flowed out so far, well over \$200 million. I can't remember if it's \$214 million or \$294 million, but it's 200 and some million dollars in total so far, and all of the class size reduction targets that were envisaged after the two-year period have been met or exceeded, in other words bettered, for grades 4 through 12. There might be one exception here or there, but I'm pretty confident that it's virtually 100 per cent.

Where the system hasn't yet met the target is in K to 3, so that's why we're putting emphasis there. Now, some school boards did that right off the get-go because that's where their immediate pressures were. But I'm talking province-wide now, and I'm talking about several dozen school boards that have not met what they and we expected they would meet by way of a progress target after the two-year framework. So it's caused us to sit back, stand back, respond to parents, respond to school boards, and say: hang on a minute here; we've got to take a new, fresh look at this.

Now, no one to my knowledge made specific commitments this far out to hire more teachers than they would have until the budgets have been approved, obviously. So we shouldn't be seeing any school boards that are vulnerable, so to speak, or being short-changed in any way. What we're simply doing is saying that it's time to just refocus this lens a little bit. It's for this coming year only. We'll try and sort this out a little better with them and help them through it.

At the same time, we need to look at one other important factor that was tremendously impacted, hon. members, by the class size

reduction initiative and that's the area of infrastructure. School boards have told me almost to the person that the class size reduction initiative is a wonderful thing but that the pressure it has put on the system for more classroom space, for more teachers to be found and hired, some with specific skill sets, obviously, for certain subject areas – that part of the equation just needed to be looked at more carefully. Therefore, we've just slowed this down for this year. But let's not make any mistake about it. We're still going to be helping school boards hire somewhere between 200 and 250 brand new teachers over and above the 1,685 teachers that have already been hired in the first two Septembers of 2004, 2005.

So I think that's fairly positive news, but I hear what you're saying about it. It leads into that question that you asked: will the budget provide just money for the class size reduction initiative and nothing for capital infrastructure? Or you asked something along that line. Well, there are significant monies already in the budget for both. For example, with respect to infrastructure on page 135 you would find that the budget proposed is \$115 million over last year's forecasted budget and \$180 million over last year's budget. So government is responding to identified needs, and we're increasing funding as those dollars become available. That's just one example of that.

You asked a question about jurisdictional averages. The reason that we do jurisdictional averages, hon. member, is simply because that was what was recommended in the Learning Commission's report, and I think that was because school boards themselves didn't necessarily want mandated capped sizes of classrooms. The explanation is very simple. Let's just theoretically say that we made it a law in theory, hypothetically speaking, with respect to a cap size for a particular grade level, and it's 18 kids. Now, what do you do when the 19th and the 20th kids show up? Do you hire a whole other teacher? So some flexibility has to be kept in mind, and that's what school boards impressed upon us. So that's good.

On the other side, I'm not immune to factors like you've just mentioned, where you might have a class of over 30. That's what we're working on now, to get those few sore thumbs, so to speak, dealt with. Having been a teacher – and I know that you have as well, hon. member, and others here have too – we know how challenging that can be, depending on the demographics and learning abilities of your students, of course.

The other question you asked about was with respect to PO and M, plant operation and maintenance, increases. Is it enough or is it not enough? It's about 5.1 per cent of an increase, up to \$395 million. You know, we're working with the school boards on this because I'm sharply aware of the increased costs of some basic things, but PO and M, generally speaking, is with respect to the cost of turning on the lights every day, with respect to heating the schools every day, with respect to custodian/janitorial services, that type of thing. We hope that that increase will work, and if it doesn't, then I'm sure that the school boards will be letting me know. That's what we got, so that's what we're passing on, hon. member.

You asked about staffing within the department. The specific question that you asked was on the increase from 691 to 696 FTEs. I think it's on page 145, at the bottom. The answer is that the additional five staff spots are related to implementation and support of the accountability factor in relation to our work with jurisdictions, where we collect and analyze a very broad array of items, many, many of them, and how they pertain to our accountability pillar. We have measures there, as you would know, and we help keep jurisdictions up to speed with that, and we help interpret and use that information for various purposes.

I'll continue with other stuff in the next segment. Thank you.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview.

Mr. Martin: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. Going through estimates, you get 20 minutes, and you sort of have to pick, I suppose as the minister does, things that you want to concentrate on. I want to talk about some specific issues, but just generally to begin with, I think we'd be kidding ourselves if we didn't recognize that there are still some educational issues simmering in terms of funding and the rest of it.

The minister is well aware of the last poll I've seen. It was last September or so. The Ipsos-Reid poll revealed that 72 per cent of Albertans still believe that the education system is not adequately funded. They're looking at things like school fees, and the minister has alluded to class sizes and the rest of it. It doesn't matter, Mr. Minister, if we throw out big figures to people; it doesn't mean much. It is a lot of money, but education is an investment, I think we'd both agree. It's not an expense overall. Sure, we have to try to put the resources in the most efficient way we can, but when you throw out big numbers to people, what they understand is what's happening in their own school or in their own classroom and if they see problems there. That's why I think that poll is still there.

I would remind the minister that to some degree we are playing catch-up, having been through the strike as a trustee in Edmonton public, the fact that the arbitration came in at 7 and 7 and we were given 4 and 3. There were a lot of teachers laid off, I know, in Edmonton public. To some degree I would say that we've probably caught up. Generally, when you talk to people, it's hard to say whether it's better or worse, but most people feel that we're sort of where we were before arbitration. There's some improvement in terms of the class initiative, I think, especially at the K to 3 level. We may not be there yet, but I'm told by people that we've seen some improvements there. Some classes in junior high and senior high are still pretty heavy.

The minister talked about capping. I think the problem with averages is that in a special-needs class you can't take that many kids. So you could have a nice average and still have a lot of classes over 30 because of the makeup in that particular school. That's why I believe that at some point there's some sort of capping. It doesn't mean that with the capping you'd have to hire somebody with one or two students later. You'd take that into the average. But I think we have to begin to look at that. Just generally those are some issues.

4:00

I want to come back to the Learning Commission. The minister knows that I'm going to raise certain things. I'm sure he's well aware of that. I want to talk about the remaining outstanding items on the Learning Commission. I mean, we could go through the Learning Commission and say that, yeah, we've done some things here; perhaps not enough. But I want to talk about the remaining items.

First of all, the fact that I'm very disappointed in our reaction on the junior kindergarten and kindergarten. The Learning Commission said that those are probably two of the most important items they made. I'm not suggesting that we need it immediately to go throughout the province. Probably financially that may not have been in the cards. But in the schools I represented and still do as an MLA – I represent the city centre project, and I know the minister is aware of that particular program. It's had a dramatic impact on those kids to have that sort of help. The Edmonton public and other boards have done this.

