

EVENING SITTING
COMMITTEE OF FINANCE

General Revenue Fund
Education
Vote 5

Subvote (ED01)

Mr. Krawetz: — Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I wasn't sure whether I had posed the question at that time when we did recess. Anyway, we'll get back on that topic and deal with a couple other points, Madam Minister, around the closure or great discontinuance and the small schools factor.

Madam Minister, has your department taken a look at bussing as far as the distances children travel? And have you had any studies done in terms of what might be a reasonable expectation of the distance that children should ride or could ride? As I have indicated, with great discontinuance occurring in a community like Theodore, there are parents there that are very concerned about their children. Some students currently ride a bus for an hour to get to the community of Theodore and now they'll be subjected to at least another 50 minute to an hour ride. And we're starting to look at in the neighbourhood of one and three quarter hours or two hours of total time spent on a bus. And I'm wondering whether or not there has been any study as to what is a goal that you're working toward to ensure that students don't spend a great deal of time riding a bus?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Thank you. I think you initially directed your comments by talking about the distance that children travel and whether or not that's something that the department has studied. What I can tell you is that we are more interested in time on the school bus than distance. You can be 15 or 16 miles away and get to your school in fairly short order or you can be 7 or 8 miles away and take some time because of the number of students getting onto the bus.

I recall as a child I was 6 miles away from the school, and I got on the bus at 7:30 in the morning and got off at 5 o'clock. And it was basically because of the kinds of back roads that we had to take, and the numbers of students getting on the bus. And we were also waiting for a bus where high school students were transferred to another school.

We do not have a policy about time on the bus. This is an issue that has been left to local school boards to determine. I do know that school boards have reconfigured bus routes in order to minimize time. And that has been quite successful in some parts of the province.

Mr. Krawetz: — Madam Minister, as you are aware, a number of programs occur after the normal school day — extracurricular activities — whether they be debating classes or drama practices or whatever else occurs after hours. The concern as we start to look at distances getting greater and greater between schools, as the case of Theodore and Yorkton, where we're now starting to look at students travelling, well somewhere in that neighbourhood of 35, 40 miles, or if we change that to kilometres we're almost looking at the same

distance as Regina to Moose Jaw. Those students will be bussed.

And while there will be changes — and I know the division board is looking at adjusting bus routes and trying to ensure that students spend as little time as possible on those busses — what will happen though, Madam Minister, is that we will have a situation where there will be students who will miss out on opportunities. They will miss out on those opportunities because their parents cannot afford to have . . . and these are comments coming from parents who will be involved next year with their children travelling to Yorkton . . . these are parents who are indicating that they do not have a second automobile to provide to the students on, you know, a regular basis, two or three times a week. They will be missing out on a lot of the activities.

And that is of grave concern, Madam Minister, because I think in your visits to various schools, you know that it is not only an academic program that will keep students in school; it's a broad range of activities. If students can feel good about going to school and being involved and all of the other programs that schools provide they may stay in school. That's one of the stay-in-school initiatives that has come across not only in Saskatchewan but all over Canada.

And I'm wondering, Madam Minister, how do we balance that. How do we balance the fact that here we have a great discontinuance occurring, where we're going to have students that are going to miss out on certain things and on the other side, we're not even going to recognize the problems that the small schools factor created in terms of grant recognition. I think we have to look at a balance in saying, where do you feel there is an optimum in terms of the quality of education, the access to education, so that all students can be treated equally in the province?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Well just so you understand this, we have changed the small schools factor. The maximum number of students recognized per grade has moved from 10 to 15. The rate per pupil for all grades has been raised from \$450 and \$850 to 1,000 — regardless of what grade you're in — per student.

And the location factor remains the same. We still measure distance by road. Kindergarten and elementary — the small school factor applies to 10 to 30 kilometres; middle years, 15 kilometres to 40 kilometres; and secondary, 20 kilometres to 50 kilometres. And we've changed it so it's no longer as the crow flies but it's actual distance.

You raised a question, Member, that has been a question that has been raised forever, particularly for those young people involved in extracurricular activity living in rural Saskatchewan. For those of us that had to catch a school bus to get home at 3:30, arrangements — if you wanted to participate in an extracurricular activity — had to be made for you to, you know, stay in town until your folks could come and get you, or you would drive home with other families that were in your vicinity.

This is not a new question. This is a question and a concern that people living outside of towns, villages, and urban centres

where schools are located have been dealing with for decades. It's an ongoing concern, and as long as we have people that live outside of the urban areas, which I presume we will have for many, many centuries into the future, this will be a question for those young people and their families to try and come to grips with.

Mr. Krawetz: — Thank you, Madam Minister. And I fully appreciate that this has been a discussion that's been around, and we need to get our heads around that one. The point that I'm trying to make, Madam Minister, it doesn't matter whether your changes are \$5,000 per student. In the case of Theodore School, because of the way the formula is considered, the next nearest grade 10, 11, and 12 is Yorkton and the second nearest is Foam Lake. Those are all beyond the distances that you have indicated in your formula.

So when we start to look at why did the Yorkdale board make that decision, it's one of program. It's one of numbers. It's one of everything, but it is also finances. And if they had the opportunity . . . and I think, Madam Minister, you're aware that those grades in Theodore — those three grades — average about nine to ten students per grade. And for simplicity sake, I think you can see the difference between ten students in a grade, and if we were talking about three grades we're talking about 30,000 potential dollars for those division 4 students, and that is the reason why the small schools factor was set up.

Ministers of Education before you have indicated that it is more expensive to offer grades in a particular school. As the distance increases, of course, and as the grades are later on in the spectrum — that is, the grade 9, 10, 11, and 12 — costs become higher. That's recognized in your grant distribution formula whereas the per pupil basis is higher for students in grade 10, 11, and 12 because there is a higher cost. You can't in a small school situation, which is a K to 12, you cannot offer the program at the same cost as you could in a much larger centre where there are 25 or 28 students per grade.

So the final point that I want to make, Madam Minister, is that Theodore people feel that this regulation that you have in place was one that was unfair. It does not matter whether there is 15,000 per student or whether or not we're talking about 10 students or 8 students or 12 students. The situation that was applied to the Theodore School was that there was no grant basically. It was a very small number that was allocated because of the choice of school buildings in Springside and Sheho.

Now the other point, Madam Minister, is that when we start to look at the distances, as I've indicated, there will be 28 students — I think . . . is the count — of the Division 4 students in Theodore who will now be riding the bus for some greater distance. And I'm sure you've been on the highway, Madam Minister, on Highway 16. You know that that distance from Theodore to Yorkton is significant and the time driving that distance, even with an automobile, is significant. Now we're going to be putting a bus on that road to have those students transported.

Is that the kind of situation that we're going to be looking at all across the province, where we're now going to look at a scenario in Yorkton, for instance, that the school, the next closest division 4 school will be now well over 60 miles away?

It'll be at Foam Lake, and there will be no division 4 schools in between. Is that the kind of system that we're moving to?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Well, Member, you'll recall that you came to see me . . . I think it was shortly before the legislature was convened or shortly thereafter. I don't know if our budget . . . no our budget had not yet been delivered. And I have to share with you, Member, that I did consult with people about your proposal and it was suggested to me that in order to go forward with that proposal, I needed to do more consultation. I did, as you know, talk to your school board — some of your members of your school board — the Yorkdale school board, about this matter, and I was advised that this wasn't something that you had discussed with them and that they wanted to have this discussion with you.

So this isn't something that . . . this wasn't a decision to maintain the existing policy that was taken lightly. There was consultation. I spoke to people at the rural congress about your idea and once again I was advised that I needed to consult a little more widely than, you know, running into a few people at the congress.

So I have not had any letters from anybody indicating that they want us to change the small school factor and have it . . . sort of compare high schools to high schools. I don't believe, and my officials have confirmed this, I have not received one letter. The only call for this action has come from you. And when I have raised it with that school division board, members of that school division board, this was something that they needed to consider, and they also reminded me that school closures or grade discontinuance are within the prerogative of the locally-elected school division board.

