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Wednesday 16 November 2016

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Mercredi 16 novembre 2016

**Standing Committee on
Estimates**

Ministry of Education

**Comité permanent des
budgets des dépenses**

Ministère de l'Éducation

Chair: Cheri DiNovo
Clerk: Eric Rennie

Présidente : Cheri DiNovo
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LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF ONTARIO

ASSEMBLÉE LÉGISLATIVE DE L'ONTARIO

STANDING COMMITTEE ON
ESTIMATESCOMITÉ PERMANENT DES
BUDGETS DES DÉPENSES

Wednesday 16 November 2016

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The committee met at 1559 in room 151.

MINISTRY OF EDUCATION

The Chair (Ms. Cheri DiNovo): Good afternoon. We are now going to resume consideration of vote 1001 of the estimates for the Ministry of Education. There is a total of four hours and 27 minutes remaining.

Before we resume consideration of the estimates, if there are any inquiries from yesterday's meeting that the minister has responses to, perhaps the information can be distributed by the Clerk.

Are there any items, Minister?

Hon. Mitzie Hunter: No.

The Chair (Ms. Cheri DiNovo): No? Okay. When the committee last adjourned, the government had five minutes left in their round of questions. Ms. Kiwala, the floor is yours.

Ms. Sophie Kiwala: Thank you again for being here today. Five minutes isn't a long time for the next question that I have for you, and I'm a little bit regretful about that, but what can you do? That's life.

Today is a special day. It's the 131st honouring of the Métis Nation of Ontario. As you probably know, we had a flag-raising on the grounds of Queen's Park today.

My question for you is on the subject of the First Nations, Métis and Inuit. Looking at last year's estimates, I'm wondering if you can talk about any increased funding that is being set aside for this population for their growth and advancement through the education system. You have already mentioned Justice Sinclair's words earlier in the discussion, that education heals.

As we know, we need to do everything possible to make sure that we honour the Truth and Reconciliation report. In that vein, I would like to ask if you could respond to the funding that would be attributed to that group.

Hon. Mitzie Hunter: Sure. Thank you so much for your question. Our government is committed to improving indigenous education in Ontario, improving student achievement and well-being, and closing the achievement gap between indigenous students and all students. Our aboriginal educational strategy has been designed to help improve opportunities for First Nations, Métis and Inuit students, and to increase the knowledge and awareness of all students about aboriginal histories, cultures and perspectives.

In 2016-17, education funding will include an increased investment of over \$7 million to support First Nations, Métis and Inuit education. This is in addition to the \$2.7 million in funding through Grants for Student Needs and \$5 million per year over three years to respond to the calls to action of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The TRC funding will be used to help develop resources on the history and the legacy of treaties, residential schools and indigenous peoples in Ontario, and will also include the development of additional teaching resources, capacity building and professional learning for educators.

I know that yesterday we talked about Treaties Recognition Week and all of the wonderful and terrific resources that were available at elementary schools and secondary schools, as well as teaching resources online—it's these types of real opportunities to bring the learning into the classroom and have real, significant learning opportunities for the students.

I was visiting David Bouchard Public School in Oshawa with the Minister of Indigenous Relations and Reconciliation, and it was just incredible to see the students engaged in that learning, sharing with each other, working in teams, using many different types of learning styles. They were passionate about this. It's a difficult topic, but it was very relevant to them, and they were all learning and exchanging.

It's important to note that the work that we're doing is in collaboration with our First Nations, Métis and Inuit partners, and we will be building on the strengths of the existing curriculum in social studies, history, geography, Canadian and world studies as well.

The Chair (Ms. Cheri DiNovo): Ms. Kiwala, you have just under a minute left.

Hon. Mitzie Hunter: To implement this process, a steering committee has been established with indigenous partners to provide advice as we move forward on this process. It's a collaborative process. We're working together. They are helping to provide that input and that direction.

Our government is committed to ensuring that all students, including indigenous students, continue to achieve excellence in our education system. As part of our government's commitment to TRC, together with the Ministry of Indigenous Relations and Reconciliation, it's really wonderful to put forward these initiatives. As

Justice Sinclair says, education heals, and that's exactly what this is all about.

Ms. Sophie Kiwala: Thank you, Minister. I know that's certainly welcome news in my riding of Kingston and the Islands. We do have an aboriginal teachers' education program at Queen's University, which is being run through McArthur College. I know that's certainly something that they're excited about.

The Chair (Ms. Cheri DiNovo): I'm afraid that your time is up, Ms. Kiwala. We move now to the official opposition. Mr. Coe.

Mr. Lorne Coe: Welcome back, Minister, Associate Minister and Deputy Minister. Let's turn for a moment to accessibility, if we could, please. You'll all know, I'm sure, that the AODA requires Ontario's education system to be fully accessible to people with disabilities by or before 2025. For the record, Chair, that includes pre-schools, schools and post-secondary education and any job training programs. Minister, where is the ministry with respect to making schools accessible and where are you on the timeline, and can you provide us with an update on that timeline?

Hon. Mitzie Hunter: Thank you very much, Mr. Coe, for the question. I want to start by saying that we believe that every child in Ontario deserves access to a world-class education. Our government is committed to ensuring that every student has access to the supports that they need to succeed in school, including students with special education needs.

Since 2003, funding for special education has increased to \$2.7 billion, an increase of almost \$1.14 billion or nearly 70%, and our investments in special education are part of our efforts to increase student success and to close the gap in student achievement. Special education grants continue to be enveloped and protected for special education programs and services and equipment only.

I will ask the deputy to also comment, but our government is committed to ensuring that, as it relates to the AODA, accessibility for Ontarians—of course, our education system has to remain accessible. In fact, one of the aspects and features of Ontario's education system is our balance between equity and inclusive schools and places where all students are welcome and all students have a right to a great education.

With the AODA, enacted in 2005, there is a recognition that greater accessibility means greater opportunities for Ontarians, and that includes our students. This is all about helping to create a more inclusive province and a more inclusive school community. Our school boards have to ensure that each school complies with all of the appropriate provincial and municipal health and safety requirements. We've made significant investments to help boards achieve greater accessibility and to ensure that students have the safe and healthy environments which they need to learn.

Since 2003, we've invested \$15 billion in school infrastructure, including \$1.1 billion in additional funding to repair and renew schools across the province. This

funding can be used to renovate and to retrofit schools and to help them to ensure compliance under the AODA. Deputy?

Mr. Lorne Coe: All right. Minister, before you turn to your deputy, can you speak a little bit about the level of collaboration that the ministry is undertaking with your colleague the minister responsible for accessibility?

Hon. Mitzie Hunter: Sure. Deputy, go ahead.

Mr. Bruce Rodrigues: Grant? Introduce yourself.

Mr. Grant Osborn: Grant Osborn, the director of the capital policy and programs branch. Talking about AODA compliance, the ministry, on the funding side, provides renewal funding to school boards. There are two components of renewal funding. There's renewal through the ops and renewal grant through the GSN, and in that component there's \$340 million for renewal funding. That's funding that boards can use to improve the accessibility of their schools to meet the AODA standards. As well, we have school condition improvement funding, which is about \$1.1 billion in this school year, and that is to address the renewals of schools. Part of that funding can also be used to address accessibility needs in the schools.

Mr. Lorne Coe: All right.

Hon. Mitzie Hunter: I also just want to say—your follow-up question was asking about our collaboration across ministries, and I think it's important to note that our government was the first to have a minister responsible for accessibility. I certainly have the opportunity to meet with the minister and her staff, as does my staff, and I'm sure that the ministry's officials do as well, because it's very important that we reflect the needs and that we're having a cross-ministry approach in our support for children with special needs, and with accessibility needs specifically.

I also have the privilege of having the former Lieutenant Governor for the province of Ontario, the Honourable David Onley, who is an alum of the University of Toronto's Scarborough campus—I get the privilege, really, of seeing Mr. Onley on a regular basis and talking about how we build and create spaces that are more accessible and making sure that we create opportunities for children with special needs, which is exactly what we're doing through many of our programs and our initiatives. When you look at the programming that we provide in Ontario, it's to ensure that all students have that opportunity.

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Over the weekend, I was at Bloorview children's hospital. We are leading, in fact, the world in the adaptation of robotics. They call them "bots." The children are putting together robots, and they're learning about STEM. They're learning about science, technology, engineering and math. This program has been adapted to children with disabilities. It's in partnership with FIRST Robotics. It's the first of its kind in Canada and, we believe, the world.

These are the types of innovations that we're doing. We want to ensure that children with special needs have every opportunity to achieve their full potential. The

funding we're providing is for a more fair and equitable system for all of our students. We're being responsive; we're making the changes that are needed.

Mr. Lorne Coe: Okay, Minister, I'm going to interrupt you because I really want to drill down on this. What I'd like to understand to begin, Minister, as the leader of the ministry, is: Has there been a comprehensive review from the top to the bottom of the education system in terms of how well you're meeting the accessibility standards?

It's one thing, as the ministry staff just did, to speak about the level of investment, but I think what I'd like to hear is the extent to which there has been an evaluation, top to bottom, of the extent that you're meeting the tests not only of students but of the educators as well, and the parents. Because it's not necessarily when a student comes in with a challenge; sometimes that challenge occurs in the education stream. There are three parts to this.

If you could speak to the level of assessment that's ongoing through the education system—yes, it's accomplished with partnerships, but it's driven through your leadership, so I'd like you to speak to it, please.

Hon. Mitzie Hunter: I thank you for recognizing that leadership, because as Liberals, that's why we're here in estimates: to answer your questions as the minister responsible.

We believe that every child in Ontario deserves access to that world-class education. That's why, when you look at our commitment to special education, our funding has increased to \$2.76 billion—an increase of \$1.14 billion, nearly 70%, since 2003.

Deputy, I would like you to speak to the specifics around how we measure the progress on AODA.

Mr. Lorne Coe: And, Deputy, be specific in the categories that I'm probing, please. I want to get that on the record.

Mr. Bruce Rodrigues: Sure. Let's start with facilities in terms of how we've spent some money on that.