[Mr. Goudreau in the chair]

I just happen to understand Edmonton public the best, the 18 high-needs schools and Dr. da Costa's work – I'm sure the minister is aware of that – and the tremendous impact that's had on those kids. If we don't do the job there – in fact, I can say that when the cuts came after the arbitration with the city centre project, yeah, they said that small classes are important. But you know what they said? Full-day kindergarten, junior kindergarten, and reading recovery were probably even more important. That's how much of a priority they put on it.

You know, I look at the figures – and I'm using the Learning Commission's figures – to see if we could afford it if we picked, you know, full-day. We already have half-day kindergarten. If we just did it in what we call the high-needs schools, that would have been \$21 million more in junior kindergarten, and funding for kids at risk was pegged at \$42 million. With all due respect, Mr. Minister, I think we could have afforded that. I think it's the pay-me-now or pay-me-later sort of syndrome. If these kids don't get that opportunity, they're going to be behind all the rest of the way through school, and we're going to end up with some of the problems that we face. I know that the minister knows this, and I know that he probably faced some pressures from some of his MLAs. I'd be surprised if this minister didn't believe this. That's why it was so disappointing that we couldn't start there, at that level. It didn't need to be universal, right across the scene.

So now Edmonton public and, I expect, others are going to have to decide whether this program is important enough. The AISI funding is running out. Is this program important enough that we take money from other instructional dollars? Then you get into the problem that other people don't think that's fair. I know that it's not going to happen in this budget, but I'd say to this minister: let's go back and review that in a very short period of time. I think that it's, as I say, pay me now or pay me later. That's so absolutely crucial for those schools. I can't say it strongly enough. I would hope that this is not a final answer, the announcement he made – what was it? – a month or so ago. I will keep pursuing that particular issue because it was something that was very important to me as a trustee.

I'll be quick on some of the other ones. You know, there's that saying: just say no to drugs. I can say something very quickly to the minister. One of the outstanding items is principals taken out of the bargaining unit of the ATA. Just say no. Just say no. It doesn't work. In fact, I don't know why the Learning Commission advocated it. They went out and talked to Emery Dossdall in B.C., who is the minister. He told them that it didn't work. I think the system works well now because it's more of a collegial model, the principal and people working together. The minute you start to have the principals out of the bargaining unit, it becomes sort of – they're at a different strata. Then you have to have the ATA involved much more and the rest of it. So I would say: just say no to that one.

The bargaining is a tougher one, the provincial bargaining. As a trustee in the Edmonton public we thought we could do our own bargaining. In fact, I sat in the unit. I also know that a lot of the rural boards don't want it, so there's a mixed message being sent there. The ASBA has basically endorsed provincial bargaining, but all the metro boards, to my knowledge, are saying no. So we have a split there. It makes it difficult for the minister.

At the very minimum if you're going to move towards provincial bargaining, the government has to be at the table. You cannot have an internal group like the ASBA bargaining if they don't have access to the money. So if we're going to look at provincial bargaining, then we have to bring the government to the board because they're the ones that control the purse strings. You can't bargain with

people who don't control the purse strings. That's the only thing I would say. As a school trustee in Edmonton I thought our system locally worked very well, but I also understand that there's a big split on that within the community. So that would be my advice there to the minister.

I'd like to turn to the whole area the minister talked about: \$180 million more on schools. This has been a big issue here. The reality is that we're playing catch-up again with our school maintenance. Again, if I come back to my experiences as a trustee, we had schools falling apart, and the ones that seemed to be built in the '50s were the worst because they weren't built to last. The maintenance dollars were not coming in fast enough, and you're always sort of playing catch-up with one or the other.

I would want to ask here, though, if the minister – and this is a school I know he cares about – could do something in the Edmonton public to loosen up the situation with Victoria comp because it's having a ripple effect on all the rest of the schools in Edmonton public. As the minister is well aware, when I was there, they were going to change it and partially knock down part of it. Now we find, because of inflation and what's going on, that that's too costly, and now they're looking at a different school. We have to make a decision here on this school. Remember that they were promised, back when, \$64 million and then totally for our budget I remember \$35 million, and \$30 million was going to go into Vic comp. So it has really played havoc there, and I think it's time that we did something with Vic comp. I know that the minister – I remember from meetings we had – had some interest in that particular school and seeing it go ahead. That should be a priority because, as I say, it has had a ripple effect on all the other schools in the Edmonton public.

The reality is that we're playing catch-up. We can say: \$180 million more. Yes, I don't doubt that that's the case, but the reality is that like the rest of the infrastructure budgets in the province, we have a deficit of playing catch-up. Calgary has probably been the most aggressive, but I know that the minister has got letters from Edmonton. I think the minister brought up the Grande Prairie situation. The MLA for St. Albert: we're getting these calls – I'm sure the minister is – from all over the province. It's a lot more money, but the reality is that we may need more. Rather than us doing it later, I would have liked to have seen in this budget how we're going to deal with this deficit problem, this maintenance problem over a three- to five-year period as part of the budget.

Now, I'm not going to turn it down if there's unfunded money in June or whatever. I'm sure the school boards will take it and say thank you very much, and I'm certainly not going to say: don't give them the money. But the reality is that that's not the proper way to budget. I would suggest that if it takes \$180 million or \$500 million more a year to catch up in the five-year period, that should be part of the budget. It shouldn't be based on unbudgeted surpluses because it makes their budgeting at the school board level very, very difficult. How do they do it? We may get a school; we may not. We may get maintenance money; we may not. Nobody is budgeting properly when that happens.

4:10

Flowing from that, Mr. Chairman, is a specific question to the minister because we've had this discussion. I've been very concerned about the way the school closure process works. We had this discussion last year, and I recollect the minister saying that they were looking into it. The process here in Alberta does not work well. We talked about the variations in construction, of taking out education, taking it over, that they will get rid of some of the situations where the per-student factor was based on the size of the

halls and the bathrooms and all the rest of it. That seems to be a no-brainer, and I would hope that there would be some clarification on that. I would think that that would probably be better being under the Department of Education. They would understand that more than infrastructure, who deal with roads and the rest of it.