Mr. Krawetz: — Thank you, Madam Minister. The concerns are surfacing in a wide range of areas because I think we're talking about schools where the distances between the schools are getting greater, and I think that there has to be a perceived fairness that the grants are distributed equitably and fairly. And you've indicated that there is further research needed and you need to look at that. And I appreciate that comment.

The point that I was wanting to conclude with, Madam Minister, is that the people in Theodore felt that for them, even though you might suggest there might be some changes later, that for them the distance has become too great. There are certain families that are looking at it and saying, I'm not sure this is in our best interests. We may have to leave — sell their existing facilities and move to a community where they can be closer to a school. And I don't think that that's what we want to have in this province. I think what we need to do is to attract more people and more families to areas in the province — that we're not concerned about school closures and grade discontinuance.

Madam Minister, if I could change to one other topic that you've been involved with, and that's the four-day week. You made reference to that earlier on in some of your comments. There was a suggestion after the first year that the four-day week was a pilot project. I think that's how it was described at Scenic Valley and I'm wondering, have you had a report on that? Have you had a chance to analyze the benefits of that four-day week — the negative things maybe that may have

come out of that? Is there a report that is already finished or is there being . . . is there an assessment that is taking place right now?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — As the member may know, the first year of the pilot project was evaluated. We've extended that pilot project, I believe, to three, three to five years — I think officially three years. But we will be extending it five years. We have called for, — through a proposal call — a team of reviewers to come in from outside of the province to review the pilot project in terms of its success.

I should tell you that I've had a chance to look at some of the research that's been done in this field. And I think it's fair to say that four-day school weeks have not lasted that long in many parts of the United States where it has been tried. And so I guess it's fair to say that the jury is still out on the notion of a four-day school week.

Mr. Krawetz: — Thank you, Madam Minister. I notice that, in articles from the middle to late April, you've indicated that there would be no more pilot projects until a review is done, and that we need to see exactly where we're moving. I think there were some comments by teachers, if I recall, that indicated that the department should be more flexible.

And I know that other school divisions are looking at Scenic Valley to get a better understanding of what is, what are the benefits, of course, to the students — number one. I think that's what we have to keep in mind at all times, of course, is whether or not the changes do benefit the students. And as I've indicated to you, I think that we need to be very wary of school closures, grade discontinuances, four-day weeks, if indeed there are benefits to students or if there are negatives. And I think I heard you say that while you are awaiting a complete study, that there will be no further pilot projects.

Madam Minister, one of the topics that you also expounded upon today when you gave second reading to The Education Act was that there have been amalgamations of school divisions and there are changes. And the changes as proposed in your amendments will decrease the number of francophone boards from nine down to one.

I recall a newspaper article not too long ago, I think — and I'm not sure, I don't have the exact quotation, Madam Minister, and that's what I'd like you to explain — where you indicated to boards of education that this was their last chance for voluntary amalgamation. And I've had some calls from board members and trustees to get a better understanding of what did you mean by, this is your last chance for voluntary amalgamations. Are you suggesting that if they are not amalgamating voluntarily, that you have a program in place to actually make some changes?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Well I think . . . let me give you the history of this, Member. You will recall that in 1996 our government underwent the largest public consultation that it's undertaken in the whole area of restructuring public education for the 21st century. In December of 1996 after meeting with 5,500 citizens, receiving 1,000 returns of the questionnaire, 70 briefs from various stakeholders, and hundreds of letters from individual citizens, the government determined that the best

course of action for restructuring public education in the province was to do two things. Obviously this decision should be left to local people to determine whether or not they wanted to restructure, and there would be strong government leadership.

At the time, each individual school board across the province was to provide the department with its proposal to launch a discussion process in their own individual school division, and they were to start having discussions with their neighbours.

Now it's very sad to report that, of the 107 divisions in the province, I think about 60 provided a written process to the department; the others did not. I think it's fair to say that some school boards went — we don't have to worry about this, the government's not going to impose restructuring. I think it's fair to say that the government entered into a commitment with these school divisions where they would go through a genuine process of discussion at the local level. They wanted to determine whether or not they should amalgamate, whether it was in their best interests, and they wanted government leadership.

Now what has happened is, in some cases school boards have begun the process of discussion with their neighbouring school divisions. In fact in your part of the province, I'm extremely optimistic about all of the work that has been done regarding the coming together of various division boards to begin the discussions at the local community level as to whether or not they're ready for a larger restructuring initiative come the next set of school board elections in the year 2000.

There are some parts of the province where, I think it's fair to say no work has been done. What I have said to the trustees — and I had some remarks that will indicate this — is that this is not unlike many things in life. As long as I am the Minister of Education in this province, there will be no forced school division amalgamation. Now I may not be the Minister of Education for ever; I'm sure I won't be.

The other thing that I said is that ministers come and go, and so do governments. Governments change. And so what I said is that I cannot guarantee that there won't be forced amalgamation at some stage in our province's history.

Now if you look at every other jurisdiction in this country, every other jurisdiction in this country — with the exception of Manitoba — has seen forced school division amalgamation. Or in the case of New Brunswick, they've totally gotten rid of school boards.

So I'm saying to school boards, we entered into an act of faith. The faith that we had in each other was that we weren't going to impose amalgamation, but they were going to do their work at the local level. So I was back out this spring to remind people of the act of faith that we entered into, that they would undergo a genuine process of consultation. And I think it's fair to say that that has not happened across this province.

Mr. Krawetz: — Madam Minister, while I recall your directive, I guess I'm wondering, when you say that you expect all 107 school divisions to look at sharing — you very early on this afternoon spoke about the separate system and its

constitutional rights — and were you expecting those school divisions to look at amalgamations? Were you expecting Regina Public, Saskatoon Public, the largest rural school divisions around Regina — Buffalo Plains, Saskatchewan Valley — were you expecting those school divisions as well to sit down and come up with a plan of restructuring and amalgamation? Was that what your expectation was?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Well there's three ways to go here. You can have a full-fledged amalgamation, you can have partnerships, or you can have sharing.

Now in the case of Sask Valley, Sask Valley has already restructured with the Blaine Lake School Division. And no doubt they're talking to other boards of education. In the case of Catholic boards across the province, we have many examples where Catholic boards are sharing directors of education and sharing resource personnel at the local level.

An example would be North Battleford, Spiritwood, Wilkie, and Unity. They've amalgamated. And then there are other school boards that have entered into partnerships with other Catholic boards. I believe the Swift Current board and the Shaunavon board are speaking to each other about sharing. Shaunavon and Moose Jaw Catholic boards are speaking about sharing.

This is not a new concept. There is sharing going on across the province and I anticipate we'll see more. But there are some parts of the province where there's been very little effort made to have the discussion. And I would make this point. We have 53 primarily rural school divisions in the province. The average size of their school population is about 1,200 students. If you look at the loss of students in those 53 rural school boards as of September 30, 1997, when we do our count, we lost 1,200 students from the year before. There is an enrolment decline trend. And so what I'm saying is school boards are going to have to seriously consider sharing, partnershiping or restructuring in order to maintain the quality of education that we have presently.

Mr. Krawetz: — Thank you, Madam Minister. I guess it would be an interesting statistic to see — and that would be . . . you've indicated that 60 boards of education responded with a plan — as to whether or not those represented a good cross-section of rural, urban, large city, small city, etc., because I think that's of great concern.

You've indicated that you're disappointed that others didn't submit their plans, and I'm wondering — these are comments and concerns coming from school boards — what is the next step?

While you're disappointed, you've indicated that while you're Minister of Education, there will be no forced amalgamations. There are boards of education who have amalgamated or are doing sharing, and they're looking at criteria and they're saying, well I wonder what the minister is looking for in terms of a school division. Should it contain "x" number of students? You've made reference to 1,200 students as an average in saying — I think presently you're suggesting that that might not be a number that's going to hold for a while — we know of amalgamations that have taken place where there are 1,500

students.