Mr. Lorne Coe: The funding is one level, but I want you to get into the level of specificity about how you're doing this, how you're going to meet the deadline, and what checks and balances you already have in place and will be putting in place. As we sit here today, there's not an educational accessibility standard—and I'll come to that in a moment—so I'll listen carefully to your answer.

The Chair (Ms. Cheri DiNovo): Just a note: Deputy Minister, could you introduce yourself when you speak into the microphone, as well? Thank you.

Mr. Grant Osborn: Hi. So I'll talk a little bit about—sorry. Grant Osborn, the director of the capital policy and programs branch.

In terms of our assessment of need, one thing that we're going is a five-year cycle of review of the facility conditions of schools. We've just started a new five-year cycle. Part of this cycle—we're adding to it—is the accessibility: the environment on the ground in those schools. We're comparing it to the Ontario building code, which is what boards build to. That is the standard that

boards build their schools to. That's for new schools or if a school is going to have major work done that would basically require that school to be brought up to code. As part of that five-year cycle, we are reviewing the accessibility needs of schools in terms of comparing them to the building code.

Mr. Lorne Coe: So in reviewing them, do you have audit reports that you can share with the committee?

Mr. Grant Osborn: There are reports produced at each school when those facility assessments are done. Each school, after it is assessed—we have a third-party engineering firm that does produce a report, yes.

Mr. Lorne Coe: Can you share those?

Hon. Mitzie Hunter: Sorry, I want to also say that the facility condition index measure is a very detailed measure. It's the first of its kind in Ontario. It took five years to assemble that information, and through the boards, that information has been verified.

It's assisting the boards, in fact, in the renewal and in the repair funding that's being provided to the boards. We've brought that funding up, with the additional \$1.1 billion, to \$2.7 billion over the next two years for boards to address their renewal needs. But the FCI, which is available, has really given the boards the tools that they need to be able to look at their facilities and to make the determination of what those priority areas are to meet those initiatives.

Obviously, health and safety are top priority. That is not what we're talking about here; health and safety needs have been addressed. This is about the actual condition of the building. That audit has been done and the boards have that tool available to them.

Mr. Lorne Coe: Minister, I'm talking about barriers and removal of barriers. If the deputy can speak specifically to the top to bottom-down assessment, how that process is under way, how that's working and what the results have been—can that happen, please? Because I'm hearing about the money, and that's one aspect, and I'm hearing that there's a five-year cycle, but I want to hear the specifics of how barriers are removed for students with existing disabilities, teachers with assisting abilities, how that was done, and if there are reports on the extent to which you're meeting those particular targets. That's what I'd like to hear.

Hon. Mitzie Hunter: Well, that's exactly the view we're providing. When it relates to our government's commitment to ensuring that every student has access to the supports that they need to succeed in school, including students with disabilities, we know that one in seven people in Ontario has a disability. That's 1.85 million Ontarians. By 2036, that number will rise to one in five as our population continues to age.

Just this year, we've appointed a minister responsible for accessibility. It's the first time in the history of this province that that has been done. With the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act, we were the ones to put that forward in 2005. It has recognized that greater accessibility means greater opportunities for Ontarians.

Our school boards have that responsibility to ensure that they're meeting provincial standards, municipal standards—

Mr. Lorne Coe: I understand that, Minister. I'm going to have to interrupt you because I need to get an answer.

Hon. Mitzie Hunter: We're also making that investment—

The Chair (Ms. Cheri DiNovo): One at a time, please. Minister, could you finish?

Hon. Mitzie Hunter: We're making that investment. When it comes to the repair and the renewal that our schools need, we've invested \$15 billion since 2003 in school renewal infrastructure, and that includes funding to repair and renew schools so that they can renovate and retrofit schools so that they are in compliance with AODA requirements.

That commitment is there. The school boards have the facility condition index as an additional tool that has been assessed. What they're able to do, really, is to have their priorities set out, and those priorities are supported by the funding that is being provided by the ministry.

If there is additional information you'd like to provide on the AODA, that's fine.

Mr. Lorne Coe: Deputy, could you speak, please, directly to my question: the extent to which there's been a comprehensive review of the education system from top to bottom in terms of the extent of compliance with the expectations of the accessibility standards?

Mr. Bruce Rodrigues: Deputy Coe, there is no single report for that. If you're looking for a single report where all of that has been compiled together, there is none. What we do have, however, is that boards have the responsibility to work with us in doing that, and so they're currently establishing baselines as to where they sit and what needs to continue to be completed in order to meet those standards.

Mr. Lorne Coe: Is that reflected in the five-year report that your colleague to your right spoke to?

Mr. Bruce Rodrigues: That's correct.

Mr. Lorne Coe: Can that report be provided to the committee?

Hon. Mitzie Hunter: As I said, we will endeavour to see what we can do. The information as I've outlined to you—all of the 5,000 schools, or close to the 5,000 schools, in the province have been assessed over this five-year period. The school boards have reviewed that particular information. It allows the school boards to have the data and the evidence that they need as they determine what their priority needs are.

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As we're providing funding for repairs and renewal, that funding has, over a two-year period, been brought to \$2.7 billion so that boards have what they need to keep the schools in a good state of repair. We know that having those better buildings is very important for students. It means that they're learning in a better environment. That includes the accessibility needs for our special needs students as well.

Mr. Lorne Coe: Deputy, I think you were going to acknowledge that the five-year report would be available. Is that correct?

Mr. Bruce Rodrigues: No. We don't have a single report, MPP Coe. Each of the schools has a report as part of their assessment. There is no single report that we can provide you, with all of the assessments.

Mr. Lorne Coe: So sitting here this afternoon, you can't tell me whether each of the boards here in Ontario is fully compliant with the accessibility standards.

Mr. Bruce Rodrigues: In the process of becoming compliant, correct—because we did the five-year cycle. This is the new five-year cycle that's starting, and accessibility is part of this five-year cycle. We're in the process of getting all of that information, but we don't—

Mr. Lorne Coe: You're in the process of getting that, and it will be completed by when?

Mr. Bruce Rodrigues: The five-year cycle will be completed prior to the deadline of what's expected.

Mr. Lorne Coe: All right. Minister, I attended an accessibility forum on the weekend with your colleague, as you probably know. Out of that discussion, there was a discussion about the extent to which there would be a willingness on your part, and the minister responsible for accessibility's part, in considering the development of an educational accessibility standard. What's your view?

Hon. Mitzie Hunter: My view, as I've said, is that we are very committed to ensuring that students have access and that they receive the supports that they need to be successful in our schools. Students with disabilities are receiving that support. I gave you a great example of accessing STEM and 21st-century learning, taking that right into Bloorview children's hospital, where they're interacting with the latest technology adapted to their needs.

This is something we're very committed to. I know that this is a priority for the school boards as well. My mandate letter from Premier Wynne talks about special needs and our commitment to students with special needs, including students with disabilities.

When you look at the investments that we're making, when you look at the increases that we're making to special education, you can very much see that our government is committed.

As it relates to the environments in which students learn, that's exactly why we have increased the funding on our renewal and our repair needs to \$2.7 billion over two years, so that school boards can make those priority decisions, including any renovations that are required to meet accessibility standards.

As the deputy minister has said, the facility condition index, which has reviewed all of our schools—nearly 5,000 schools in Ontario—is a tool that is now available to school boards. As part of the go-forward renewal cycle, there will be an enhanced focus on the accessibility needs.

The Chair (Ms. Cheri DiNovo): Mr. Coe, you have about a minute left.

Hon. Mitzie Hunter: We recognize that this is a priority. It's a growing priority, based on the numbers that I've just pointed out to you, with one in seven people in Ontario having a disability. We want to ensure that our students are learning in the best possible environment, including our students with special needs and special education needs and requirements.

Mr. Lorne Coe: You should know that the AODA Alliance, led by David Lepofsky—

Hon. Mitzie Hunter: I've met with him as well, in my office.

Mr. Lorne Coe: Just let me finish my comment for a moment, please.

Hon. Mitzie Hunter: We had a very good conversation.

Mr. Lorne Coe: Chair?

The Chair (Ms. Cheri DiNovo): If you could just let him finish. Thank you, Minister.

Mr. Lorne Coe: Thank you. At the particular forum that I participated in with your colleague—you can anticipate that Mr. Lepofsky will be coming forward and raising some of the points that I raised here with you. Also—

Hon. Mitzie Hunter: As my colleague has said, the minister responsible for accessibility, this is an important priority for our government. Ontario is leading in the area of accessibility.

The Chair (Ms. Cheri DiNovo): I'm afraid that is it.

We'll now move to the third party: Mrs. Gretzky.

Mrs. Lisa Gretzky: My first question is around child care. I know that the minister will probably answer it by talking about the number of child care spaces that they've just announced, but frankly, before that announcement, and since, nothing has changed: Child care is still unaffordable in this province.

I'd like to know if the government will cap the cost of child care in Ontario and, beyond that, what actions will the government take to ensure child care is actually affordable? And before you mention eliminating the wait-list fees, we're all well aware of that. In fact, it was the NDP that pushed for that. So, although we and families appreciate that you actually listened and removed the fees, I'm speaking specifically to the fees that parents pay for the actual child care service, so the day-to-day costs for child care. Will the government cap the cost of child care, and then, what additional actions will you take to ensure that child care is affordable?

Hon. Indira Naidoo-Harris: So I want to start out by thanking you, MPP Gretzky, for this very important question.

As you know, I've been having conversations over the last little while with a variety of people in the sector, so certainly, parents and early childhood educators and experts in the field and community leaders. I couldn't agree with you more that ensuring that our children get the best start in life of course had to include the idea of accessibility and affordability. In the conversations that I've been having in the last little while—I recently returned from a trip up north. I went to Thunder Bay, I went to Moosonee and I visited Moose Factory, but in

addition to that, I had some conversations in and around the GTA with various leaders, including in Ottawa, where we spoke to early childhood educators. Absolutely, the issue of accessibility and affordability are deeply tied together. This is something that I am hearing from parents and experts in the field.