It's the school closure process, again, that worries me. Remember, Mr. Minister, we talked about the fact that Ontario got rid of this sort of payoff, the inner city against the suburbs. It's true in rural Alberta, too, where you have to close down schools to get new ones. Remember, we talked about that. They got rid of that in Ontario. They said:

There have been "rewards" in capital funding for closing schools which has distorted facility considerations. Some boards felt compelled to close schools in one area to be eligible for new schools in another, even if the sites were far apart. Some boards closed school prematurely to become eligible for new replacement schools. The ministry will no longer recognize closed schools as creating eligibility for new school grants.

The point I want to make there, Mr. Chairman, is that I would hope that we're looking at this closure process. The minister, I think, said that they were looking at the school closure process as part of the act. It creates enemies. It pits schools against schools, it pits neighbourhoods against neighbourhoods, and it doesn't make sense. I would really hope that we are looking closely at the Ontario model. If a school closes itself because of lack of students, eventually it will do that whether it's in rural Alberta or not, but they should not be rewarded by saying: oh, if you close a bunch of schools down in the inner city or one town or another, somehow you'll get another school. It's unfair. It doesn't work. I remember the minister saying that they were reviewing that, so I'd like his comments on that if we could, Mr. Chairman.

The minister is talking about high school completion rates, and that's a big concern in this province. I think we have some of the lowest – for some reason in rural Alberta I think the minister has alluded to kids getting jobs making more than the teachers. It's a little harder process to tell them that they have to stay in school, but they have to because down the way we're creating a big social problem.

I want to say to the minister – I think he said something about this – that round-tables are nice, but there are some things that we can do. I think the minister knows this. In Edmonton public we had to deal with the number of counsellors. Maybe I'm biased, having formerly been one, but I think that has an impact on the number of counsellors we have and the number of people that work in library services, learning resources. I expect that this is true throughout the province. The memorandum from Edmonton public on September 27 showed that the number of school counsellors has dropped from 99.1 full-time equivalents, FTEs, in '90-91 to 43.8 in 2004-2005. The number of learning resources, mainly librarians, dropped from 81.7 to 12.1 FTEs. Now, these are people that deal with literacy, and these are people that as counsellors deal with students in not only career counselling but personal counselling. They have a big impact on whether kids stay in school. The minister would be aware of this.

The figures I've seen indicate that if a kid comes out of grade 9 one year behind in reading level, their chances of being a dropout are very significant. Most of them will drop out. Even one year. So that's why I think librarians are that important. We may need a special initiative, as we did with the class learning sizes, something to deal with that problem. But I suggest very strongly to the minister that this is at least one part of the puzzle. I would argue that if we don't do something with the high-needs kids at the earlier levels that I was talking about, we're still going to be facing a problem in those

schools, and of course we need to do more for aboriginal education because they have a tremendously high dropout rate, and some things seem to be working better than others.

I'm moving along fairly quickly here, Mr. Chairman. The other thing I wanted to briefly talk about is the unfunded liability. I know that this has been raised in question period, that we have the \$6 billion, and I know that there was an agreement in '92. We know all that, but something that worries me is that it could be a \$46 billion problem down the road. Then that has implications not only for the teachers; it certainly has implications for the province in terms of our financial stability down the way. I think the question is: do we work on a \$6 billion problem, or do we work on a \$46 billion problem?

I would remind the minister that another province, Newfoundland, has wiped out its teachers' pension liability with negotiation, and the elimination in Newfoundland just came up as part of the agreement between teachers and the government. It will see the government of Newfoundland and Labrador pour \$1.952 billion into the teachers' pension fund. In return, the province's 6,400 teachers agreed to enter into a four-year collective agreement for the period between September 1, 2004, to August 31, 2008, which will see a wage freeze in years 1 and 2, and a 3 per cent increase in each of years 3 and 4. If they can do it, we should be able to do it, because to postpone the problem is going to cost us more.

Mr. Chairman, I'm almost out of time. I realize that by looking at the clock. But those are some of the issues. I would have liked to talk about too much predominance of standardized tests – we've done some work on that, as the Member for St. Albert did – but time runs out. Thank you.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you very much to the hon. Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview for raising actually some very, very good points. We may disagree on some of the methodology to a few of them, but I think spiritually we probably would agree on most of them.

I'll begin just by commenting on the poll that I think was cited at the beginning of his comments, and I would simply like to rebut, if I could, by saying that of all the parents that were surveyed across the province, 83 per cent of the parents expressed great satisfaction with our education system. In general, the public responded with a 72 per cent satisfaction rate. So I think that on balance things are pretty good. Obviously, they could always be better. They could be better in virtually every part of our personal and professional lives, but in terms of the education system the results are there. We have the highest funded education system anywhere in Canada. It's the highest per capita, Mr. Chair. It's the highest per student, and we have the best results on virtually everything. So we're very proud of that. Can it be better? I've said it before; I'll say it again. Of course it can. That's what we're working on: constantly improving, constantly pushing our own borders, and constantly trying to help our students up the ladder of preparation aimed at success.

I am aware of some of the difficulties that still exist with respect to special-needs funding. I think there was a point made in that respect, that when we're talking about class size averages on a jurisdiction-wide basis, they don't mean a lot to the people who are having the other side of the experience, larger than ever classrooms. I have some in my own riding, and I'm sure that others do as well. But, still, we're working away on that. I expect some tremendous progress to be made in the next two years as we complete that five-year window.

With respect to remaining recommendations in the Commission on Learning report I know that there are a lot of people who would support additional junior kindergarten programs, and I know that there are others who would like a full-day kindergarten program.

I'm well aware of that. The only thing that we said, however, is that we're not going to force them onto the system.

Now, that's a key word. We're not going to make them mandatory, but that doesn't mean we're not going to support the provision of them or that we're not going to step up to the plate and provide money, because we do. We provide about \$241 million in this budget alone, but the difference is – and you would know this perhaps better than most in the Chamber, hon. member, because you've been a trustee – that school boards do still want flexibility. You are correct that it will vary from metro centres to large urban centres to rural areas. That's true. There's a great amount of variety that we're proud of in this province, so finding a way of addressing everyone's needs and desires has been extremely challenging. I don't think that there's a part of government that doesn't experience some of those issues on a jurisdictional basis.

4:20

Let me just say this in response to what we are doing to help the so-called at-risk children that need that additional assistance and so on. This past year we opened something along the line of 22 brand new parent link centres.

Mrs. Forsyth: Forty-five in total.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Forty-five in total this year? Yeah, there we are. The Minister of Children's Services, who leads that initiative – and I partner with her and help where I can – has seen to it that these parent link centres, in response to a recommendation out of the Learning Commission, I might add, fulfill their function of helping parents help their kids. Some of it becomes medically involved, and we have the Minister of Health and Wellness that will chip in and help out in that respect as well.