If the department is looking at establishing criteria as suggestive criteria to say to boards of education, if you're considering an amalgamation, you might be considering this, this, or this. Or is the question from you one such that says I don't care what you do. I would like to see a plan from you that says you're going to be sharing or you're going to be amalgamating and what you come up with is strictly your own concept. Is that what you were requesting from boards of education?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — I think, just so I'm clear, each board of education in this province was asked to submit a plan of action, to have the discussion at the local level. Each board of education was not asked to do nothing, you know. Do nothing was not an option. Each board of education was asked to submit a plan about how they were going to consult with their public.

Let's look at the demographics in our school division, for example. What's happened to the numbers of students? Let's look at programs. What programs did we have years ago, ten years ago; what programs don't we offer now. What curriculum support did we have five years ago; what don't we have now. What are the benefits of doing nothing, and what are the benefits of doing something.

And what I can tell you is that there were literally dozens of boards that chose not to submit a report and that was extremely disappointing because they're the very same boards that wanted to go through this process themselves. They wanted to determine what they would do. They wanted to consult with their public and that sort of thing. They were the people that were encouraging the government not to force amalgamation and to let them undertake the discussion themselves, and in some cases they haven't undertaken the discussion and they haven't submitted a plan for discussion to the province.

Mr. Krawetz: — I understand your explanation, Madam Minister. I was wondering what you expected and whether you received it, I guess. You have those statistics at your disposal, I don't. If Moose Jaw public for instance — with, I don't know what they have for students, probably 5,000 students I'm sure, if they said nothing, if they determined that they weren't going to talk to anyone and decided that they just didn't want to amalgamate and they felt that the delivery of the program in Moose Jaw was essential and they didn't submit a report — now you're suggesting you're extremely disappointed with them. To do nothing was not acceptable. Did the boards fully understand that indeed that was what was expected of them?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Well I think all of the boards understood because we issued a response to the public consultation. I think each board was presented a letter asking for their plans by June of 1997. So this is not a new request.

Mr. Krawetz: — Thank you, Madam Minister. You've indicated in this House that there were a number of successful amalgamations and we know that those have taken place. Has there been a public backlash to any of those amalgamations from community members that you are aware of?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — I am absolutely aware of no backlash to those amalgamations, anywhere. No one has written me a letter

since the school board elections of October 21, 1997, saying that this is a bad way to go.

Mr. Krawetz: — Thank you, Madam Minister. You've indicated that the changes to The Education Act — we're going to see the changes to the francophone boards, and we'll have 107 boards that will become 99 — are there any other projects or discussions taking place right now that might lead to amalgamations prior to the next election two and a half years from now. Could you give us any of those possibilities?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — There is some possibility before the next set of school board elections, we know that for instance in Estevan Roman Catholic, Weyburn Roman Catholic, and Weyburn Central, they have a shared service agreement for director and assistant director. In the Estevan Rural School Division they are meeting with their neighbouring school boards.

Shaunavon and Maple Creek are sharing services, and we have a shared service arrangement that's being worked out between Herbert and Swift Current. The Davidson School Division has established a committee to pursue amalgamation with neighbouring boards.

Buffalo Plains and Cupar School Division — and you said that you didn't think school boards surrounding a large place like Regina, that's Buffalo Plains, would restructure — well they're having their discussions with Cupar. Moose Jaw Roman Catholic has established a committee to look at sharing services with the Swift Current School Division.

The Shamrock School Division and Wadena School Division are going to share a director of education and a central office staff come this fall. So that's a possibility; sharing often is extremely beneficial to the boards. Saskatoon West and Saskatoon East and Outlook are still pursuing the idea of a larger division. Wakaw, Humboldt Rural School Division, Humboldt School Division, and Lanigan School Division are pursuing the notion of amalgamating. Kindersley and Rosetown — I'm advised they've established a task force to look at the possibilities of amalgamation, the benefits.

Kamsack School Division has established a restructuring committee, and they're looking at restructuring. And their final report is to be to their board by December of '98. And the Biggar School Division is also involved in discussions across the province. And the Northern Lakes School Division is in discussions with the Spiritwood Roman Catholic School Division, and they've got a facilitator that's been contracted.

So we think there's quite a bit of activity that is happening. But there are some parts of the province where no activity is happening.

Mr. Krawetz: — Thank you, Madam Minister, for that summary. Madam Minister, one of the documents that I was looking for — and I thank you for the responses that you have provided for me — is a breakdown of the number of students enrolled in each of the different categories, urban, rural. You've indicated 57 rural school divisions. And I was wondering whether I could get that information from your department officials at a later date. I would appreciate that.

Madam Minister, one of the other things that we always look at when we look at students that are enrolled in our systems throughout the province, in all school divisions, is home schooling. And one of the articles that came about in the paper — just a couple of weeks ago I believe — was that parents have decided that, due to the length of a bus trip, they're going to home school.

I'm wondering what are the home schooling numbers looking like? Have they risen dramatically over the last little while? And the other question, Madam Minister, that will allow you to give a much broader explanation here is, what kind of monitoring takes place of home schooling students to ensure that the program that they are taking at home provides them with a broad enough base, I guess, to ensure that when those parents and students collectively decide that they will enter, you know, the public system, will they be able to fit into a grade level applicable to the current curriculum?

What kinds of structures do you have in place within your department to ensure that the home schooling of children across this province is adequately supervised?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Well I'll give you the numbers. You may know that since we introduced our home-based education policy in 1994, registrations for home schooling have risen from 1,021 to 1,498 — so a 47 per cent increase.

I think that this increase may be due to the formal introduction to our policy in 1994 in that students, parents, have two options. They can register with their director of education or their local school board in their area, or they can register with the department. The director of education or the person responsible for home schooling in that particular division board is involved with the parent in determining the appropriate curricula, what's going to be taught. So there are supports from various boards of education across the province to those parents who wish to home school.

I don't have a breakdown of how . . . I don't believe I have a breakdown in terms of how it breaks out in terms of rural and urban. But I can tell you that there are many, many parents in urban Saskatchewan that home school. I think this is a phenomena that is increasing, and it seems to be increasing across the country and across North America.

Mr. Krawetz: — Madam Minister, do you have any records that would indicate whether or not there is an ease of moving students from the home schooling area to a division 4 program? And I'm assuming that they'll be probably trying to enter into a grade 12 or whether they're taking their final classes at home. Like, do we have numbers that would indicate how many people move from the home schooling system into the public or the Catholic system and whether or not there is any difficulty in actually determining the grade-level placement, that maybe a parent determines and says well I believe my child is ready to take grade 11 subjects and whether or not that is actually a successful attempt?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — We are unaware of any difficulties. Boards of education provide the following services if that parents registers with that board of education and not the department: registering, obviously; monitoring; establishing a

dispute resolution process; and special-needs student testing. Other services are left to the discretion of the boards of education.

And I should indicate that when students are registered with the board of education, there is recognition in the foundation operating grant for home-based students and last year — or this year, in the foundation operating grant we recognize expenditures of \$2.5 million.

Mr. Krawetz: — Thank you, Madam Minister. Yes, it does indicate that your recognition here is for 2.4 million, and you've indicated that those numbers are growing. Do you receive a report from I guess the director of education, provincially, whose responsible for the home schooling system as to the reasons why that program is increasing and whether or not there are difficulties administering that program?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — We have some speculation that the reason why the numbers have increased so dramatically over the last four years is because now parents can register their students through boards of education and the department, so there is quite an ease of registration. I should tell you that we have a home-based education review committee and they are in charge of monitoring this new legal framework that we have. And they have not yet submitted a report to myself.

Mr. Krawetz: — Thank you, Madam Minister. Madam Minister, one of the other concerns that we're looking at in all across Saskatchewan — we've talked about the Scenic Valley situation with a four-day week and other school divisions that have looked at various kinds of school years. One other one, of course, is referred to as the balanced school year and I know that it's been tried in a lot of jurisdictions. Cities, especially Regina and Saskatoon, have been on a balanced school year for some time, I believe it's probably three or four years. I'm wondering is there is a plan in place to look at whether or not the entire province is going to move toward a balanced school year, whether you're going to allow both to continue, and I understand that some of the concerns that are surfacing from parents is where they'll have students that will be involved in both, one system and the other.