I want you to know that I understand and we understand that Ontario families are facing challenges when it comes to finding affordable child care. I think that's why the Premier really wanted to shed a light on this specific age group and this sector, because if we are going to succeed as a province, we have to ensure that our children are taken care of, so that families who want to choose to head to work and be contributing to our society in a way that involves going to work and being part of the economy have that peace of mind when they head off.

So, yes, I've heard from many people that safe, high-quality child care does have to mean also funding and has to mean subsidies. Yes, we're making this historic investment that is going to transform the early years and child care system—

Mrs. Lisa Gretzky: But does that include a cap on child care costs?

Hon. Indira Naidoo-Harris: —it's why affordability is part of the conversation.

I want you to know that the reason why I'm concentrating on the conversation part is because we really want to talk to people in the sector—parents and so on—and find out what they need. To some extent, what we are trying to do is—that accessibility part really means ensuring that people have choices in different ways. Certainly, there are child care centres, there are home centres, and some people choose to use someone in their neighbourhood and so on. We feel that the government should not really be dictating what kind of child care you take and what you do; we want to be able to give people that accessibility. The conversations I've been having are precisely about what it is that people in this area, and parents specifically, would like us to do.

I can tell you, in the commitment that we've made for the \$100,000, which I know is a part of the conversation—

Mrs. Lisa Gretzky: Rather than wasting my time that I have for questions, I would actually like you to address the question I've asked, so not talk about how you're talking to people, because we've heard that. I actually want to know: Like in Alberta, are you going to place a hard cap on the cost of child care? That's what parents need. That's the question I've asked. Are you committed to providing or to putting out there a hard cap on child care costs in order to make it financially accessible to families? I know you've been talking to a lot of people. That's great. I want to know: Are you now planning on acting and putting a cap on the cost of child care to make it accessible to families?

Hon. Indira Naidoo-Harris: So again, thank you for that question. Once again, I'd like to tell you—

Mrs. Lisa Gretzky: And I'd thank you for an answer to the question.

Hon. Indira Naidoo-Harris: No, I get it. I get where you're coming from, but the bottom line is that families out there are not saying that they want it this way or that way; they're giving us ideas on various levels.

I will have my associate deputy minister, Shannon Fuller, continue with this, but what I do want you to know is that we've set aside between \$600 million and \$750 million to go towards operational costs, which will involve subsidies, absolutely. How those subsidies are moved forward: We are leaving it to parents to let us know what they really want.

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The cap you're suggesting is one form, but it's not the only option. I'd rather not dictate to parents what they should be getting; I'd rather get some feedback from them, and that's where we are at this point. Certainly, my associate deputy minister can give you a more fulsome answer on this.

Mrs. Lisa Gretzky: And that's great, if I'm going to get an actual answer to the question, which is: Is the government going to cap the cost of child care? Like Alberta, which is clearly leading the way over the province of Ontario and the Liberal government here—not only have they capped the cost, but there are still subsidies available to families on top of that.

I do have other questions, and I don't want you taking all my time talking about how many child care spaces you've created and the lovely conversations you're having. I specifically want an answer to: Will the government cap the cost of child care in this province?

If that can't be answered, Chair, then I would like to move on to my next question.

The Chair (Ms. Cheri DiNovo): Could you say your name, please, first?

Mr. Granville Anderson: Chair?

The Chair (Ms. Cheri DiNovo): Yes, Mr. Anderson.

Mr. Granville Anderson: Can we have a little civility in here, please?

Mrs. Lisa Gretzky: Chair, out of fairness, the member who is asking for civility was just sleeping in his chair, while the member from the PC caucus—

Interjections.

The Chair (Ms. Cheri DiNovo): Okay, order.

We're going to move to the assistant deputy minister. Please state your name and attempt to answer the question.

Ms. Shannon Fuller: Good afternoon. Shannon Fuller, assistant deputy minister, early years division.

In terms of the question as to whether there will be a cap, that's not something that I can answer. As the associate minister has said, we are looking at a variety of different options as part of the renewed policy framework that we are in the process of engaging upon. Then we will be looking at policy considerations as we move forward.

I do think that it is important to note that the government currently spends over \$1 billion a year in operating funding, which does go toward subsidies for families to help in regard to the cost of child care across the province.

In addition to that, one of the biggest cost elements of child care really is around the staffing and wages of child care centres. The government is also investing \$269 million over the next three years to support wage enhancement for eligible child care educators within our sector. Certainly, that has been a large support, in addition to a number of other opportunities that have been provided through capital funding in school-based child care and others.

Mrs. Lisa Gretzky: Okay, thank you.

The next question is: School board operating grants increased from 2015-16 to 2016-17 by 3.2%. The 2016-17 briefing book states that the change primarily reflects increases in operating costs, including utilities, transportation and negotiated agreements.

My question is: Can you specify how much of the change was due to an increase in utilities, and what that translates into dollar values? I know the grant went up ever so slightly and not enough, but I want to know how much of that increase was directly related to the cost of hydro, and what the dollar value is attached to that—the cost of utilities, sorry.

Hon. Mitzie Hunter: Sure. Deputy, I'm going to ask you to address that.

I do want to say that it is important to note that the funding of these critical programs, through the Ministry of Education budget for 2016-17, is \$25.6 billion. For that year, the increases are really addressing the needs. The increased enrolment with regard to Syrian refugees—we've allowed for about 4,000 newcomers. Increasing funding for the child care sector, of course, to support the modernization and the continued implementation of a wage increase for front-line child care workers—

Mrs. Lisa Gretzky: Okay, I'm speaking specifically to how much of the increase in funding went specifically for utilities, and what that dollar value is.

Hon. Mitzie Hunter: We're going to talk about the operating grant—

Mrs. Lisa Gretzky: If it's the deputy minister who can answer that, then I would actually like to know that. I would like to know a dollar value on that.

Hon. Mitzie Hunter: I'm addressing the increases and what's driving that—

Mrs. Lisa Gretzky: I acknowledge that there was an increase, but I would like my actual question answered. My question was: How much of the change was due to an increase in utilities, and what was the dollar value attached to that?

Hon. Mitzie Hunter: Deputy, I'm going to ask you to talk about how we handle those increases. Go ahead.

Mr. Josh Paul: Thank you for the question. Every year—

Hon. Mitzie Hunter: State your name.

Mr. Josh Paul: Oh, thank you. Josh Paul, education finance.

Every year, the Grants for Student Needs are adjusted in a variety of different ways after consultation and engagement with stakeholders.

One of the things that the government has consistently done, year in year out, is adjust the utility benchmark and the electricity benchmark, and also transportation amounts, to allow boards to keep up with those costs.

In 2015-16, the benchmark increase was 3.5%, I believe, based on the Ministry of Finance's long-term energy report. The exact dollar amount of that I don't have, but I can certainly look into seeing if I can provide it.

Mrs. Lisa Gretzky: Okay. Do you have an estimate of how long it would take to get that information, by any chance?

Hon. Mitzie Hunter: We've confirmed that we'll endeavour to look into that for you.

Mrs. Lisa Gretzky: Right, and I'm asking if there's an estimate. I'm not asking for a hard timeline, just if there's an estimate of how much time you might need. It's not a hard deadline on when it will be available. But if there's an estimate, how long would that take? Are we talking weeks, months?

Hon. Mitzie Hunter: I think that's exactly what we're saying, which is that we will take a look at that.

Mrs. Lisa Gretzky: So it's open-ended. It could be in a week; it could be five years from now before that info is—okay.

I'd like to move on to my next question. According to the 2016-17 Grants for Student Needs, the Special Education Grant decreased for 25 boards, totalling more than \$8 million, yet many boards spend more than they receive from the province on special education.

My question is, why are you underfunding students' special education needs? Again, I will reiterate, before you tell me how much more you think you've spent on special education, that 25 boards actually received less funding than they had before, totalling \$8 million—\$8 million less than they were receiving. I'd like to know why those boards are not receiving the support they need for the students with special needs.

Hon. Mitzie Hunter: I think it's important that we do recognize that the special education funding is increasing. At the same time—I mentioned in my earlier response the need to look at special education. It's a commitment that I made as well, right away.

When you look at, for instance, our supports for autism and the \$500 million that we've committed in additional funding for that—\$39 million from education over the next two years—those are contributing to our commitment to special education.

I want to make sure that we answer that question, because I believe that there is some great work happening in special education. There's more work to be done. We have acknowledged that; it's part of the mandate and the priorities that we have, as a government—

Mrs. Lisa Gretzky: But why are the 25 boards receiving \$8 million less for the students with special education needs?

Hon. Mitzie Hunter: Yes, we're going to respond. Go ahead, please.

Mr. Martyn Beckett: Good afternoon, Chair. My name is Martyn Beckett, assistant deputy minister for

learning and curriculum with the ministry. Good afternoon. Thank you for the question.

I appreciate the boards that have been articulated by the member at the table, the 25 boards. I don't have specifics on the 25 boards.

I can comment on the Special Education Grant, which is made up of six different components, some of which have been held constant over the last number of years, and some of which are very driven by student enrolment, so they're incremental. As student enrolment goes up, the size of the grant goes up. As the student enrolment goes down, the size of the grant goes down.

One example of that is the special education per-pupil amount, known as SEPPA within the system. That is entirely driven by student enrolment within school boards. If a board is experiencing a decline in student enrolment, that board will see a decrease in its SEPPA amount. If a board goes up in student enrolment, the board will see an increase.

That's contrasted by an amount that's driven for the boards, such as the behaviour expertise amount, which is another one of the six pails of money that flow to school boards. The behaviour expertise amount is an amount that's given to school boards to support the hiring of those individuals who are specialized in supporting individuals, particularly on the autism spectrum, to provide for expertise—clinical expertise, a qualified clinician or a particular level of expertise within the school board—to support the education of these children. That amount of money is not driven by enrolment. That is an amount that is independent of enrolment.

There will be boards that have increased, and there will indeed have been boards that have decreased with their overall grant, in spite of the overall amount of money from the ministry increasing over the past several years. Indeed, it increased last year.

Mrs. Lisa Gretzky: Does the ministry allocate resources to track students who are identified as having special education needs but aren't yet receiving the supports?