In my experience I've found this. These parent link centres are helping parents and the system in general to do far earlier interventions, far earlier screening, additional diagnostic-type screening that really helps to identify what kind of help a particular child needs. But let me just give you one example of where I wish things could be a lot better: speech-language therapy. You know what, hon. member? If we had more people in that profession, we would absolutely see them being hired. The fact is that there's a shortage world-wide, not just in Alberta or in Canada. You just can't seem to find them. They're almost as scarce as welders in the construction business. You just can't seem to find enough of them. The minute they graduate, they're snapped up. Still, there is a lot of good work going on there, and, yes, I am familiar with Dr. da Costa's work.

You mentioned reading recovery. I agree. That is very important. I don't have any argument there. But I stress that just because we didn't make these programs mandatory doesn't mean that we're not continuing to do something about it.

I think that you said something about: is this the final answer? Well, that's the answer for that particular recommendation, but the next question is this, at least in my mind. If you're not going to make junior K mandatory and you're not going to make full-day kindergarten mandatory, what are you going to do? I mean, that would be the logical question from my perspective. So what we are doing is constantly adding additional dollars to the system. We're working with partnering ministries, as I just said, to create other ways of addressing this. We're involving the communities more so to help them out because Alberta is a very different place from corner to corner to corner to corner. I agree. It doesn't need to be universal, and some strides are being made. So I hope that you'll take some comfort in that, and we'll see what else develops as we go forward.

With respect to another issue coming out of the Commission on Learning, the principals being in or out of the ATA. As you may recall, the government did accept that recommendation, and my predecessor, in fact, had hired a gentleman, I think out of the Rocky Mountain House area, to do a survey and a report. I have that report. I haven't acted or responded to it yet, but I hope to get that done fairly soon one way or the other.

I do understand the point of collegiality that you mentioned, and having been a teacher in a larger school, a very large school, for a while and in a smaller school, I understand the difference there. Having grown up in a very small rural community where we only had a handful of teachers gave me that experience as well.

[Mr. Shariff in the chair]

The collective bargaining model is another issue, and I'll just re-emphasize again that 59 per cent of the school boards voted to accept the model proposed by the Alberta School Boards Association, the so-called ASBA model, but, obviously, 41 per cent didn't. Then there were a few – shall I call them fence-sitters? They liked the concept of a new collective bargaining model, but they didn't like the specific proposal that ASBA had come up with for their own particular reasons. Still, when you counted up the number of students that were represented by the boards who didn't like province-wide bargaining or didn't like the specific model that ASBA proposed, they represented about 50 per cent of the total student base across the province. It was almost a dead even split, almost right down the centre of it. So I think we took the position that we took with respect to, specifically, the ASBA model and indicated that we could not support that model as presented.

Can government be at the table for future bargaining? I think you asked that question. Other people have asked this question as well. We have resisted that temptation, and I think we will continue to resist it because in keeping with what I just explained about the local bargaining model being kept local, so too is it important for us to recognize that school board officials, school board trustees, are locally elected folks and they have a role to play in this. I would get concerned after a while as to how much of a role we're really leaving in the hands of elected school boards if we were yet to take that away from them, you know. So that's an important point.

Your other point was with respect to Victoria school for the arts or what was once called Victoria composite. Yes, that is a fond place to me, having taught there for a number of years. I recall the announcements of the \$63 million and then the \$51 million and then the \$35 million or \$36 million or whatever. I should tell you that we do have a proposal that came in for 1,700 students at that particular school. I understand that they now have around 2,000 students already or soon to be enrolled. I'm not sure if it's current, right this minute, right now. I understand that it is right now. But that figure that we're talking about doesn't necessarily even include anything for the demolition cost for the current school.

You will remember that there were three different proposals, right? One was for a brand new, stand-alone over there and knock this one down. The other one was to build something new and keep part of this and so on. It's gone along the way quite a bit, but it's not quite there yet. I would say that even with the \$36 million, hon. member, assuming that goes ahead as planned – and we'll see what those monies will bring – that will be the most expensive school project, I believe, in the province's history, even at that amount.

I'm not arguing for a moment because I think the arts are extremely important, and that model is unique in Canada. So, too, is the Grant MacEwan arts model. It's unique in Canada. They are absolutely amazing. You hear about Grant MacEwan, for example,

in other parts of the world where I have had the pleasure of travelling to and visiting. So, too, I expect the same will occur with the Victoria school for the arts. I think it will become Juilliard north, if you will, for that age group. They do tremendous work there, and they do it very successfully. But we still need the community to come together a little bit more on this, hon. member. That's why we don't have any one finalized, settled solution yet to comment on.

Very quickly moving ahead to the point you mentioned with respect to deficits. I can't remember the exact point you mentioned, but it was something about proper ways versus improper ways to do budgeting. Now, if you're talking about the school infrastructure piece – and I think you probably were – I am very aware of some of the deferred maintenance as it's called, or the backlog, in both the O and M envelope, which is the routine, day-to-day upkeep stuff, and also in the IMR envelope, which is the infrastructure maintenance renewal budget. I'll say this. With respect to the infrastructure maintenance renewal budget, which is where most of this would come in, we are going to increase that funding envelope by 68 per cent, from \$48 million to \$81 million if the numbers serve me correctly, and they do. That's a tremendous increase, but, you know – I've said this to my colleagues as well – that's still not enough because there are some significant other factors to keep in mind here.

4:30

One of them is the sharply rising costs of labour and of materials and of equipment. Even though a 68 per cent increase sounds impressive – and it is; let's face it: a 68 per cent increase in any part of the budget is huge – when you're facing backlogs that are four, five, six times that amount, that is where we have an issue. That's what we're trying to work on with this new plan that we're working on for June. I don't know yet what the success of that entire plan will be, but I have to be confident that it's going to reflect very honestly and accurately what the needs are in a prioritized fashion province-wide.

Your comments about the school closure process I will probably respond to in some greater length in writing because of time. Suffice it to say that I am aware, having just inherited all of this three weeks ago – the files, that is – of the issues you've mentioned with respect to how hallways or gymnasiums or closets or whatever it is may or may not have been counted in terms of school utilization of space.

I want to say that people that I have met over in the Department of Infrastructure and Transportation are extremely capable, talented, and professional people who know this area very, very well. I had my first meeting with them about a week and a day ago, as I recall, and we spent a couple of hours together looking at issues just like this. I told them what my expectations were, and they told me what their expertise and experiences were. We're trying to come together in the middle and sort this out to everyone's benefit. I don't like seeing schools pitted one against the other or neighbourhoods being pitted one against the other, and we've lived through a few of these together.