When you're talking about elementary grades and elementary schools being in one system and high school kids being in another system, we have two different school years. So basically, we're looking at summers that become extremely short when you start talking about June 30 and August 7 or 8. I'm wondering if you've had a report on the benefits or the negatives that have surfaced from having a balanced school year?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — You'll recall last year when we brought in amendments to The Education Act, that this was left to the discretion of locally elected boards of education and they determined whether or not they want to go forward with the balanced school year.

I believe we have four balanced school years in the province. Saskatoon Catholic, Regina Catholic and Buffalo Plains, and the balance applies to both elementary and secondary students. And we also have the balanced school year in Moose Jaw, and I believe it applies only to the high school students.

So basically there's four. And this is up to the locally elected boards to determine whether or not they want to go forward with the balanced school year. It's not the intention of the province to move to a balanced school year for all students in the province. We've left that up to locally elected boards.

Mr. Krawetz: — Have you had any responses . . . I note that you have mentioned two of the larger Catholic systems, the Saskatoon separate and Regina separate. Has the reaction to your office been one that says that this was a favourable decision, a more negative decision, or is it an equal split?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — I think it's fair to say that it's a mixed reaction. I know that I have recently received correspondence from a business person in Saskatoon who is involved in gymnastics, and this business person runs a summer camp for gymnastics, for students that are involved in gymnastics. And it's very difficult for him because the Catholic system is not balanced with the public system in the city of Saskatoon. So it's hard to run a gym camp for both Catholic and public school children.

So I would say for the most part the reaction has not been negative, but there are some people that have expressed concerns about the balanced school year.

Mr. Krawetz: — Thank you, Madam Minister. And we're hearing the same kind of concerns as well from parents, where some believe that the balanced system, balanced year, is a good choice, while others raise various concerns that say that unless you have everybody on the same system — either the old school year or the balanced school year — it causes great concern. And I know that those kinds of concerns have been raised here.

Madam Minister, if I could turn to another area, which is the area of special education, especially in the area of children with hearing disabilities. I was surprised to read the article James Roots, the executive director of the Canadian Association of the Deaf, said — and I was surprised to hear his comment — he said that . . . his statement, and I quote here, "is that Saskatchewan doesn't appear to have any deaf instruction." What Saskatchewan has is a medical rehabilitation program, not an academic one. And I'm concerned that someone who looks at all of Canada's systems, all the provinces, looks at Saskatchewan and then says that we have moved in the wrong direction, that we are not able to deliver an academic program to children with hearing disabilities.

No doubt you've seen the comment, Madam Minister, and I'm sure you reacted at the time that you saw the comment. I'd like to hear what your reaction is to the kind of program we have in Saskatchewan and how did this gentleman make that type of conclusion or draw that type of conclusion.

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — I think it's fair to say that there are varying opinions and deeply held opinions across North America about how deaf and hard-of-hearing people should be educated. I've long held the view that there are three ways to educate deaf and hard-of-hearing people.

One of the ways is through the use of American sign language. One of the ways is through the use of English sign language.

And one of the ways is through the use of the oral tradition where deaf and hard-of-hearing people learn how to speak.

I believe that parents should be able to have an option as to how they want their children to be educated. We no longer have the school for the deaf in the province of Saskatchewan. That decision was made in 1989. And I was involved in that discussion in this very legislature about educational programming for deaf and hard-of-hearing students.

There are some people in this province that are adamantly opposed to the use of American sign language in Saskatchewan classrooms. There are some people in this province that are adamantly opposed to the notion of English sign language in Saskatchewan classrooms. And there are some people that are adamantly opposed to the notion of children learning how to communicate through the use of the oral language when they're deaf and hard-of-hearing. These are fundamentally held beliefs, and there are fundamental divisions in this country and in North America as to the best way to educate deaf and hard-of-hearing persons.

I'd just like to reiterate my own personal opinion that parents need to be given an option, and that is not the case in all boards of education across this province.

Mr. Krawetz: — Madam Minister, there does seem to be, there does seem to be some inconsistency. And I think you've met Tammy Benson before. She has indicated to you that in one system she was denied an interpreter and then, having transferred her child to a second system, an interpreter was granted and that she felt that that was what was necessary. So the choice of option to her was to move the child from friends, from a school that he was familiar with, to one where she felt that that was the best choice for her child.

Madam Minister, I'm wondering what kind of directives does your department have in terms of how the Department of Education is going to ensure that children with hearing disabilities are educated properly.

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — As the member will know, being a former chairperson of a locally elected board of education, your board of education could not provide all services to your students, and there were some cases where your student had to go elsewhere in order to obtain those services. So I would say that in the case of certainly persons living in the city of Saskatoon, you do have a choice. You may not get that choice within the same division, board of education. For the persons living outside of the large major centres, they may not have that choice within their particular division, but they should have those services available to them elsewhere in the province. And I think for the most part we do have those services available.

Now I would make this comment, that if you were to look at every board of education across the province, I suspect you would not find all three choices in every board of education's jurisdiction. You might find two.

Mr. Krawetz: — Madam Minister, would you know from your officials as to the number of students who have hearing impairment in our current systems, whether or not we could break that down to be the public schools in this province and

the separate schools? Do you know how many students are in our systems currently that have hearing impairments?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — We'll have to get that information for you, Member.

Mr. Krawetz: — Thank you, Madam Minister. Madam Minister, as far as your grant formula, how much money is designated by the department to educate hearing impaired children?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — In addition to the basic rate, this year we moved the rate for high-cost students from \$6,750 to \$7,088.

Mr. Krawetz: — Thank you, Madam Minister. Madam Minister, while we're talking about special education needs, I think children with autism fit very, very clearly into that. And I guess one of the greatest, I think is tragedies, is that we don't have a clear understanding of how to deal with these children, how to provide the necessary plan to ensure that these children are handled correctly. And I know that it's a difficulty for health departments and social services and education. And I'm wondering what services the Department of Education currently has in place to actually deal with children who suffer from autism?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Well I can tell the members that we provide no direct services as the Department of Education to children that are autistic. Boards of education are stuck with that task. And high-cost funding in addition to the basic rate per student, there would be an additional \$7,088, the previous number that I gave you, Member.

Mr. Krawetz: — Madam Minister, I'm wondering if you would know from your statistics how many autistic children are being home schooled as a result of parents determining that they would be best handled in the home setting?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — We'll get that information for you. I think we should be able to find that for you.

Mr. Krawetz: — Thank you, Madam Minister. Madam Minister, I'm wondering if there are continued discussions between your department and the Department of Health as to how we could better address autistic children in terms of planning and ensuring that there is a program in place to better deal with autistic children.

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — For the information of the members, we have an interdepartmental committee of Health and Education as well as Social Services looking at support services for autistic children and their parents.

Mr. Krawetz: — Madam Minister, when we deal with all children who require special education and special needs and bring a special requirement into the classroom, you have to have a very well-trained individual who can deal with those. And I'm not familiar with some of the changes that have been occurring at the university levels, both University of Saskatchewan and University of Regina in the special education area.

I'm wondering if the program that teachers that will graduate

this year and next year and over the next number of years, whether or not there is a form of autism . . . and whether or not there is a section where they will deal with children who suffer from that special need, and whether or not those teachers will become better equipped to be able to teach children who suffer from autism.

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Well you ask a very good question because one of the things that you no doubt know is that the special ed department in the College of Education at the University of Saskatchewan has lost a substantive number of people over the several years to retirement, and they have not been replaced. As a result of the downsizing of the department of special education in the College of Education, this fall there'll be a merger between ed psychology and special ed, early childhood. We're hoping — or I'm certainly hoping — that this will be able to assist us in the development of special education teachers in the province.

I think it's fair to say that I'm extremely concerned about what's happened in the College of Education with regards to special education because, at a time when we have more and more special needs emerging, we need to have properly trained teachers in order to deal with some of these situations. And it's troublesome when you see people like Barbara Bloom, who was an expert in the whole area of the mentally challenged, not being replaced, as well as other experts in the College of Education in Saskatoon who've not been replaced.