Hon. Mitzie Hunter: Go ahead.

Mr. Martyn Beckett: Thank you. Chair, would you like my name at each question?

The Chair (Ms. Cheri DiNovo): Once is fine. Thank you.

Mr. Martyn Beckett: Thank you. Through you, Chair: The amount for boards to be tracking for the students: Boards report annually the number of students who are receiving special education programs and services within the province of Ontario, so that information is reported. It's important to note that not every child who is receiving special education programs and services in Ontario is formally identified through the so-called IPRC process.

1640

Mrs. Lisa Gretzky: Okay. And then how long does it take from the time a student is identified until they receive supports? What's the timeline for that?

Mr. Martyn Beckett: Well, when a student is formally identified—if that's the way that I can explore this, if that's okay—the board is required to create an

individual education plan for that student, known as an IEP, within the system. That triggers the services, the supports, the programs that are articulated through the Identification, Placement and Review Committee and the IEP immediately upon being put in place. So it's going to be board-specific in terms of the timing.

The timelines for the production of the IEP are laid down following an IPRC. I believe it's 30 days, off the top of my head. So there are a number of days that are clearly articulated to boards, and the expectation certainly is that a child who requires special education programs and services—and those identified and articulated in the IEP—will be provided.

Mrs. Lisa Gretzky: Okay. And in the boards where they are already spending more than they are receiving in funding from the government for special education needs, is there an incentive to the boards to not identify students who would have special needs?

Hon. Mitzie Hunter: I just want to say that our commitment is to ensure that every child in Ontario is getting the supports they need. We're very committed to that from the perspective of student achievement, closing the achievement gap and making sure they have access to as full as possible educational supports. That's why we have increased the level of funding. The special education grant is enveloped. It continues to be a protected part of the special education grants. We want to make sure that these funds are going towards the students who are in need. I think that's just an important reminder for us all.

Mrs. Lisa Gretzky: Okay. And then the next question is: In some boards—in many boards; frankly, too many boards—bulletproof Kevlar is being purchased and provided for teachers and EAs in special education classrooms, and more and more are purchased and provided for mainstream elementary teachers. I'd like to know: What is the cost of one outfit, a Kevlar hoodie and shin guards? I'd also like to know how many boards are purchasing Kevlar personal protective equipment, and what percentage of the spec ed funding is being spent on personal protective equipment. Then I want another breakdown of how much is specifically for special education staff and how much of that is being spent on those in mainstream classrooms.

Hon. Mitzie Hunter: I will turn it to the deputy as well, but I want to also say that—and we've just talked about well-being as well across our ministries. Ensuring well-being is one of our four goals, and that includes for all students and our staff. Their safety and their working in an environment that is safe is absolutely a priority for us.

I think it's very important to know that. Obviously schools, principals and boards make decisions locally in their best interests in the programs they've delivering, but ensuring the health and safety and wellness of our students and staff is a key priority.

The Chair (Ms. Cheri DiNovo): Ms. Gretzky, you have just over a minute.

Mrs. Lisa Gretzky: Okay. Just to wrap that up, I'd just like to say that underfunding special education and

not giving students the supports they need and outfitting teachers and educational assistants and other support staff in Kevlar I wouldn't say is a direction that this government should be going in. In fact, the funding should increase so that we don't have to put personal protective equipment on every staff member who's working in a school and we don't have students to the point where they're not getting the supports they need and they then act out in trade for that.

The next thing I would like to ask, in my brief time, is how many schools in Ontario have been closed or are currently undergoing an accommodation review since the 2015 changes to the Public Accommodation Review Guideline. These are considered minimum guidelines. Can you tell me how often only the minimum requirement is followed when looking at closing schools?

Hon. Mitzie Hunter: I will get to that question. I think it's very important that—

The Chair (Ms. Cheri DiNovo): I'm afraid the time is up. I'm sorry.

We now move to the government side—you can continue then. Mr. Dickson?

Mr. Joe Dickson: Just on a point of order, if I may, through you, Madam Chair. I just wanted to say that I've known that particular individual who just went back to his seat for so long—he has a blue tie on today, but I'll get him a red one for tomorrow—as an educator, a principal and a director of education at the Durham public school board, one of the finest educators there is going east of the GTA by far. I'm very pleased to see him in this forum this evening.

The Chair (Ms. Cheri DiNovo): Thank you, Mr. Dickson. That is not a point of order, as you know. Government side—

Mr. Joe Dickson: Madam Chair, that's why I didn't mention his name. I thought it would be in conflict.

The Chair (Ms. Cheri DiNovo): Fair enough. And who do we have speaking on the government side? Mr. Dickson.

Mr. Joe Dickson: I just wish to talk for a moment and ask a couple of questions about accessibility.

It was very nice to hear the name "David Onley" in reference to accessibility. As you know, he's from the Ajax-Pickering area. I've actually sat down and had breakfast beside him sometimes. When you have someone of that stature working on our behalf, I feel very proud to be part of the government of Ontario.

I wish to just ask a question in reference to—despite declining school enrolment, per pupil funding, I understand, has increased in the range of \$4,500 to almost \$12,000, or a 60% to 65% increase. You can confirm that for me once I get my question out of my mouth. And since 2003—just confirm for me—funding of education has increased almost 60%.

In my community of Ajax-Pickering—depending which mayor you're talking to, they might say, "In the community of Pickering-Ajax"—I know that access to high-quality child care is important to my constituents. But this service must definitely—and I say this as the

oldest of 10 children in a family—be affordable. So I wondered if you could look at that for me.

The question, Associate Minister—not of the day, because better ones will come—I wonder if you can speak more about how the province is helping to address both accessibility and affordability of child care in this province as one question in its entirety. I do appreciate that.

Hon. Mitzie Hunter: I'll start, MPP Dickson, and then the Associate Minister of Education, Ms. Naidoo-Harris, will answer your question specific to child care.

Our commitment, as you know is to—and I see Josh is back.

Mr. Joe Dickson: No, the other gentleman had a blue tie as well.

Hon. Mitzie Hunter: Is that Grant?

Mr. Joe Dickson: Yes.

Hon. Mitzie Hunter: Oh, okay. Sorry, Josh.

Mr. Josh Paul: That's okay.

Hon. Mitzie Hunter: Our government is committed to ensuring that students across Ontario continue to achieve excellence. You can really see that in our results, the investments that we're making in the skills and talents of our people. Since 2003, we have increased education funding to \$22.9 billion, an increase of 59%. This is despite declining enrolment in some areas. Our per pupil funding has increased by more than \$4,500, to \$11,700. So students are getting that investment back into those great programs.

Yesterday I talked about, for instance—and I know they're happening in schools in Durham—the Specialist High Skills Major, making sure that our students are ready for that 21st-century world which they confront. I have to give credit to our education partners, because we're making these investments but it's through those education partners—our school boards, our principals and vice-principals, the teachers, superintendents, early childhood educators and our custodians in the school. It's very important that the whole school community is experiencing this investment and that everyone is thinking about how we support the best interests of those early learners and the children. That funding, we believe, is giving us that return. It's an increase of 59% since 2003.

The graduation rates have increased to 85.5%. That's more than 17 percentage points since 2004, when the rate was 68%. If the rate had stayed at 68%, we would be graduating 190,000 less students in Ontario. We can really see that there is that incredible outcome from the investments that we are making in the skills and in the talents of our people.

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We talked earlier this afternoon about the investments of more than \$15 billion in school infrastructure. That includes nearly 716 new schools and more than 735 additions and renovations of schools.

When you go into a new school, as I did on the first day of school—I went to Vista Hills Public School in Waterloo, a school that was actually built thinking about

the high-tech community in which it serves. It's just an incredible space: fully accessible, three levels with an elevator and all of the attention to the things that really are important in a 21st-century school environment. You can just see that the principal, the teachers, the school secretary, parents as they're walking in, children as they're moving through the school, appreciate that environment so very much because they're going to be learning—this is going to be their new school.

We're also investing in programs to support areas that we need to do better in, such as renewing our math strategy: \$60 million in a renewed math strategy that's going to support our students to develop the numeracy skills that we know that they can achieve. We've seen results in literacy, we've focused on literacy, and we will continue to focus on literacy. We're doing the same in math and in numeracy.

Of course, we're very proud of the rollout of full-day kindergarten across Ontario: 260,000 students experience that every year and over one million children have gone through the full-day kindergarten program. Play-based learning, inquiry; students are learning—so incredible.

Yesterday, we had a conversation around split grades. I want to say that—and I know that there are many educators in the room—the reality is that grades are sometimes split. That's a decision that principals will make and the local school community will make. But the learning is not compromised. Our educators are giving our students the best possible learning environment. There are some children who actually really enjoy that experience, and they thrive and they do very, very well. We've seen, in other jurisdictions, where they're seeing extraordinary results from split grades or just different grades working together.

With that, I want to ask the Associate Minister of Education to speak to the area of what we're doing to make child care more accessible.

Hon. Indira Naidoo-Harris: Thank you, MPP Dickson. I'm going to ask the Chair: How many minutes do I have?

The Chair (Ms. Cheri DiNovo): Thirteen.

Hon. Indira Naidoo-Harris: Thirteen. Okay, great.

MPP Dickson, I just want to thank you for that important question. As I said earlier, when MPP Gretzky asked me the question about affordability and accessibility, you can't have that conversation without talking about both of these issues at the same time. I want you to know that we understand that Ontario families face challenges when it comes to finding affordable child care. That's certainly something that I have heard in the many conversations I've been having over the last few months. That's why we're making this historic investment, because we know that this is going to transform our early years and child care system. We understand that an infusion of funds is going to assist when it comes to affordability and accessibility. That's why affordability has been part of our conversations from the very, very beginning.

We've heard from parents and child care professionals about the need for increased access to affordable care,

and we're listening. We understand that families out there are facing challenges on a daily basis, and depending on where you live and what your child care situation is like, the affordability question can really vary. What a parent pays, for example, in the middle of a city and, perhaps, in a rural area, is different. What a parent's and a family's needs and means are really varies also.