I can't recall what the details of the Ontario model are that you referred to, and I don't know if we have that model in our shop or not. We probably have it. I wouldn't mind taking a closer look at it then.

What I can tell you in having met with some of the school boards – and perhaps some of the trustees were from other parts of Canada and brought this idea here. I don't know. They indicated that there was thinking about the community playing a larger role, not just the elected school board folks or the government but the community. Now, that's one issue.

The other issue that I hope to look at through this plan in June that I'm going to come up with is with respect to where the schools are

physically located in relation to where the population now lives. We see neighbourhoods maturing now to the point where there may be very few kids there, but the school is still there. What is the impact going to be of a school board looking at a potential closure in that area and the building of a new school, a replacement school as it were, in an outlying area so that we can avoid some of the transportation costs, the busing times, and all of that? I don't honestly have that answer sorted out yet, but I want you to be aware that we are looking at those aspects as well.

On high school completion rates there are things we could do now, absolutely, and we're doing them. I have mentioned this in all three of my meetings with the school board chairs or school board trustees in general. I know that more counsellors would probably help and that we need to be careful when talking about that whether we mean guidance counsellors or work counsellors. A huge difference between the two. I would suggest that work counsellors are very important and fulfill an important role, obviously. However, guidance counsellors tend to do a little larger array of counselling. That would be one area that I'd like to strengthen going forward, but I don't have those dollars built into the budget to make any announcements at this point.

I feel similarly about librarians. Librarians are a critical part, and they, too, would impact in a positive way our high school completion rates. We have seen a large number of library technicians come into the system, but I think we all know that that's not the same as schoolteacher librarians. They perform different functions. In fact, library technicians don't typically have the authority to even supervise or to teach a class of children whereas library teachers do. There are some fundamental differences there. I agree, though, that it's very important, and that is an initiative that came out of the Learning Commission in part as well. I have met with the Library Association once or twice now, and I don't have any huge progress yet to report on that front, unfortunately.

The FNMI, First Nations, Métis, Inuit piece, the aboriginal education piece that you mentioned, is important. We are strengthening that. I don't have all of the dollars just handy in front of me right now, but I do notice, for example, that Edmonton public will receive over \$7 million, almost \$7.1 million this year. It's probably an increase of about 2 per cent, somewhere in that neighbourhood, I think.

Similarly – I meant to give this to you earlier – with the ECS instruction funding Edmonton public will be getting \$13.6 million this year for ECS or kindergarten-type programming. Plus, for ECS mild/moderate disabilities and gifted and talented they'll be receiving about \$683,000 this year. Again, another increase. For ECS program unit funding, PUF funding, they'll be receiving \$15.8 million, which is about a \$300,000 increase in that category. So there's quite a bit going on there, and we're pretty pleased with that.

My final comment, quickly, is with the unfunded pension liability, which I think you referred to. We will be providing through this current budget about \$152 million for addressing government's responsibility for a two-thirds share of that unfunded pension liability, which is, as you know, consistent with the 1992 agreement. The question is: what is the impact of the unfunded pension liability on the recruitment of future teachers and on the retention of existing teachers? I would say that there are some unpleasant possibilities of negative impacts if we don't do something about it, but I don't have the mandate at this point to do anything about that. We have talked about this with the ATA, we have talked about this with the Alberta School Boards Association, and it's an issue that we continue to see some movement toward. Newfoundland wiped out theirs and made a four-year deal, as you know.

I'll stop there. I hear the bell, Mr. Chair.

The Deputy Chair: Hon. members, given that there is a great demand for members to participate, the chair is going to recognize the following: Calgary-Nose Hill, followed by Edmonton-Mill Woods, and then the minister.

Dr. Brown: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. It's a pleasure to take this opportunity to rise and raise with the minister a few issues which I've raised with him on previous occasions. One of them was alluded to by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview, and that is the issue of high school completion rates. I would like to know whether or not we've made any progress in that regard over the past year. Would the minister also advise whether or not his department has taken any initiatives in this budget to improve any progress that we have made?

The second is the issue of participation rates in the postsecondary education system. I realize that it's not primarily in the bailiwick of your ministry. However, decisions on whether to pursue postsecondary education and training are decisions that for the most part are made during high school. The die is cast, so to speak, at that time on the career paths, whether it be trades, colleges, technical, or university. I wonder whether the minister could comment on whether there are any measures being taken by way of improving career counselling or similar measures to encourage more participation in postsecondary education, particularly in view of the economic circumstances that we are in right now, where there is temptation for young people, perhaps, to go out and make money in an easier manner to their long-term detriment.

The third issue that I would like to address to the minister is another one that I've raised on previous occasions and that relates to the age of leaving high school. I would like to know whether the minister has any intention in the future or in the plans to proclaim the School (Compulsory Attendance) Amendment Act, 2003, which was passed in the 25th Legislature, whereby it would make compulsory attendance necessary until the age of 17 years. As the minister is aware, that has been on the books for two or three years now, and I'm wondering whether or not there are any plans or any budgetary provisions to implement that in the future.

4:40

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods.

Mrs. Mather: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I've got some specifics that I'd like to look at, but as I was thinking about this very important budget and this very important portfolio, our Ministry of Education, I felt that it was important to look at the long-standing education pedigree that needs to be recognized in this province. It began in the late 1930s with the election of the Social Credit Party. William Aberhart, an educator himself, served as Minister of Education as well as Premier. Together with his deputy, G.F. McNally, and H.C. Newland and John Barnett of the Alberta Teachers' Association, they formed a formidable team for educational reform. Particularly interesting was the partnership between the Premier and his deputy minister. In background and temperament they were very different men, yet they shared a common commitment to education, which is exactly what Alberta needed.

Aberhart was a small "c" conservative. Religiously, he'd be called a fundamentalist. McNally was a Deweyite, trained in the progressive school of education at an American university. Both were prepared to be radical and flexible in facing the need for change. McNally recognized that any solutions must fit Alberta's situation, that they could not be superimposed from some other experimental school system somewhere else. Aberhart recognized the need for students to be exposed to other points of view. As

Minister of Education he signed letters defending the teaching of evolution in Alberta high schools at a time when this was very contentious. He stated that exposure to scientific theories was a necessary part of a liberal arts education.