We're hoping that we'll see some more permanent positions that will go to the college of special education and ed psychology because we see more and more children that are at risk, and we see more and more need for early identification in order to put in preventative strategies to assist those children and their families.

Mr. Krawetz: — Thank you, Madam Minister. While you've indicated that we see a non-replacement of retiring professionals, there has been a concern suggested that within your department that there also is a situation where, since we've had the changes to the delivery of the deaf program, the delivery of special needs education, that indeed we don't have someone supervising or ensuring that there is top quality education delivered to all of our students with hearing difficulties or deaf children. Is there such a person in place, or is indeed that a correct statement to make, that there is no departmental official who actually oversees the entire province and ensures that deaf children are being dealt with in an appropriate manner under the special needs section of your department?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — I think you raise a very good point. In July of 1997, the person who was the long-term provincial consultant for students who are deaf and hard of hearing retired and that person has not yet been replaced. But what I can tell you is that we have a policy at present where we second people from the field as needed on this issue. I'm hoping that the government's strategy in the whole area of special education will soon be transparent. We know that there is a need to really take a look at this whole area.

Mr. Krawetz: — I'm glad to see the minister move in that direction because I think we have to have someone there for

people who have a concern about the needs of their children so that they can feel comfortable being able to talk to a supervisor who understands the entire province. And I look forward to your announcement that would indicate that we have someone in place to take care of the retirement that occurred in 1997.

Madam Minister, one of the changes that you've suggested is that, you know, we're going to be addressing The Education Act and ensuring that the francophone systems are converted from nine school divisions down to one. I noted in your budget . . . in the estimates as far as the language office and the amount of money that's provided there to the minority office is that there . . . I'm wondering if you have any concerns about the cost of ensuring that the francophone legislation can be followed and that boards of education, the francophone boards, have the ability to do what your legislation suggests. Will they be provided any financial aid or will they be expected to complete their amalgamation from nine down to one without any financial support from your department?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — As you may know . . . now I don't know if this is your predecessors or not but the Liberal government in Ottawa . . . your predecessors aren't the Tories and your predecessors aren't the Liberals. Anyway . . .

An Hon. Member: — We're the Saskatchewan Party — new and different.

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Yeah, right. Which is the Liberals and the Tories? It's very easy. We can just call it your predecessors.

The Liberals in Ottawa have reduced funding to minority languages all across the country. And in this case, this is basically a reduction in the capital. The capital construction is pretty well completed for the francophone schools. We have made the same commitment to the francophone community as we've made to every other school board community, that they will receive grants on the same basis. And they also will be eligible to receive, I believe it's \$15,000 to assist them in their restructuring initiative.

Mr. Krawetz: — Thank you, Madam Minister. Madam Minister, in the subvote no. 4 under teachers' pensions and benefits, I note that there's a significant reduction in the expenditure for teachers' pensions and cost of living allowances this year. And previously there has been always a slight decline in the numbers. We were into that area of 118, 120 million, whereas this year I see a significant decline from 116 million down to 105. What is the explanation for that significant decline in expenditure in the area of teacher pensions and cost of living?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — There are a lot more teachers retiring. The bulge is coming where people are reaching the age of retirement, which you and I will soon be at. So that's the explanation.

(2000)

Mr. Krawetz: — Thank you, Madam Minister. I did expect that answer and as we, I think, are aware, statistics are indicating that probably the 12,000 or so teacher body that exists right now is, I believe, about 30 or 35 per cent is eligible

for superannuation over the next five or six years. Now if that's true, I think we're going to see a significant decline in that number, Madam Minister. And while I look at your overall budget in Education, and you talked about the amount of money that's been allocated to the grant program through the foundation grant, I note also that in the area of teacher pensions and benefits, because of the number of teachers now in the old plan — that plan is steadily declining — we're looking at a \$10 million decline in expenses if we're . . . Do you project that that will occur over each of the next number of years, that we're going to see that kind of savings as far as the expenditure line?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — We expect it to be fairly level and that's because the cost of payroll is going up somewhat with the changes to the collective agreement. So I'm advised by the officials for the Teachers' Superannuation Commission that we expect the number that you will find in your blue book to be fairly consistent over the next several years.

Mr. Krawetz: — I don't quite understand that, Madam Minister. If last year's expenditure was 116 million and there was a significant decrease and a number of people retiring — it dropped to 105 million — and we're expecting those kinds of similar changes to the teaching force, why wouldn't this number continue to decline?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Each year when people retire, it's offset because you have to pay out their pension under the old plan. As you know, it's an unfunded liability. And then the other issue is that . . . So as people retire the other issue that happens is that people who are left might see a pay increase in the last . . . and so their contributions would go up and the government's contribution would go up. So I'm told actuarially they expect this to be fairly level.

Mr. Krawetz: — Thank you, Madam Minister. I guess what I was wondering about is the calculations of the teacher's pension under the old system is based on the top five years, the average of the top five, and while we see salary increases negotiated under the new contract over the next number of years as teachers retire, their pension will be based on higher levels of salary than what we have in place today. So I can see that that is where there will be some increases.

You mentioned the words unfunded liability and under the old plan. What is your actuarial studies showing in terms of the unfunded liability?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Well the bad news is that it's about 2 billion; the good news is that it's in a lot better shape than it was a few years ago for a couple of reasons. As you know, we've had some remarkable returns in the market so the fund is earning . . . the money that is there is earning money, so that's the good news. We still have an unfunded liability of about \$2 billion but it's in a lot better shape than it was a few years ago because of the improvement in the stock market.

Mr. Krawetz: — Madam Minister, would you have the numbers at your fingertips that would indicate how many teachers currently are in the new plan versus how many current teachers who are in the teaching force are still under the old plan?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — We don't have the exact numbers here so I'm going to give you an approximate, and if I'm incorrect, they will correct it. I'm told that we have about 12,000 teachers in the province. About 7,000 people are on the new plan, which we don't administer — it's administered by the Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation — and about 5,000 active teachers are on the plan that we administer, which is the unfunded liability.

Mr. Krawetz: — Thank you, Madam Minister. Of that 7,000 teachers, I guess there may be some that are considering retirement. Is that occurring already? Do we see teachers that are retiring from the new plan?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Very few. The new plan didn't come into existence until 1980 so the most . . . the maximum number of years that you'd have is 18 years so that you would have to have started your teaching career quite late in life in order to begin retirement. So very few have retired on the new plan.

Mr. Krawetz: — Thank you, Madam Minister. Madam Minister, you announced the operating grants distribution to the school divisions — the \$384 million. You noted that there were some changes to how you were distributing that grant to all of the school divisions.

One of the concerns that was raised by school divisions, of course, was that they felt that they were going to be receiving full compensation for all salary increases for teachers. And of course you've also answered in this House that based on the equalization or the foundation grant formula, that didn't occur. And I'm wondering whether that was a confusion or whether you indeed suggested to boards of education that they would receive full compensation for their entire costs of the newly negotiated teachers' contract.

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — I think if you look at *Hansard*, December of 1997 — I think you asked the question, Member . . . (inaudible interjection) . . . Right. And what did I say?

An Hon. Member: — I'm not sure.

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Well you should read it, because that's what I've . . . (inaudible interjection) . . . Well it's very clear. Then obviously you can't read. No, I'm teasing you. What I said at the time, and I've said it everywhere I've gone, is that the cost of the teachers' salary increase would go into the foundation operating grant. That's what I said.

If you look at *Hansard*, I think it's December of 1997, that's exactly what I said. There was no mistake. I said that we would increase the foundation operating grant by the amount of the teachers' salary increase. And I said that all across the province. I think part of the confusion is that many people do not understand how the foundation operating grant works. And I believe that that's where the misunderstanding is. I know that the partners in education had no confusion. They knew exactly what I was talking about. For those people who understand the foundation operating grant, they know how it's distributed. But of course there are people who don't because it's a complex formula in terms of the distribution of the grant.