But this is about ensuring that all of our children, regardless of their background or their families, are able to get the best start in life. Also, this is about ensuring that all families out there have the opportunity to be able to succeed. That's why we are making this commitment. Our commitment to create 100,000 new child care spaces for children zero to four years old may be something that may just sound like a number to some, but let me tell you, every single one of those 100,000 spaces is going to have a huge impact on the families and on the children that are going to be using them. I cannot underline or emphasize that more.

In addition to that, even though we're saying a number of 100,000 spaces, it actually translates into a whole commitment that goes beyond the number of spaces. It really is about transforming the way we deliver child care. I think this is probably one of the most important and forward-looking things that our government has done and will be doing for years to come. We will feel the impact of this not just today and tomorrow, but for years to come. And when those children get older, the ones who will be on the receiving end of this important and substantial financial commitment from our government, they are going to be reaping the benefits. We'll see it when they head to the classroom, when they're in kindergarten, when they are in grade 1, when they head to elementary school, of course, and high school and then on to university.

So we know that this investment gives back seven-to-one. An investment in our early years learning gives back to our society basically on a basis of seven-to-one. So, absolutely, this will include child care subsidies to support families. Affordability and accessibility involve child care subsidies. I'm happy to say that over and over again so that everybody in our province who is using child care understands that this is a serious commitment. This conversation can't happen without talking about affordability. We've all had children, or know families who have had to struggle with child care issues, so that is an important part of it.

Right now, approximately 20% of Ontario's child population from zero to four years old is in licensed child care. Let me take you back to 2003 and before we came in. When we came in, 10% of the children out there had access to child care. We have now doubled that, to 20%. But we are not stopping there. We recognize that parents and families need more support, so we are actually doubling that and making a commitment to take it to 40%, which is a commitment I'm extremely proud of, and I think most people will be. This commitment will double our current capacity, creating spaces for about

40% of all Ontario children in the zero-to-four age group. It's an investment that's going to help so many Ontario families who want better access, more choice and greater convenience when it comes to licensed child care. That's why we are including an operating budget of between \$600 million and \$750 million, which will include subsidies.

Let me give you a little bit of a sense of what impact this is really going to have. Right now, we are committing on a yearly basis slightly more than \$1 billion a year towards operating costs, and slightly more than \$1 billion a year towards capital costs. This commitment of an operating budget, in addition to what we're already doing, of between \$600 million and \$750 million, which will include subsidies, is substantial. I think it's important to recognize that.

Increasing the number of child care spaces for zero-to-four-year-olds will increase access as part of that, and we will need to have important conversations regarding our subsidy system, tools and approach. Why? Because this is a conversation that cannot happen without involving parents, our early childhood educators, our experts in the field, families and our community leaders. Child care, as we know, touches every level of society, and our children are our future.

In order to get it right—I belong to a government and work with members of my ministry, my team, and certainly my colleagues and the Premier, who do not believe this should be a top-down approach. I'm not here to dictate to the people out there what kind of child care subsidies we're going to give them and say, "This province is this one; that province is that one. So we're not going to consult with you. We're just going to go ahead and take a page from another province and do what they're doing." Absolutely not. We believe in finding out what Ontarians want and what Ontario families want, because ultimately, in the end, we're here to represent them.

1700

So I am going to work hard on ensuring that I am consulting Ontario families to find out what they mean when they say they want affordable care, because that's the crux of the matter. It's about giving parents access to high-quality, affordable child care where they know their kids are safe, happy and developing their skills.

Of course, this commitment is in addition to all the work the ministry has already been doing when it comes to child care in this province. We know that a high-quality child care and early years system supports families and is an essential start to a child's cognitive and social development.

We know that those early years are extremely important. The preparation for the journey into school-based education really starts long before a child turns four. We know that, and the experts tell us that. I had a very good conversation with Charles Pascal not too long ago, and we had a very deep conversation about this early years time in a child's life and how important it is. It starts in early years programs and in child care settings across the

province, where little people of all ages are a part of a community that cares for them and encourages their development.

I've also had very good conversations with Martha Friendly and other experts in the field whom we're listening to and I am consulting with to ensure that we get it right. That's why, since 2003-04, our government has doubled the child care funding to more than \$1 billion annually.

We recognize that there's more work to be done. In 2016, the ministry is providing over \$1.05 billion to 47 municipalities. This is an increase in overall funding of \$16.3 million, or approximately 1.6% over last year. Since 2011-12, more licensed child care centres have opened in Ontario than closed each year. The net increase in licensed child care centres is 348 since 2011-12.

We've already announced that, starting in September 2017, there will be before- and after-school programs that will be available to children four to 12 years old in all schools where there is sufficient demand. I cannot tell you the kind of response we're getting from families all across the province. I've been visiting a few of them already, but I heard a lot about before- and after-school programs in the north. It was interesting to me what the needs are and how they vary depending on where you live. Certainly in some of our more rural and northern communities, it's the before- and after-school program care that they're really talking about, that they really say they need support and assistance with. That particular announcement that kicks in in full force in September 2017 is being greeted with many congratulatory comments, and I'm very proud of that.

As of September 1, of course, we banned wait-list fees, as you all know, for anyone who's waiting to get into child care centres, so that parents and families no longer have to worry about dealing with those costs. There's much more work to do with our partners. We recently said we're going to get started on our 100,000 spaces—not in 2017, but we're going to start moving some of that funding early. That was announced in the fall economic statement. That was something I was extremely excited about and I thought really underlined the commitment that our Premier and this government have to getting this done and doing it as quickly as possible.

In the coming months and years, we will absolutely be sure to include a focus on affordability and accessibility, which is a part of that. In the end, this is about laying a foundation that will start our children on an early path to success; giving parents high-quality, affordable child care, where they know their kids are safe, happy and developing their skills; but most importantly, giving parents peace of mind, and in addition to that, ensuring that our children are safe and getting the best possible start they can and the best possible education they can early on, at a time when we need to focus that attention on them.

I am extremely proud of that initiative and absolutely want to ensure that the member, MPP Gretzky, leaves

here feeling assured that subsidies will be a part of what we're doing, and we are committed to that. We are interested in working with everyone to ensure that that happens, and that absolutely includes the various parties in this room.

The Chair (Ms. Cheri DiNovo): Mr. Dickson, you have about a minute.

Mr. Joe Dickson: Thank you very much, Madam Chair. Through you to both the minister and the associate minister, I hope I didn't confuse you today because I only asked a question once and I didn't go back and ask it again and again. I let you take hold of it and give us an answer, and I am very impressed with the way you've handled that professionally.

Further, Madam Chair, if I may, through you to the other MPPs, I have a colleague at this particular table who is looking desperately for a five-minute breather, for lack of a better term. I wonder if I could leave that with you, Madam Chair.

The Chair (Ms. Cheri DiNovo): Sure. Is that amenable to the committee, that we take five minutes?

Okay. We're going to take—

Interjection.

The Chair (Ms. Cheri DiNovo): We'll come back at 11 minutes after 5. Okay?

Mr. Joe Dickson: Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

The Chair (Ms. Cheri DiNovo): No problem. We stand recessed until then.

The committee recessed from 1706 to 1714.

The Chair (Ms. Cheri DiNovo): Can we take our seats, please? We're about to resume.

We now move to the official opposition: Mr. Smith.

Mr. Todd Smith: Good afternoon again to the minister and the associate and the deputy.

This morning, during question period, I had a question for the minister regarding the demonstration schools and the other provincial schools. There are five of them in all in Ontario: in Brantford, in Belleville, in Milton and in Ottawa.

What we've found through public accounts were that \$700,000 more is being paid to local distribution companies in the areas of those five schools to pay for the soaring cost of electricity. That's from between 2009 and this past year. That's a significant amount of money: \$700,000. In the case of the CJL school, which is in downtown Ottawa, and Sagonaska School, which is in Belleville, the hydro actually spiked by 62%. That's an enormous increase.

What I'm wondering, Minister, is: Where is the money coming from to pay for those exorbitant electricity bills, and is that a concern to the ministry, the rising cost of electricity, because this is just five provincial schools that we're talking about that we actually have the hydro bills for.

Hon. Mitzie Hunter: Thank you, MPP Smith, for your question. I too have visited Sagonaska in Belleville. It was just a tremendous opportunity to meet our students and our educators. I remember visiting one class where

they had a math lead, and the students were very excited to learn about math.

We're very committed to the success and to the well-being of all of our children in Ontario's publicly funded education system. As you would know, our provincial schools—earlier this year, we consulted with students, families, staff and the education community to look into a range of supports that we can provide to these programs. Part of the outcome of that was to look at how we can provide the excellent services and results that we're getting from those provincial schools to—

Mr. Todd Smith: And how can you do that when \$700,000 more is going to pay to keep the lights on in these schools? How do you do that? Is there someone within in the ministry—and there's a lot of staff back there—I'm just wondering if there's someone within the ministry who could actually tell me how they're dealing with the incredible increases we're seeing in electricity costs. Is there somebody that you could point us to that might have those answers?

Hon. Mitzie Hunter: I'm answering—

Mr. Todd Smith: I know you're talking about how great the schools are. Listen, you don't have to convince me. You don't have to convince Ms. Gretzky, because we were actually at those schools.

Hon. Mitzie Hunter: I think it's important that we have a fulsome response to your questions. Given—

Mr. Todd Smith: I'm concerned about the electricity. That's really where we're going with this, because it's not just the provincial schools that we're talking about. There are almost 5,000 schools, I believe, across the province and all of them, every single one of them, would be seeing massive, massive increases on their electricity bills.

The only reason that we have the numbers for the provincial schools is because there's not a school board that they fall under—they're provincial schools. We don't have the numbers for the individual school boards. I think people should know, and I think parents of children in these schools should know, exactly how much money is now going to keep the lights on at these schools.

I see somebody has taken a seat there to your immediate left. I'm not sure if that gentleman has the answers. He's being replaced by somebody else. It's the rotating chairs. Hopefully, somebody—

Interjection.

Mr. Todd Smith: There's no music going, but it's musical chairs. Does somebody have an answer for me?