McNally, the progressivist administrator, was also a churchman. He donated a trophy for citizenship to a Calgary postsecondary lay training school. It was awarded annually to a student chosen by secret ballot by his or her classmates. McNally believed that citizenship was a necessary ingredient of a good religious education. That school was later studied by Americans, who said admiringly that they'd seen nothing like it in their experience. A later group of Americans did the same recently in commenting on Edmonton public schools leading the way in innovation, in school-based budgeting, alternative programs, and a relaxation of boundaries. An issue of educational administrator was devoted entirely to what was happening here, the first and only time it focused on a single district. This commitment to education continued two generations, through Social Credit and into the early years of the Progressive Conservative government. Politicians and teachers saw each other as allies, not adversaries, in the need to better Alberta students and society.

Alberta's educational excellence is also recognized at the postsecondary level. A friend of mine, a graduate of the University of Alberta, was accepted into doctoral studies in education at Oxford 15 years ago. He was pleased and surprised to learn from his adviser there that the faculty considered our graduate school here to be among the top in Canada. The U of A's new president is committed to making her institution a world-class university. This achievement is not far off. It grows out of a dream by Alexander Cameron Rutherford and Henry Marshall Tory a century ago, when they built a campus south of the river. It is paralleled in a province that now has four full-fledged universities and a number of colleges offering university-level courses and approaching university status.

Yes, Alberta has an educational pedigree of which we can be proud. It was begun with the first Liberal government, reformed by Social Credit, fostered by progressives and early Progressive Conservatives, and needs to be conserved by all Conservatives to take their name and our heritage seriously. The past decade of using education as a chopping block for budget cuts is a bad dream from which we are thankfully beginning to awaken. I and my colleagues look forward to renewing this province's commitment to education. Given the opportunity, we'll see an Alberta whose motto, Strong and Free, is rooted in an even more enduring line: you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free. When that happens, we will be able to look back on the past decade of educational cuts and controversy as a blink or hiccup against a backdrop of history and of promise that is bright indeed.

My first area of concern has to do with high school funding and course completion and credits, that sort of thing. Since funding is based on course completions in high school, they only receive funds for actual courses completed; that is, where there's been 50 per cent attendance and a minimum mark of 25 per cent. I know that some schools feel that they have invested heavily in staff time, smaller classes, aide time, calls to parents, attendance policies, tutoring students, and making plans to assist students at risk, but if the student is not successful or does not attend in spite of all these efforts, there is a loss of funds to the school.

Another thing to consider is clawbacks which result because of audits. This has affected every CTS school, any school with CTS courses, because of funding based on individual modules. The problem was the number of prerequisites required. If a student completed the intermediate level but had failed the beginning module, the credit funding was removed. Because of grandfathering and Alberta Education searching out individual models, schools have

been affected. I believe they're suggesting now to clump the modules in three- or five-credit groups, which will be better overall, but this really looks like a return to what was the case 12 years ago where we taught, for example, beauty culture 10, 20, and 30. Why they changed this is beyond me. Those schools that were offering the three-year or full program were of course hurt the most.

The concern that the requirements for the apprenticeship board and Alberta Education differ is also a huge one. For example, if you look at cosmetology, nail art 2160 was a prerequisite for manicuring 2, 3, but nail art is not recognized by the apprenticeship board. Schools that only offer partial programs were dinged even bigger time because they didn't have the prerequisites, and cosmetology has been the biggest hit.

Now, if the student passed all the courses, no search was done for prerequisites. As soon as a failing mark was issued, however, a complete history was done, and money was taken back. Clumping modules into three- or five-credit clumps could get rid of this problem. I think also that we could get advice from the people who are in the front line. Maybe that's a novel idea, but it's a good idea. Until they are seriously changed, this existing model's delivery problems will continue to arise.

Education should not be funded on a business model because it is not a business. It is a tool whereby society assists, as much as possible, future citizens in becoming contributing, active, and moral members of society. Because human growth and development cannot be legislated, automated, or regulated, funding schools as though they were factories creates the groundwork for a dysfunctional education system and produces not only poor results but a liability in the future.

CBC's Wild Rose Forum during the week of March 6, '06, discussed a study which estimated that a possible 40 per cent of Albertans are essentially illiterate. This is a staggering number. However, considering the way public schools are funded, perhaps it's not unexpected. The funding crisis in public education is bound to produce poorly educated young people, and that was bound to become eminently visible sooner or later.

I've seen enormous changes in the way education is delivered to students. Some of the changes have been very beneficial. For example, technology has helped students to become more aware of the world in which they live and has provided them with vast amounts of information. Some of the changes have been less than beneficial. We've also seen enormous changes in the attitudes towards learning on the part of large numbers of students, and it has not been a change for the better.

For whatever reasons many children are coming to school with impaired abilities to learn, to read, or to concentrate. Some are severely impaired, and their problems are being addressed as best the schools can. Some are impaired only just enough that they do not receive any extra assistance, and since the burdens on classroom teachers are tremendous, the problems of these children remain unaddressed for years. As they progress through school, not because of capability but because of age, their deficits become larger and larger. By the time these children become disillusioned young adults entering high school, their reading and academic deficits are so large that they feel that they can never catch up or succeed.

4:50

The way schools are funded – and at this point I'm speaking about high schools – contributes enormously to the problem of providing appropriate education for all students. Yet at the same time the Department of Education requires that teachers provide appropriate education for all students. In a population area where large numbers of students tend to be reluctant learners, schools face uncertain

funding levels from one year to the next. Having to rely so heavily on payment for completion of credits and for retention on a year-by-year basis makes it difficult for these schools to plan longer term programs that will address students' needs. Because of the volatility of students' lives, one year may be a great success, another may not, and with funding fluctuating accordingly, as if students were blocks of wood that could be carved identically, a program cannot maintain itself over the rougher times.

Another thing that is happening about the funding is the coercion used on teachers to ensure that students pass their courses, sometimes whether or not students have fully demonstrated understanding of the outcomes/concepts prescribed in the government's various programs of study. This coercion creates in some financially struggling schools a certain disregard for how students pass to get their credits. These schools may demand that teachers push, pull, or drag students across the passing mark line, thereby allowing the school to receive its funding. Development and reinforcement of behaviours that are detrimental both to the student and to society as a whole can easily ensue.

For example, when a class of students is given an assignment and a reasonable due date, responsible students adhere to that due date. Responsible students ensure that they work on the assignment, clarify whatever they can't understand, and submit the assignment on time. On the other hand, students who do not take personal responsibility do not make good choices, and when the due date arrives, they do not hand in the assignment. Many students make excuses. If each incomplete assignment eventually affects the bottom line in funding, teachers are expected to get that student to do that assignment. On one level it is, of course, a good thing that teachers do not allow students to remain irresponsible. However, the real emphasis is not on ensuring that students learn to take personal responsibility; it is on ensuring that no funding is lost.