Mr. Krawetz: — Madam Minister, I do read and I did read your answer. And I also read your comments in various press

articles long before December which seem to suggest — seem to suggest — that indeed boards of education would receive full compensation for all costs. And we can provide you with those articles as well to indicate that boards of education were expecting the entire cost.

And I also look at your breakdown of the grant formula, Madam Minister, where you have indicated that \$21 million — 21 million extra dollars — are being provided to education. On the same side, Madam Minister, I do note that in your distribution formula, the equalization factor that is used to determine how much boards of education contribute has also increased significantly — increased by almost a quarter of one mill. And, as I understand, a quarter of one mill is somewhere in the neighbourhood of 7 to \$8 million — closer to 8 million.

So your announcements that indicate that there was going to be a significant amount of new monies spent in rural technology and in transportation and all of the other things also came into play when, by way of formula, you've indicated that boards of education must contribute an additional \$8 million of the recognized expenditures. So when we start to look at the recognized expenditure column, even though that column has increased significantly, you've also asked the boards of education to pick up additional costs.

At the same time I think that's maybe where some of the confusion has developed for boards of education when they started to look at their staff component — the staff cost component — and indicated that their teacher contract, if it changed by 2 per cent for 1998, which it did, was going to result in X number of dollars worth of additional cost. Their interpretation was that they were going to get at least that kind of grant support.

However, when you put in all the factors into place — the fact that the boards of education have been asked to contribute \$8 million more, that you've indicated the assessment situations — those boards of education in fact didn't even receive the monies necessary, or the increase in their grant isn't even sufficient to cover the cost of their teachers. And there are some boards . . . I'm sure you've received the phone calls and letters from those boards.

At the same time they incurred a 6.9 per cent increase in the cost of their natural gas back in January that's built into the cost this year, the full year will be borne now as far as additional costs.

They're looking at all of their other costs at their local level. The salaries that they'll negotiate with bus drivers, all of those additional costs including curriculum costs, including increases in the cost of living, including costs of increases of products that they purchase, materials that they purchase — all of those kinds of things have gone up. And in the end result is that the amounts of moneys that you've indicated is sufficient to cover the salary increases, in fact isn't enough. And boards of education as you are aware are indeed . . . have some concerns, have serious concerns that now they have to pass on those additional costs directly to their local taxpayers.

(2015)

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — For the record the equalization factor was increased by .13 mills. So it went from 14.67 mills to 14.80. This is an increase of .9 per cent, but inflation9 per cent — in terms of . . . it wasn't 1 per cent or 2 per cent or 3 per cent or 5 per cent. The increase in the mill rate was .9 per cent. And we believe that this will be less than the rate of inflation.

Now as you know, having been a chairperson of a board, and having been the president of the SSTA, (Saskatchewan School Trustees Association) the increase ensures a level of equalization across the province. And it is true that some boards receive no increase. Even though there was \$21 million increase to the foundation operating grant some boards received none of that.

And why is that? Because they are highly assessed areas. They have lots of oil and gas or they may have a potash mine. They may be making a significant amount of money from a particular industry. And they would get lots of assessment dollars relative to the number of students that they have.

There are some places in this province where they may have 15 students and they have a huge assessment. With 15 students they can have three teachers. You know it would be pretty nice to be in a classroom of one or two students because they have such a huge assessment. Well that is happening in the province of Saskatchewan.

So I would say to you that this is about equalization; it's about fairness. And those boards that have more students and have a smaller assessment get more money from the province.

Mr. Krawetz: — Madam Minister, I'm fully aware of how the grant formula, and why the grant formula, is distributed in that fashion. There also was some concern expressed around the province that the foundation grant formula was a formula designed at the time when the cost of education was split 60/40: that is 60 per cent from government and about 40 per cent from the department. And it has almost completely reversed that amount and there seems to be some degree of uncertainty as to whether or not the formula is actually achieving what it was intended to do.

And you've indicated that by suggesting that there are boards of education, due to the assessment, are at the point of 100 per cent of their funding; yet at the same time we are aware, as you are aware, that they have very little say in terms of how 70 per cent of their costs are passed on to them. So when we take a whole look at the formula and determine how assessment comes into play there are difficulties.

When we look at assessment, Madam Minister, I'd like to have your comments. You indicated that you were adjusting, I think, the cap that you had placed last year. There was a 25 per cent cap on any reduction to school divisions and you were going to extend that to at least this year, but that it was not going to continue into next year. Is that accurate or are there . . . are you planning to continue with the 25 per cent cap beyond 1998?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — It continues until 1999.

Mr. Toth: — Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Madam Minister, a couple of questions here that have been brought to my attention

that I'd like to raise and get responses to.

First of all, on capital construction, Madam Minister, the group that was here this afternoon, you'll remember the . . . when I talked about education, the process that was taking place in the Assembly. There was a group here from Langbank, the elementary school.

And a number of years ago two schools got together — actually two school divisions. One decided to release school after a fair bit of, not just lobbying, but after a vote that was taken within the area. And two schools amalgamated and the one carried the K to 6 and the other carried the 7 to 12. And they certainly have been . . . in the one school; the 7 to 12 school has needed a fair bit of work. That work has not been completed or even done, but there's . . . the board has now reached a position where both schools are in a situation where substantive work needs to be done.

And when it comes to . . . at the time I don't believe, Madam Minister, any requests have come forward. But the question I'm asking is a hypothetical question. When it comes to capital construction and it comes to a request being put forward to a division and the division then putting forward the request . . . number one, what percentage of the construction, if it's given the go-ahead, would be covered by the department? And number two, I guess, would be the — probably it should have been the first question — what are the criteria that the department is going to look to before they give approval for capital construction? Or is that capital construction strictly limited in the department's hands, or is it a joint agreement between boards of education and department?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — If the board engaged in this project today, their share would be 43.7 per cent of the cost of the project.

Mr. Toth: — Madam Minister, if the project is given approval to go ahead, am I taking it that the local board has the final approval, or does the Department of Education give a final approval as to whether a capital construction project would move ahead?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — The Department of Education gives approval because public funds from the province are involved.

Mr. Toth: — And what are the criteria that the department is going to look for when it decides whether or not to give approval for a capital construction project?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Health and safety would be an important consideration, the condition of the building, the numbers of students in the building. Is this facility going to be here ten years from now? Will the population be there to sustain the facility?

Mr. Toth: — I guess, Madam Minister, those were some of the areas that were being discussed, and that was one of the reasons that a meeting was called about two weeks ago — a public meeting — because of the fact that you're aware in this case, it just so happens we have two communities that have taken quite a while to finally work out their differences, get together and provide one school. The question now is it might be very

difficult to justify the work that was needed as both schools have some health and safety areas that . . . some problems that are arising.

And so the discussion has been, well in making this proposal it's probably only legitimate to consolidate into one facility, and that's something that the communities are currently working towards. And I believe there seems to be a consensus looking at longevity of the school and the fact that you can give more reasons to work with one unit by having K to 12 in one community versus the two communities. So I'm sure you'll be hearing about this project in the near future.

But those are some of the areas I wanted to bring forward because some of the questions that were being raised to me as the MLA (Member of the Legislative Assembly) — what is the department going to be looking for? What are we going to have to do in making our proposal . . . first of all going to the local board and then working with the local board in making their proposal to the department?

The second thing I believe as well, Madam Minister, and I believe you chatted a bit with my colleague, the member from Canora, is regarding the four-day school week and the Scenic Valley experiment. I believe Broadview, the Broadview School Division, has toyed with the idea. I'm not exactly sure whether their ratepayers have given a real nod. I know they've looked at it significantly especially since the last budget came out in trying to deal with some of the budget realities.

And, Madam Minister, I believe you indicated earlier that the further expansion of the four-day school week is on hold. You're waiting for, if I understand it correctly, a review. I'm wondering, Madam Minister, is this review under way? And when do you expect to have something back in regards to the four-day school week, and how well it has worked?