Hon. Mitzie Hunter: I'm answering your question, and I want to do that in as full a way as possible. I certainly have the support of my deputy and his team, but part of the commitment in being here in estimates and why our Liberal ministers are here in estimates is that we're accountable. This is an appropriate forum for us to address why we're doing things and what the results are that we're looking to achieve.

I do want to say, and I will hand it over to the deputy, that we're not closing the provincial schools. I think that

it's important that we say that. What we're looking to do is to take the work that is happening in those schools and to bring them to local communities—

Mr. Todd Smith: Yes, I understand that.

Hon. Mitzie Hunter: —to those local school boards so that they can actually be delivered closer to where students and children live so that more students can benefit from the program and the services, right?

Mr. Todd Smith: I understand all that. My question is regarding the electricity prices. I understand. I understand everything you're saying.

Hon. Mitzie Hunter: So we want to—

Mr. Todd Smith: Can we actually—

The Chair (Ms. Cheri DiNovo): Let the minister finish and then we'll go back.

Mr. Todd Smith: We could be here a while.

Hon. Mitzie Hunter: So we want all of our students with special needs across the exceptionalities to have the supports that they need. So Deputy, if you could talk specifically to how we're providing those supports to provincial schools.

Mr. Josh Paul: Josh Paul, education finance. I can't speak to provincial schools, but I believe there was also a reference to the 5,000 or so schools across the province.

Every year, we sit down with stakeholders and talk about where investments need to be made and where efficiencies can be found. Those changes are brought forward in the annual Grants for Student Needs announcement, usually towards the end of March. This year, using the Ministry of Energy's long-term energy plan, we adjusted the benchmarks by 3.5% for utilities. In the past, using the same data source, those increases have been in the magnitude of, say, 7.3% or 7.5%.

1720

Mr. Todd Smith: Would it be possible for the estimates committee to receive the actual electricity bills for the schools across the province? I know that would take some time, but I think it would be important for parents of students in the system and taxpayers in general to know exactly what the Liberal energy policies are costing our education system. Is that something that you could provide? We can easily access the provincial schools from the public accounts, but we can't with the school boards.

Hon. Mitzie Hunter: Well, let me just say that we've talked a lot during the time that we've been here about the funding. We've talked, actually, on a per pupil basis, about the fact that education funding has increased by \$4,500 per student—

Mr. Todd Smith: I realize that, but Minister, how much of that \$4,500 is actually going to keep the lights on in schools and not going into education?

Hon. Mitzie Hunter: Well, let me tell you what is going on. Let me tell you what it's going towards—

Mr. Todd Smith: That's what we really want to know as members of the committee. It's what we really want to know.

Mr. Han Dong: Point of order.

The Chair (Ms. Cheri DiNovo): Okay, wait. Just one at a time. Mr. Smith had the floor. Let him finish. When the minister has the floor, let her finish.

Is that what it was going to be about, Mr. Dong?

Mr. Han Dong: No.

The Chair (Ms. Cheri DiNovo): Okay. Mr. Dong: a point of order.

Mr. Han Dong: Point of order, Chair: I thought this estimates was about education, but what I've been hearing in the last five minutes are questions about energy. I don't understand—

Mr. Todd Smith: I know it's difficult for you to understand, but it actually has an impact.

The Chair (Ms. Cheri DiNovo): Excuse me; speak through the Chair, please.

Mr. Han Dong: I am speaking to the Chair.

The Chair (Ms. Cheri DiNovo): Yes. Mr. Dong, finish what you were going to say.

Mr. Han Dong: I'm just consulting with the Chair to see if these questions are appropriate for this estimates, which is with regard to education.

The Chair (Ms. Cheri DiNovo): My understanding is that it's a free flow of questions. These are questions about energy costs in schools, so it's entirely appropriate.

Back to you, Mr. Smith.

Mr. Todd Smith: Can Mr. Paul, or Deputy—is that something you could provide to the committee?

Hon. Mitzie Hunter: So—

Mr. Todd Smith: No; I'm asking the deputy or Mr. Paul if that's something that they can provide.

Hon. Mitzie Hunter: Mr. Smith, I'm attempting to answer your question, other than the interruptions. I think that it is important that we look at how the funding for education—where it's going, because that's what you're asking: Where is this funding going? The funding is going to student needs. It's going to students in the classroom, and we see that by the results. If you look at the fact that graduation rates are at 85.5%, if you look at 71% of elementary students meeting or exceeding the provincial standards in reading, writing and math, and if you look at—and it's not just what's happening here in Ontario; it's when we look at Ontario compared to other leading jurisdictions internationally.

It is very important that we look at those outcomes and those results, because they are going into programs, into specialized programs. We talked about the Specialist High Skills Major. We talked about all of those things—

Mr. Todd Smith: It's a simple question.

The Chair (Ms. Cheri DiNovo): Could you let the minister finish? Thank you.

Hon. Mitzie Hunter: It's pretty surprising to me when you—if I look at the PCs' commitment to education during the last election, you committed to cutting 2,000 teachers and 5,000 early childhood educators—

Mr. Todd Smith: No, it's actually not true.

She's here to talk about the estimates—

The Chair (Ms. Cheri DiNovo): Again, Mr. Smith, can I ask you, just one at a time. Let the minister finish.

Mr. Todd Smith: You're here to talk about the estimates of education. We want—

The Chair (Ms. Cheri DiNovo): Mr. Smith, could you please speak through the Chair? The minister has the floor. Just finish. Thank you.

Hon. Mitzie Hunter: Madam Chair, I'm very proud of the work that we are doing in education. We're increasing funding so that students have the supports that they need. Funding has increased in education, and continues to do so. We talked about the \$400 million of new funding that was brought into the system this year and the important work that that is doing to support our Syrian students as they come in, getting the language supports, getting the mental health supports, having mental health leads in every community; supporting our truth and reconciliation commitments, ensuring that we have an education system—

Mr. Todd Smith: What is the point of this, Chair? I asked questions. I want the answer. We only have a certain amount of time to get the questions answered. Clearly, she's not answering the question, Chair. All I want—

The Chair (Ms. Cheri DiNovo): There is nothing in this committee or in its mandate that compels her to answer your question or to say anything. Sorry. Those are the rules. The minister has the floor. She's going to finish her statement and then we'll come back to you, Mr. Smith. One at a time, please.

Hon. Mitzie Hunter: Absolutely. I want to also talk about our funding supports, which are ensuring that we have equitable and affordable access to high-speed broadband in our schools. We talk about 21st-century learning—because you're asking where this funding is going. It's going towards the investments that we're making in the classroom, in having the best teachers teach our students, so that our young people are prepared and are successful for the world that they will confront.

The Chair (Ms. Cheri DiNovo): Mr. Smith, back to you now.

Mr. Todd Smith: I ask you: Is there any way you can provide us with the information I'm asking for—not the minister's talking points. Is there any way we can find out the electricity bills for the school boards in the province of Ontario? Taxpayers are paying education taxes. Ratepayers are paying rates. We simply want to know how much is diverted from the education system—from the envelope of money that education is receiving, how much is actually going to pay the bills? It's a simple, simple question.

Hon. Mitzie Hunter: You talk about taxpayers, but we have to talk about the two million students in our system, and we have to talk about—part of our focus is to ensure that all of our students in Ontario who are in our publicly funded education system get the best education possible. We have 5,000 schools in Ontario. More than 800,000 students are transported each and every day to school. There are 19,000 school buses and special-purpose vehicles that transport our students—

Mr. Todd Smith: How much is that costing—school buses?

Hon. Mitzie Hunter: We spend close to—it's about \$800 million that is spent.

Mr. Todd Smith: Okay. How much is being spent on electricity?

Hon. Mitzie Hunter: If you look at—

Mr. Todd Smith: I know “electricity” is a dirty word for the Liberals. It really is a dirty word for the Liberals. You don't want to talk about electricity.

Hon. Mitzie Hunter: What I want to talk about—

Mr. Todd Smith: I get that, but I think the people of Ontario—

The Chair (Ms. Cheri DiNovo): Wait. I'm going to ask you again—

Mr. Todd Smith: —have a right to know what the electricity bills are in our education system.

The Chair (Ms. Cheri DiNovo): Mr. Smith, if you could direct your comments through the Chair. I would ask you again not to interrupt.

Minister, could you please answer succinctly? Thank you.

Hon. Mitzie Hunter: You know, I think it's important to recognize that Ontario's education system is delivered in partnership with all of the education workers. We have 72 school boards in this province that are responsible for the budgets, and our school board funding has increased substantially. I want to talk about funding for the eastern region. It has increased by \$1.4 billion since 2003.

Mr. Todd Smith: How much of that has gone to pay electricity bills?

Hon. Mitzie Hunter: That's an 80% increase. The per pupil funding has increased by \$4,600 since 2003.

Mr. Todd Smith: How much of that has gone to electricity bills?

Hon. Mitzie Hunter: So it's an increase of 61%. We've talked about the increases for licensed child care to \$67 million in the eastern region—

Mr. Todd Smith: How much of that has gone to electricity bills? These are all fair questions.

Hon. Mitzie Hunter: Investments in school infrastructure: It has increased in the eastern region by \$2.4 billion in school infrastructure.

Mr. Todd Smith: I bet a lot of that has gone to pay electricity bills.

Hon. Mitzie Hunter: Well, that includes 127 new schools and—

Mr. Todd Smith: How many schools are you closing?

Hon. Mitzie Hunter: We absolutely have an accommodation review process in this province, because we don't want funding to be for empty classrooms. That's not what we want. We want funding to be in classrooms where students are learning. We want our students to be learning in the best possible environment. Through the supports that we're providing, in fact we have \$750 million that school boards are able to tap into for consolidation so that they're able to combine schools and provide much more robust programming, so that they're

able to provide more activities for students, whether that's through gyms or programs like Specialist High Skills Major or dual credits, and the best possible teaching experience for all of Ontario's students and all of our learners. That's right across our school boards. Whether we're talking about our English public boards, our English Catholic boards, our French boards or our French Catholic boards, these programs and these supports are provided and are available.