Schools need to be assured of an adequate block of funding each year. Schools, unlike factories or other industrial or business undertakings, cannot be treated as though their products can all be made, shaped, molded in an identical manner. Stable and adequate funding allows schools to function, whether they serve an academically elite population or a population comprised of less able students. Without stable and adequate funding we teach too many of our students, young people who are already disillusioned and angry with adult society, that school is irrelevant, adults are fools, and society has abandoned them. It's a high price for society to pay.

Along with stable funding there are some other things that we can do. I think that if we could provide additional funding to enable jurisdictions to offer early intervention programs – and I know you're looking at that; I really emphasize the need for full-day kindergarten – we could avoid some of these later problems. Alberta Education should ensure that there is additional funding to support guidance and counselling services. I like that you mentioned that. We need to support them and to co-ordinate the delivery of multi-agency and school-based services, including exit interviews of students leaving school, to find out why that's happening.

Again, I'll go back to high school counsellors. I think there's a need to have a formula, a student/counsellor ratio in place. With the limited resources of child welfare there are a lot of families and students that are falling through the cracks, and we're not able to meet the demands in the school properly. I think that there are just not enough resources. If we look carefully at perhaps including social workers or children's services workers in the school building to work alongside school staff, I'm wondering: would we see a greater co-ordination and a more seamless approach to getting these students and the families the help that they need?

In addition to the school counsellors, I'd like to mention again that

we do need librarians. We do need adequate funding. Teacher-librarians are essential. But we need money yearly to keep up the libraries in schools. One of my elementary schools had an audit lately, and their status says that they need \$60,000 to catch up and then \$5,000 a year to make up for the past cuts.

Another area that I'm concerned about is school fees. Albertans with school-age children have become accustomed to a bill coming home in their child's backpack which asks for payment of school fees. I think that with the booming economy that Alberta is experiencing and the wealth that we're experiencing, not seen for many years, we should be assisting those that are trying to improve their quality of life. In doing so, they are contributing to the richness of our province. I believe we should look at the elimination of school fees.

Another area related to that, I suppose, is fundraising. This is a huge problem. I have letters from parents from numerous schools in my own constituency saying that they're concerned about the lack of identifying and funding basic education in Alberta. Computers are seen as tools to success and learning and part of the Alberta curriculum. Why, then, are parents having to fund raise to purchase computers? Parent fundraising is also subsidizing school expenses such as the school intercom system, headsets for the teachers, library books.

One school council is telling me that in the past four years they have provided over \$40,000 to the library. They're talking about buying computer labs, \$20,000 that they've put in; school photocopier, \$10,000; AV equipment, \$4,000. The bottom line is: why do we fund raise and attend casinos to pay for computers, library books, playgrounds, and all these other things that I've mentioned? Again, if literacy is important, why isn't there a literacy fund for each school to draw on and use so that they have proper books in the library and other resources that are required?

I wanted to say something about AISI funding. I believe that the professional development it has allowed has been amazing. Focusing on teacher practices in the classroom and looking at results have all been relevant. It's important, and I'm glad to hear that AISI funding is going to continue.

I know that the reading recovery program was a Rolls-Royce. It had a massive impact, but it costs one teacher who sees one student at a time for half an hour. It's being cancelled because schools can't afford it, and that truly is a shame.

You mentioned the shortage of speech and language therapists. I'll include school counsellors in that. By that I mean trained school counsellors. That's happened, I think, in large part due to the fact that the jobs were disappearing with all of the cutbacks. People didn't see that there was any reason to be confident that they'd have a job. I'm glad that you're recognizing a need for these people. I hope that we'll get them back.

The 45 parent link centres, I want to say, are wonderful. I'm glad that we have initiated that and that we're continuing that program.

The unfunded liability. I know that many have mentioned it today. Could you explain to me, because I need to understand. You said \$152 million for unfunded liability, \$187 million to the current service payment. What's the balance? Like, where does that leave us? How big is the problem with this unfunded liability? It is a big concern. I'm glad you're addressing it. I'm glad it is on the radar screen at this time.

Special needs. I want to mention that. I think I've got a few more minutes. Curriculum is changing. New textbooks are required in many of our regular programs, and the province doesn't provide any money for those changes. Funding for special-needs students remains inadequate. For example, an aide costs the school close to \$40,000, yet the direct funding that we're getting from the province

is about \$20,000. That means that we're taking \$20,000 from the general operating funds, and we're stealing from the other programs.

5:00

How are we working towards prevention through early intervention for students at risk of school failure with school districts across the province? The pilot junior kindergarten at Norwood, Delton, and Spruce Avenue are exemplary models that are in place, models that we need to expand on.

Thank you.

Chair's Ruling Speaking Order

The Deputy Chair: Hon. members, the chair had indicated that given the long list of names that we had, the chair would recognize the Member for Calgary-Nose Hill, followed by the Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods, and then the minister. I do know that there are two other members who wish to speak, but that's what the chair had indicated before.

The hon. minister.

Debate Continued

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you. Mr. Chair, I will try to be brief so that we can get the other members' questions on record because I assume that that's what they want.

Calgary-Nose Hill asked about high school completion rates, and I want to just give him and other members here some comfort knowing that we have a variety of very innovative and creative ways of addressing high school completion, and we see that as we hop around and visit school jurisdictions. Some have an arts focus, a programming focus in the cultural vein. Others stimulate interest in the CTS or industrial arts vein. Others perhaps have more of an academic bent. Suffice it to say that jurisdictions are now offering very wide and diverse courses that perhaps they weren't always able to offer and are enticing students to hang in there longer.

In fact, we are seeing the high school completion rate averages moving in the right direction. They have improved virtually every year for the past several years on average, and our projections are right on target with what is in our annual report. So we're pretty confident and comfortable that we're meeting them. Of course we'll do more, I'm sure, after we finish our round-tables this spring or this summer as we travel the province and as we culminate with our high school symposium later this fall, assuming that we're able to get it all done in the time frame available. I hope we can. That's all good news.

With respect to participation rates in postsecondary, I'll just say that we're seeing tremendous results coming in – we truly are – as a result of our RAP program, the registered apprenticeship program, and with respect to the YAP, the youth apprenticeship project. We have a new one now that we've been working on called learner pathways, which is a cross-ministry initiative between Alberta Education, Advanced Education, and Human Resources and Employment. It includes kindergarten to grade 12 students as our first thought, obviously, but we work with these other ministries because we know that we're trying our best to encourage students to not only complete high school but go on to some form of postsecondary, be it in the arts or industrial arts, skilled trades, or academic pursuits. We have those specific goals.