Just for your information, the Grenfell School group that was in this afternoon are part of Scenic Valley. And I certainly asked, I didn't get any negatives from the school group having . . . certainly the teachers, even the parents who were quite, most of them, were quite pleased with the program, how it's been working to date.

What I'd like to know from you is what process do you have in place right now in regards to reviewing how the process has worked before you look very seriously at maybe expanding or allowing the expansion of the four-day school week?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — We're at the end of two years. We had an evaluation done by a Dr. Burgess at the end of the first year. We've extended this pilot — I think we've given them formal approval for three but it will be extended to a five-year approval. And at the end of five years we will have an evaluation done.

As I've said to your colleague, we've called for a proposal for a group of evaluators to come in from outside of the province. Part of the problem when evaluating yourself is we all know each other. So we're going to have an external reviewer engage in the process of looking at whether or not the four-day school week works from an academic point of view, and also a sociological point of view.

I will say that some of the research that I've looked at, particularly in the United States, the four-day school week lasted for a while and then it was gone. So we'll see. At the end of five years, I mean, people could tire of this. The financial situation may be much better. The school board may be feeling better about things. And they may, at the end of the day, decide that they don't want a four-day school week.

On the other hand the evaluation may show that this is sound academically, or the evaluation may show that it's not. So we'll see what the evaluation shows us.

Mr. Toth: — So, Madam Minister, I guess what I'm hearing you say, Madam Minister, is this is a five-year review. So until that review basically has been completed in the five years, we're at a standstill. Scenic Valley will continue to function in its four-year role, and you'll assess how it works over five years. You've looked at one year; you'll have the second year now to look at very shortly, and to review and see how it's working.

Madam Minister, one other question I need some clarification on. In regards to — and I'm not sure whether it's called family life and education, the program — but a recent call came regarding a letter that went out from one of the local schools and some concerns raised by some parents.

And the question I have, Madam Minister, what resource materials does the department have? Have you given approval to a number of different types of resource materials? And I guess one in particular that comes up, and that was raised in this one local school, is the *Degrassi Talk* series. What I'd like to know is, is there approval for the whole *Degrassi Talk* program to be utilized in the schools as resource-based material or how much . . . what all do you have as far as resource material for the family life program?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — We don't have our curricula personnel here, but we will get that for you. So we will be able to tell you what support materials there are for the family life education curricula.

Mr. Toth: — Madam Minister, when it comes to the family life education formula, I believe we discussed this before. Now I've just mentioned the one that was brought to my attention just recently which I have no knowledge about other than a little bit of information that went to the parents. One of the criteria . . . I think in our discussion even last year, I think, it seems to me if I recall correctly and . . . or need a clarification, that when it comes to that curriculum, as I understand it, each school board makes the final decision as to the program that they would endorse or would work together with using . . . working together with parents. Is that correct or is that just a program that all school districts follow or do they use different types of teaching materials? I'd like to know.

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — I think the member's talking about sexuality education in Saskatchewan classrooms. We do have a family life curricula in high school, and what I can say is that the kind of sexuality education or sex education used in Saskatchewan classrooms is something that's determined at the local level, and there's a lot of work that goes on between the school and parents to determine what's appropriate for that

particular community. And so I would say that, if sex education is being taught in a community, I suspect that they should have talked to the local people to see what's acceptable from a community standard point of view.

(2030)

Mr. Toth: — Well, Mr. Chair, thank you, Madam Minister. I guess that was the question I was going to ask and bring to your attention. I think that's one of the suggestions I made to a number of parents that did call — to call the board and sit down with the local board and if there are areas that they're concerned about, if there are areas of this sex ed program that are being offered that they feel that they can accept, to pass that on.

I know talking to my colleague, the member from Rosthern, he's indicated to me that certainly in his area, when he was the principal, before they really went ahead they took time to converse with a number of parents and determine which was the best route to follow in regards to the sex education that they eventually went forward with in our school. And I guess that's the type of information I think parents need to know. I think some parents feel at times, when they get a letter that's sent home from the school, and I think the letter is sent home in good faith, they feel that they've been boxed into a corner rather than asking for and sitting down to go over what's being proposed. And they may find at the end of the day that some of the . . . maybe they'll have some problems with some of the material, but maybe by sitting down and conversing, you can come to a common understanding and agreement where everyone is comfortable and the program still is presented.

So I appreciate those comments, Madam Minister, and, Mr. Chair.

Mr. McLane: — Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Madam Minister, just a few questions for you this evening. As I travel around the province and certainly in my own constituency, the school division is one of the things that we talk about — and that the school boards want to talk about — is the additional services that school divisions and schools in general happen to provide these days. Is it your general principle, your wish, that schools do provide more services or do you think that there are many services getting sloughed off to the schools that the teachers have to provide on a daily basis?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Well I think the member's observations are correct, that school is being expected to provide more and more services. And one of the things that we're trying to do as government is to have the school board, the district health board, and social services come together in an integrated way to begin to coordinate and integrate those services so that the school isn't totally responsible.

And we have an associate deputy ministers' forum, bringing the various government departments together, as well as regional inter-sectorial committees, where the regions are sitting down and trying to put together in a coordinated and integrated fashion, services for children and young people.

And I think this is in response to the schools saying, look, we're teachers and yet we're being expected to become health workers, social workers, provide all kinds of supports to

children and families. So I think it's fair to say that your observation is correct, but I think it's also fair to say that there is much more coordination today than there was a few years ago.

Mr. McLane: — Madam Minister, I guess with all these services comes a price tag. And as the education budget on the government side is shrinking and it's increasing on the local taxpayers and the land base, property base, that's an ever-increasing problem.

I guess I would ask you — you really didn't answer my first question — do you feel that that's the way that we should be going or is it simply because of a funding crisis that the ship is heading that way?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Well I've had this discussion earlier today; obviously you didn't hear the discussion. But I'll repeat it.

You'll know that we've just had an exercise in this building around health reform, and keeping the Plains hospital open. And as I said to the member earlier today, this is a government that has tried to provide a balanced form of government in terms of balancing the budget, balancing the budget with the notion of tax reductions which you just talked about, and balancing the budget with the notion of tax reductions and improvements in social spending.

Now if you look at how we've spent our money — and all you have to do is look in the blue book — a vast majority of funding increases have gone to the Department of Health, the very area that you're protesting — \$88 million increase in the Department of Health.

If you look at the Education budget this year, there is an increase in the Education budget of \$21 million in the foundation operating grant and \$7.8 million in capital, so close to \$30 million increase going to school boards.

Now I don't know how you can have it both ways. On the one hand, you complain about the burden of taxation at the local level. On the other hand, you complain about health care reform that has to do with saving money and shifting that money into other services. So I would say that if you're going to be a critic — and I understand that that's the role of the opposition — please be a balanced critic.

Mr. McLane: — Well thank you, Madam Minister. I did indeed hear your lecture earlier in the day. I didn't care for it then; I don't care for it now. And had you been listening to my question instead of turning around and talking to the people in the back benches, you would have understood my question a little better.

It had very little to do with the funding. What my question was, is what are your views as to these services? Should they be provided by the school, or are they being forced on the school because of the funding crisis in other departments? My question to you is, do you agree with that, that the schools and the teachers should have to be providing more services? Or in a perfect world, should it be the other way where the services are provided and paid for by other departments?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Just so you understand, I think what I said was that there is more and more pressure on the school to provide a host of services. This has been happening forever. Schools are expected to administer drugs, provide health services because that's where children are . . . social services, guidance, mental health services, and so on.

What I can say is that at a time when there was all kinds of money in this province, schools were still expected to provide those services, and now what we're trying to do is get health boards — which I think you were involved with at one stage — involved in providing services at the local school level. That's what we're trying to do.

Now is it happening? In some places people aren't getting out of their boxes. They continue to want to operate from their little box. In other places it's quite successful. We just had an opening of a facility at Nutana Collegiate in Saskatoon where the Health Board is going to have addiction workers there — mental health supports. Social Services is moving over a couple of social workers because 80 per cent of the students have some interaction with the Department of Social Services.