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I can understand that you want to ensure that there are those outcomes, but I do ask that you listen when we're talking about those results, because those results are making a difference in children's lives. If our graduation rates had stayed at 68%, 190,000 less students would be graduating from high school than what we're having today.

Mr. Todd Smith: How many of those students are entering the workforce?

Hon. Mitzie Hunter: We know that, first of all, the Ontario education system is recognized around the world as one of the best education systems in the world.

Mr. Todd Smith: We know that. You've told us that 100 times since this started.

Hon. Mitzie Hunter: Well, we should be celebrating that. We should be celebrating that because—

Mr. Todd Smith: I just want to know—

Interjection.

Hon. Mitzie Hunter: —our graduates—

Mr. Todd Smith: Don't you want to know in Kingston how much your schools are paying for electricity?

The Chair (Ms. Cheri DiNovo): Again, one at a time. Mr. Smith, Ms. Kiwala—we're back to the minister. Can you finish your sentence, please, Minister?

Hon. Mitzie Hunter: Thank you, Madam Chair. I am very, very aware that we care about education in Ontario. That's why we're making those investments. It's because we want to make those investments for our children.

I want to say, Mr. Smith, that funding in your own riding of Prince Edward-Hastings, to that school board, has increased by \$310 million. It's an 84% increase since 2003. These increases are right across the board. They're affecting our students. That's a \$5,100-per-pupil increase in your riding of Prince Edward-Hastings. Three new schools were built in your riding: Harmony Public School, Stirling Public School and Tweed public school. We are making those necessary investments.

Mr. Todd Smith: I understand that. You're spending a lot of money; I understand that. I simply have a question. We want to know how much is being spent on electricity in these schools. Deputy, is that not something that should be readily available to this committee? When it comes to the estimates of the Ministry of Education, we should be privy to that type of information. This is the estimates of the Ministry of Energy. Where is the money going that's allocated to education?

Hon. Mitzie Hunter: This is actually not the estimates—

Mr. Todd Smith: No, this is estimates committee.

Hon. Mitzie Hunter: This is not the estimates of the Ministry of Energy; this is the estimates for the Ministry of Education—

Mr. Todd Smith: Exactly.

Hon. Mitzie Hunter: —and we're telling you about the funding that we're making and the investments that we're making in student achievement and in student well-being right across the board.

The Chair (Ms. Cheri DiNovo): Mr. Smith, you have just under two minutes.

Mr. Todd Smith: Are you telling me, then, that we're not going to get those numbers? We're never going to find out—you know, transparency and accountability was something that Kathleen Wynne said she was going to bring to this government. I find it so hypocritical that the minister and the deputy won't inform the estimates committee of that type of information. It should be available to everybody in the province of Ontario. How much is being spent on the electricity bills?

Clearly, you've been stonewalling me now for 17 minutes or so. I've asked a simple question: Will you provide that information to this committee?

Hon. Mitzie Hunter: Mr. Smith, I've been telling you about the investments that we're making in education.

Mr. Todd Smith: I know you have.

Hon. Mitzie Hunter: Supporting children and youth is the best possible investment that we can make in Ontario. Our publicly funded education system is a testament to that. We have two million-plus children who receive education from that system each and every day in this province. We're making those investments and we're seeing the results of those investments. If you look at our graduation rates, if you look at—you asked about the pathways for our students beyond high school. That's incredibly important.

We're the government that just made tuition free for post-secondary education for families on low incomes. We did that because we recognize that students from low-income families were not applying. They had just taken themselves out of the game. And if they weren't applying, what does that say earlier on? What kind of signals are we giving to our young people, to our children in grade 7 and grade 8? We want them to believe that they can achieve that college or university or apprenticeship program. So we've made that free.

Those transition moments are very important. I believe in our young people, and I know that they are succeeding.

The Chair (Ms. Cheri DiNovo): Thank you, Minister. Mr. Smith, time is up. We now move to the third party: Ms. Gretzky.

Mr. Todd Smith: We got so far.

Mrs. Lisa Gretzky: I'd like to know what prompted the reduction in funding to rural schools through the Geographic Circumstances Grant, and are any funds being diverted to rural schools to make up for the loss in funding through the Geographic Circumstances Grant?

Hon. Mitzie Hunter: I just want to say that we are very committed to our support for rural schools. We have

actually increased our funding, taking into account specific circumstances that rural and northern schools will face. In 2015-16, we provided \$3.7 billion in funding toward rural school boards. Since 2003, our per pupil funding has increased by \$4,753, or 64%. Since 2012-13, we've increased the annual GSN funding for rural boards by over \$199 million, or 5.7%. We've changed the Grants for Student Needs funding formula to better address the higher costs of materials and resources, as well as the reality of the declining enrolment associated with rural schools. I'd like to ask the deputy to—

Mrs. Lisa Gretzky: Actually, the Geographic Circumstances Grant that's specifically for rural schools was actually, over the last two years, cut by almost \$10 million in 2015-16. So you haven't actually increased that grant; you've reduced it.

Hon. Mitzie Hunter: As I said, we have changed the funding formula. I'm going to ask the deputy to address that question.

Mrs. Lisa Gretzky: If you can please let me know why that grant was reduced—that was the first part of my question. Why was that specific grant reduced?

Hon. Mitzie Hunter: She's talking about funding for rural schools.

Mr. Josh Paul: Yes, absolutely.

Two parts to the question, perhaps:

(1) What does the GSN do for rural schools and rural boards?

(2) What were the overall considerations in some of the changes to the GSN that were brought forward?

Firstly, as the minister noted, rural boards receive about \$3.7 billion in 2016-17. This is despite the fact that they have declining enrolment, and enrolment is a key driver in the Grants for Student Needs. As my colleague Martyn Beckett noted earlier, when enrolment goes up, funding goes up; when enrolment goes down, funding goes down for a great preponderance of the Grants for Student Needs.

But there are, as was asked, specific recognitions of the characteristics of rural boards and rural schools in the Grants for Student Needs. In particular, there are protections for declining enrolment. Many rural boards do have and are grappling with declining enrolment. There is a declining enrolment adjustment in the Grants for Student Needs—approximately \$31 million in 2016-17.

There are protections for the transportation funding. Transportation funding is essentially what you got last year if you're a board, plus or minus some adjustments. One of those adjustments is enrolment. The transportation envelope for every board is protected in the case of declining enrolment. Rural boards have schools that are isolated. Certainly, the Grants for Student Needs, when it looks at the funding it provides to the School Foundation Grant, for principals and vice-principals, or the funding for ops and renewal, does recognize the fact that funding should be increased or should be at a higher level for those schools that are isolated from other schools of the same board.

There is also, as you mentioned, the Geographic Circumstances Grant, which recognizes the fact that there are increased costs to providing services when schools are dispersed from each other or when a board is overall, say, removed from an urban location. There are also some specific factors, in both the Special Education Grant and the board administration grant, to take into account the remoteness or rural-ness. So it is one of the factors that goes into those overall grants.

Mrs. Lisa Gretzky: Thank you.

Mr. Josh Paul: In terms of the second part of your question, which was about some of the changes that have been brought in over the past few years, what the government does—and does every year—is sit down with a broad range of education stakeholders from students to teachers, to principals and vice-principals, to school boards and others, to determine how to make changes in the best needs of students. One of the emphases, as far back as 2013, given the overall fiscal situation, was certainly how to identify efficiencies as well as how to identify opportunities for investments. What we heard as part of those conversations, and continue to hear, is that there is an opportunity to make a more efficient use of school space. In Ontario, there is significant underutilized space.

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What was needed was supports for boards to make those decisions, either through school consolidation, through joint use or community partnership. The government brought forward a whole package of reforms designed to work together to really provide the incentives and supports. It did, in the main, reduce some funding overall in some grants. Specifically, the major one was the school option renewal and the top-up for non-isolated schools. At the same time, it invested in the actual space that was being used, the per pupil benchmark.

It also made some changes to the Geographic Circumstances Grant as part of that overall package. Primarily it was an update in data. The data had not been updated for several years. The number of centres in Ontario that had over 200,000 population changed. There was a series of updates there that happened.

The other elements of the strategy to support boards in making a more efficient use of school space were the planning capacity money that was rolled out in 2015-16 and also the efforts to make the processes around accommodation review more streamlined and modern. Also, as the minister has mentioned, at that time there were significant capital investments put on the table: \$750 million over four years at the time.

Mrs. Lisa Gretzky: Thank you. I think that covers my—when we're talking about streamlining the accommodation review, it is actually speeding up the process of closing schools. You can put it that way.

Next question is: How much is allocated for transitioning EQAO assessments to put them online? Then, more specifically—or secondary to that—the OSSLT, the Ontario secondary school literacy test, was offered online as a pilot project at 900 schools. Unfortunately, the

project was cancelled, and there were many students—thousands of students—who had spent months studying for that test. I'd like to know: How much did it actually cost to administer the pilot project?

So, first part: How much is it costing to transition to the EQAO—as a whole—to online assessment? Then, secondary to that, how much did it cost to administer the OSSLT pilot project?

Hon. Mitzie Hunter: I will ask the deputy to speak as well, but one of the aspects that we have to recognize is that EQAO results are based on Ontario's curriculum, and the testing that is occurring is really demonstrating that students are succeeding at the EQAO test. If we look at international standards, through PISA and others, Ontario schools are recognized really in the top 10s of comparable jurisdictions.

I'm very proud of the work that our students are doing and the achievements that we're seeing. It's helping us to provide the necessary supports in areas that need that, like we have said, with our math strategy, the \$60 million that we're putting in there.

Moving online is something students want us to do. It's something that will make the testing more efficient for students. We were committed to doing those pilots. We had done a series of them. Obviously, the one most recently we had to cancel, given the fact that there was a cyber attack on our system that didn't allow us to proceed with all of the students completing. But EQAO is in the process of doing an assessment, and they're going to make that fully public as well.

Deputy?

Mr. Bruce Rodrigues: The total cost for EQAO per year that is a transfer payment is approximately \$32 million a year for all of the work that EQAO does. In terms of that \$32 million, there were no additional costs for the attempt to move the system online. It was taken from the internal costs.