Your question with respect to the age of leaving high school and whether or not we're able to proclaim a higher age: not at this point. This is a longer, more complicated answer, Mr. Chair, so if the member will indulge me, I will respond in writing. I have done this

before. It's about a three-page letter, so I will provide that information there.

Very quickly to the hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods, who is also a former teacher, I appreciated your historical lesson, your vignettes, as they were. What sort of jumped out at me, of course, is not only the pedigree, as you referred to it, that has been created but the relationships between Premiers and ministers and deputy ministers. It occurred to me how privileged I feel to be sitting right beside the Premier in my role as Minister of Education because it ties in back with the Aberhart days as it does back with the Rutherford days, where there was a very close relationship. In fact, it was so close that it was one and the same person. Our Premier is extremely supportive of our educational initiatives, and I know that I can always count on his support to take it even further.

The high school CEUs I'll just comment on very quickly, Mr. Chair. This area is under review. I heard a lot about it, on March 24 in particular, from school board chairs. I think we have to just remember that, fundamentally, we do expect accountability, but we don't expect to be unreasonable in our approach to it. We need to keep in mind that most of the funding recoveries, or clawbacks, or whatever the word is that some people have used here this afternoon, relate to a funding request that should not have been asked for in the first place. Some school boards actually told me that they understand that. The trick here would be to not incur those kinds of situations to begin with, and then there is no need for any recoveries or whatever.

I am sensitive to the point, however, of the 50 per cent attendance minimum or whatever it is – I've just forgotten the exact criteria – the 25 per cent minimum test score. There are things like that. I am sensitive to that because I know that when school boards do their planning, they don't plan on students dropping out on the 49th per cent day, so to speak. They've incurred the costs: they've hired the teacher, they bought the equipment, and they bought the supplies and whatever. I'm not sure what we're going to do about it, but it's one reason why I asked the deputy minister and his staff to get me back some information on this, and let's see what we can do about it. We had a very good dialogue with the teachers.

Mr. Chair, how much time do we have left, roughly?

The Deputy Chair: We have about, I would say, five minutes.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Well, maybe I'll just stop there so that the Member for Calgary-Varsity can get in a couple of points.

Hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods, I will respond in writing to the rest of your questions.

The Deputy Chair: Hon. Member for Calgary-Varsity, we have about five minutes.

Mr. Chase: Thanks very much. I wish I could talk 10 times as fast.

The lack of support for education in this province was my prime motivation for becoming politically involved in 1997 in a support role as a Calgary-Foothills Liberal Constituency Association director. Education concerns noted over a 34-year teaching career, which led to my running in 2001 and again in 2004, continue to drive me. I'll primarily be using the Calgary example, with which I'm most familiar, as the petri dish of problems faced by students, parents, teachers, trustees, support staff, maintenance and custodial support throughout this oil and gas rich but education vision poor province.

Last May the Calgary board of education presented to this province a capital plan that covered three years, 2005-2008, and that was presented to the then minister of infrastructure. Of the 13

projects listed in the 2005-2008 capital plan, only one was approved for provincial funding. No new schools were announced the year before, though the Calgary board of education did submit a 2004-2007 school capital program. The board submits a three-year capital plan and a 10-year facilities plan to the provincial government annually. I would suggest that local boards attend to their homework and vision for the future to a much larger extent than this government.

Since 1995 Calgary's population has increased by well over 200,000. It's the equivalent of tacking the city of Regina onto our borders. In 2004-2005 alone over 23,000 new residents moved into Calgary, and that growth continues. In Calgary there are approximately 40 new and developing communities in varying stages of development with no public school presence. High school population is increasing, especially north of the Bow. At least two new high schools are required.

This next figure I cannot believe. The Calgary combined boards of education bus in excess of 50,000 children a hundred thousand kilometres per day. This is a waste of children's time, school board resources, never mind the environmental effect and the resource depletion associated with it.

Fifty per cent of our schools are 40 years or older, creating a backlog of deferred maintenance and facility upgrade costs. When you add the Calgary Catholic with the Calgary public, the deferred maintenance is well over half a billion dollars. There's no excuse for this being left to this sad state.

5:10

With every new school constructed in the newly established suburbs, there is a corresponding decline in enrolment in schools in established suburbs or the inner city: close a school, kill a community, kill the price value of the homes that are in the existing community. Why would people want to move back into an area that doesn't have a school? Very short-range planning.

There's a whole series of problems along with school closures. Since the 1999-2000 year – and I'm just going back five years basically – the board of trustees of the CBE has closed 18 schools and five programs. This year, of the programs closed, Fred Seymour elementary school and Jerry Potts school as they currently exist were closed. Added to that, four of the entire schools and programs out of the whole city were in Calgary-Varsity. It greatly upsets me that the school board was forced by poor planning in this province that doesn't take into account the reduced class size formula and the school utilization space formula.

The Deputy Chair: I hesitate to interrupt the hon. Member for Calgary-Varsity, but pursuant to Standing Order 58(5), which provides for the Committee of Supply to rise and report no later than

5:15 on Tuesday, Wednesday, or Thursday afternoons, I must now put the following questions after considering the business plan and proposed estimates for the Department of Education for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2007.

Agreed to:

Expense and Equipment/Inventory Purchases	\$3,824,278,000
Nonbudgetary Disbursements	\$1,000,000

The Deputy Chair: Shall the vote be reported? Are you agreed?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Deputy Chair: Opposed? Carried.

The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Renner: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I move that the committee now rise and report the estimates of the Department of Education.

[Motion carried]

[Mr. Shariff in the chair]

Mr. Goudreau: Mr. Speaker, the Committee of Supply has had under consideration certain resolutions, reports as follows, and requests leave to sit again.

Resolved that a sum not exceeding the following be granted to Her Majesty for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2007, for the following department.

Education: expense and equipment/inventory purchases,	\$3,824,278,000;
nonbudgetary disbursements,	\$1,000,000.

The Acting Speaker: Does the Assembly concur in the report?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Acting Speaker: Opposed? So ordered.

The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Zwozdesky: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to all members for participating in the estimates of the Department of Education today. We have again seen a great deal of good progress and some very good discussion, debate. Some interesting points were made.

On that note, I would move that we now call it 5:30 and adjourn until 8 tonight in Committee of Supply.

[Motion carried; the Assembly adjourned at 5:15 p.m.]