There was a surplus in the previous budget. To start the process, it cost EQAO approximately \$4.6 million to get it going overall. In terms of your specific question as to what the OSSLT cost this year in terms of the trial run of it, that's still being assessed in terms of that total cost in what occurred.

There was an RFP put out in order to get a vendor to support that move online, and so there is a shared cost in that particular piece as well.

Mrs. Lisa Gretzky: Is there any indication of how long it's going to take to assess the cost of the pilot project?

Mr. Bruce Rodrigues: There is an audit taking place around it. I don't have that information in terms of the length of time that that audit would take, but they are doing a forensic audit around it.

Mrs. Lisa Gretzky: My next question is around school transportation. As we know, at the beginning of this school year there were thousands of students who were impacted by the fact that there are not enough bus drivers to be transporting the students. What I want to know is whether the government is committed to a

review of the funding framework for the student transportation grant and how it's distributed. I know they receive the money, but many boards are still struggling to actually make ends meet when it comes to transportation. Is there a review of the funding framework that's going to take place? If so, what is the timeline of the review? When can parents, school board trustees and administrators expect to see a review done?

Also, a large, if not the only, contributing factor to what happened in the beginning of this school year is the fact that there is an issue around retaining bus drivers, specifically to the process of securing student transportation. In simple terms, contract flipping is an issue. When boards are looking at it from a funding perspective, they put it out to RFP and they are trying to get, basically, the cheapest service. I'm not saying it's not safe service—although there have been questions around that with some boards—but they're trying to work within the funding that they're given. So it goes out to RFP and then bus operators, the companies, then come forward with their proposal, and the boards choose the consortiums from there.

The issue is that once that happens, there is no guarantee that if a new company then comes in and provides transportation, the school bus drivers who were there the previous year are going to then move on to a new company, a new service provider. In that case, many of these service providers do not have the bus drivers in place to provide adequate transportation.

We have an issue around—and I realize it's up to the operators, but it's directly linked to the funding that the boards can provide for transportation. Many of them aren't making an awful lot of money and aren't being compensated for all the work that they're putting into it.

My question is: What is it that the ministry is doing to ensure that we're not going to see this again next year? This has been an issue for years; this is not a new issue. What is the ministry doing to ensure that we're not going to see contract flipping, where we're going to see bus drivers who have experience, who have already been servicing the education sector and doing an incredible job—many have formed relationships with the students they are transporting, and we're losing them during the RFP process. I'd like to know what, if anything, is going to be put in place to ensure that we're not going to have that issue again next year, or in years to come, that there is going to be some sort of job security for school bus drivers, and that boards are going to receive the appropriate funding so it doesn't simply come down to who can provide the service the cheapest.

Hon. Mitzie Hunter: First of all, I want to start by saying that more than 800,000 students are transported each day in Ontario. There are approximately 19,000 school buses, or school purpose vehicles, under contract with school boards used to transport our students. I want to thank those transportation workers for safely transporting our students. It's something that I'm very grateful for, because they are doing that very important job in

taking our students to school so that they can get the best education.

We are committed to helping school boards deliver that safe, effective and efficient transportation service for all of our students. Since 2003, we've increased funding for transportation by 40%. At this point, in 2016-17, student transportation funding is projected to be \$896 million. I'd like to note that, because earlier I had said \$800 million; it's \$896 million, an increase of 40%.

This is a service that many parents rely on and students enjoy. They expect the bus to come. It gives great peace of mind to know that our children are safe and they're being transported safely to school.

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The disruptions that occurred in September of this year of course are frustrating, and it's very concerning. I know that the boards that were impacted, other than—there's a normal amount of getting used to the beginning of the year and how many students are needing that service, but this year there was a particular frustration. The boards have been working very, very hard to resolve that issue. Many of them have done so. There are still a few boards that are sorting it out.

We're ensuring that we get through this immediate challenge in terms of the issue of driver coverage for routes. As you may know, the Ombudsman has indicated that he would like to do an assessment as well, and we welcome that. The boards themselves—I know that the Toronto District School Board has said that it would do its own review.

That information is very important because I'm interested in bringing all of those stakeholders together so that we can actually work collectively to put a plan in place so that something like this does not happen again, so that when we look forward, there is a solid plan that speaks to the issues that caused the disruption and we are able to provide that support.

So there's a longer-term need, but in the immediate term, it's important that we get kids to school, that they know they are going to be able to rely on that service. And we know that parents really rely on that to have that peace of mind. We're in touch with the boards, and I know the ministry is as well.

Maybe you should comment on this as well, Deputy. Go ahead.

Ms. Cheri Hayward: My name is Cheri Hayward. I'm the director of the school business support branch, and I have the student transportation file as one of my areas of responsibility. Thank you for your question.

It's important to note—and you have made reference to this—that the driver shortage issue has been an ongoing problem. It's a complex issue. It is not something as simple as competitive procurement. The driver shortage issue, in fact, is something that's happening right across North America in terms of school bus drivers. There is a shortage. There is a shortage in Ontario of truck drivers; there is a shortage of municipal drivers. In fact, Peterborough recently had to cancel five of their routes because they themselves, at municipal

rates—it was not competitively procured—had difficulty getting drivers and had to cancel those routes altogether.

Every year, as the minister said, there is often that start-up piece in terms of the driver issue. This year it was not anticipated, the driver shortage. In fact, it was not anticipated by the operators themselves. They felt they were ready to start school. This is part of the complexity of the driver issue. It's a really tough job, as you've mentioned. They play a really important role. The issue of driver wages, the working conditions and the full benefits package, the remuneration package, is an issue between the operators themselves and the drivers, their employees.

It should also be noted that this year, in the areas that we've had the most difficult situation with drivers, they had competitively procured—

The Chair (Ms. Cheri DiNovo): Ms. Gretzky, you have under a minute.

Mrs. Lisa Gretzky: Thank you. If I may, because you brought up wages and you brought up municipal bus drivers: I'm not sure if the minister is aware, but one of the biggest issues is that those who are transporting such precious cargo, our children, to school every day—a very important job—are not actually paid the same as those that are driving public transportation buses, those who are put in charge of everybody's personal well-being. They are, in my opinion, equivalent jobs, yet those driving school buses have no job security and are not compensated the same.

I would suggest that although you say it's between drivers and the companies, if the school boards received funding in order to be able to look at procuring services where the employees were treated fairly, were compensated fairly and didn't have to worry about losing their job the next year when it goes out to tender, we might not have a bus shortage.

The Chair (Ms. Cheri DiNovo): I'm afraid that's it. We now move to the government side. Mr. Anderson?

Mr. Granville Anderson: Thank you, Madam Chair.

It would be remiss of me if I didn't commend the minister, the deputy minister and all the staff who participated here today for their patience and their professionalism that was displayed here, under trying circumstances at best.

I'm going to paint a different picture. I enjoy visiting schools. I spend a lot of time doing that whenever I can. I was a trustee for some 11 or 12 years. A couple of weeks ago, I visited two schools in north Oshawa. It was a great occasion. I announced the building of two new schools in the area. I didn't go on-site where these schools will be built; I went to other schools to make the announcement—one Catholic school and one public elementary school, two elementary schools.

I went in and I saw exuberant, joyful, happy kids, happy teachers and a happy atmosphere. I spent time there, made the announcement, and they said to me, "Would you like to tour the classrooms?" Of course, I jumped at the idea. I jump at any opportunity to tour classrooms. So I went to the classrooms, met the kids,

met teachers individually, and they were all happy. It wasn't doom and gloom. The sky wasn't falling in. They were grateful and they were happy about the supports and the quality of the schools.

By the way, these two schools that I visited: One was six months old—they didn't even have an opening yet—and the other one was about two years old.

In all the schools that I've visited, I have seen nothing but great teachers, great professionalism by teachers and principals, and happy, exuberant students who are there to learn. I'm not saying it's perfect. There are occasions which, as a trustee, I know are trying circumstances, like where you have an unusual amount of kids with special needs. That's trying for any teacher to deal with, and yes, those are problems. Those are things that you deal with. Societal problems are problems that—you can't base it on government or around the school system. They're just the circumstances that happen on rare occasions.

Having said that, I understand—

Interjection.

Mr. Granville Anderson: Two minutes left? There's so much to say.

On school closures, it's not a bad thing to close schools if there's a need to close them. It's a disservice to kids to keep a school open with 50 or 60 kids in it. They cannot get the programs or the supports they need. They cannot participate in athletic programs.

It depends. I know in urban areas, there's a difference. In rural areas, if it requires travelling for two hours on a bus, under those circumstances, yes, you would keep a school open.

I personally closed a school in Clarington, the only time that I closed. That school was closed because one school, which was St. Elizabeth, was built for 400 kids. There were 700 kids in that school. There was another school, St. Stephen's, with 150 children in the school. So I said to the community, "Instead of building a school for 300 kids, let's close a school. It's a savings. It's money that goes back into programming, into special needs, into running the school board and the school system better." They agreed, so we built a school for 600 kids. In that school, kids access all the programs. They get to participate in extracurricular activities, sporting activities.

So there are positives to closing schools, other than financial consequences or financial circumstances. It's also better for kids and it gives them an opportunity to participate in a wide array of programs, extracurricular activities, sporting activities etc. So it's something we do.

I could go on for days expressing the good things I see in schools.

I would like to thank the minister for not flip-flopping on sex education. She has stood her ground because it's also something that is a good thing. It's a positive thing. The community and society as a whole are accepting that—

The Chair (Ms. Cheri DiNovo): I'm afraid that is it. In fact, that is it for estimates and that is it for this session. I'll be reporting back on estimates in the House tomorrow afternoon, so this brings us to the end—

Interjections.

The Chair (Ms. Cheri DiNovo): Quiet, all. This is so exciting.

This brings us to the end of our consideration of the 2016-17 estimates. Just before we stand adjourned, I

want to thank our Clerk, our legislative researcher, our translator, Hansard and our audio technician back here. Thank you all for your hard work. Thank you, everyone. We stand adjourned.

The committee adjourned at 1800.

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