So we're beginning to see the notion of full-service schools where those services are located in the school. Is it happening everywhere? The answer is no, because some people are still operating out of their little boxes.

Mr. McLane: — I'm sure some of the school divisions, the school boards and the teachers will be happy to hear that. I guess the question is do you agree with that?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — I've been one of the lead ministers, Mr. Member.

Mr. McLane: — So I take that as a yes.

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — As I said, I've been one of the lead ministers on introducing the notion of a child action plan and integrated schooling services. I think that the community has to be much more involved in providing services from the school. So obviously I agree with it.

Mr. McLane: — Thank you. That wasn't so hard.

One of the other things that I've been hearing as I'm scooting around the province talking to the school divisions around the province, and in my own constituency as well, is the problem with the funding and the 60/40 split and the trend toward more government funding than local funding. And of course to compound the problem what you did earlier this year was to hijack the protocol agreement and force your views and your bargaining team upon the local taxpayers in this province, so that you could have your wishes for a settlement reached much easier than if you had us poor old landowners out there fighting back with you with our locally elected school trustees.

I guess my first question on that issue would be is what kind of a relationship do you have with the SSTA these days?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — I think I have a good relationship with the SSTA.

Mr. McLane: — I guess I hope that's a sincere answer because I'm almost positive that that isn't the view from the other side of it. And if you're reading from the School Trustees' Association I think you're very much off the mark on that one, Madam Minister.

However, one of the things that you have done is, as I said, taken over the protocol agreement and forced your wishes upon local taxpayers. And certainly one of the problems that that has been created is that you've forced many of the school divisions into talking about raising taxes and local tax rates.

I wonder, Madam Minister, if you could tell me how many school divisions does this province have a cap placed on their funding?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Well I don't want to appear too defensive, Member, but I think I have a pretty good relationship with the Saskatchewan school trustees across this province. There are moments when we'll disagree, and there will be moments when they will write letters, and there will be moments when we will just have to agree to disagree. I think that fundamentally we have a good relationship. We have a great deal of respect for each other and there will be times when we have a difference of opinion.

In terms of the cap — now just to be clear what the cap means — the cap came about last year as a result of reassessment. And with reassessment, as you know, some school divisions saw their assessment increase seven times, which meant that their ability to raise taxes locally increased because of the value of their property, which meant that the foundation operating grant was reduced to their particular division. The cap affected 23 school divisions across the province, and it represented \$6.6 million in actual money that school boards have, but if we hadn't put the cap they would've had it taken away from them.

Mr. McLane: — I'm sorry, Minister, I don't know if you said it or not, is how many school divisions have the cap?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Twenty-three.

Mr. McLane: — One of the problems with the funding arrangement was the fact that when you put some dollars into the education budget it was enough to cover the teachers' salary but it wasn't enough to cover a support staff. What are your suggestions to the school divisions to cover off that expenditure?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Just to refresh the member's memory, we increased the foundation operating grant by \$21.8 million, I believe. In addition, grants in lieu of taxes went to boards of \$1.6 million. So, in fact, school boards across the province received close to \$24 million increase unconditional funding; the teachers salary increase represented \$15 million. So, in fact, schools across the province saw an extra \$9 million. How they choose to spend that money is totally within their discretion.

Mr. McLane: — Now many school divisions, Madam Minister, are telling me that the increase difference between what the teachers received and the total amount of the grants, does not cover off the same types of increases for the support staff. So that being the case, what is your suggestion? What are

you telling the school divisions as to how to raise the money to keep those salaries in line?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — As the member will know, the way we fund school boards in the province isn't unlike the way Ottawa funds provinces. Wealthier provinces do not get an equalization factor; poorer provinces do.

In the case of school boards across the province there are some school boards that receive very little money from the province because of their capacity to raise funds locally. Other boards receive a great deal of money from the province because they do not have the capacity to raise funds locally. So in some cases, school boards would have seen a significant increase in their grant that would have more than offset the cost of the teacher salary increase plus other costs, and some boards would have seen very little increase which meant that they would have had to cover the cost of teachers' salaries locally.

Mr. McLane: — Could you give us an example of school divisions that don't have the capability of raising money and those that need very little money from the province.

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Okay, two examples of school boards that receive very little grants from the province are Weyburn and Leader.

Two examples that would receive a significant amount of money from the province are Northern Lights which is in the northern part of the province with Cumberland House, La Ronge, Pinehouse, La Loche. And the other area would be Northern Lakes which is part of the forest fringe area of the province.

Mr. McLane: — Could you tell us why the two divisions that get very little money don't?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — The answer would be very high assessment and relatively few students relative to their assessment.

Mr. McLane: — Minister, could you tell me how long the caps that are on the 25 school divisions are in place?

(2045)

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — They're in place to 1999.

Mr. McLane: — Until April 1, 1999?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — We introduced the cap last year. It's in place to the next assessment which comes in the year 2000; so '97, '98, and '99 school year.

Mr. McLane: — What preparations are you making for those school divisions when that cap comes off?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Well I understand that school boards are planning for the eventuality of the cap coming off, so they have three years to plan. And I know that I've heard from some school boards with a cap that are beginning to increase their mill rate this year because, as you know, the money won't be there once the cap comes off.

Mr. McLane: — That in fact is the only option that school boards have to recoup that money is to raise the local mill rate.

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Well that's right because they're getting more money than they're actually entitled to. I mean, this is all about equalization and fairness, and while they're getting \$6.6 million, they have more money than they're actually entitled to which means that the rest of the provincial boards have less money than they're entitled to. So it's about fairness, Member.

Mr. McLane: — Yes, that's right; it is about fairness. And fairness didn't occur with the reassessment.

I guess on a particular incidence, say a school division is looking at down the road of a shortfall of some three-quarters of a million dollars and aren't prepared at this point in time, can't go back to the local tax base to raise that money, what will happen at the end of time when all of a sudden they're faced with a huge deficit position?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Okay, just so I'm clear, Member, those 23 boards of education on average have a smaller mill rate than other boards of education across the province.

And I know you understand how assessment works. An example would be that if I'm — regardless of where I live in the province — and I have a \$100,000 house that's assessed at \$100,000, I should be paying the same amount of school tax across the province; that's what I should be paying. But if I'm living in the capped school division areas, I no doubt will be paying less because my mill rate is subsidized by the cap.

Mr. McLane: — That's right. However, because of reassessment some of these school divisions have been put in a bind. And you have capped them, so that takes away the problem for now and for last year and for next year.

But what if a school division chooses not to look after the problem now, as you're suggesting that they have three years to look after it. What if they can't? What if they choose not to? What if the people that elected them are saying no way, we're not paying any more and we want the province to come up with this money? And in three years time, in the year 2000, all of a sudden, whammy, there's a school division sitting with three-quarters of a million dollars, looking for help. What's going to happen?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Well they've been given ample opportunity to make the adjustments necessary. They were told they were capped for three years and at the end of three years, with new reassessment, the cap was ending. So I would say that they would put their taxpayers in a predicament three years from now.

I know in the city of Saskatoon, for instance, they phased in their increases in property taxes. And here's an opportunity for those school boards that are capped to begin to phase in an increase to the mill rate, not unlike what the city of Saskatoon has done.

Mr. McLane: — Are you and your department monitoring the school divisions to see if they indeed are preparing for the year

2000?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — We are monitoring the situation through our regional directors. I think it's fair to say that many school boards are phasing in an increase in the mill rate and other school boards aren't.

Mr. McLane: — If you're monitoring them then, and watching to see them handle — and there are many that aren't or if they are — is there any action that your department will be taking, or the government?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — We don't have any legislative authority to force them to do anything other than what they want to do in the area of the mill rate. They can't deficit budget. There is that provision in the legislation.

Mr. McLane: — I'm sorry. Madam Minister, I was interrupted there, and I didn't quite hear all your answer. Would you mind repeating?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — We have no legislative authority to force school boards to increase their mill rate in order to deal with the cap that comes off at the end of 1999. What I can tell you is our regional directors — and we have regional directors in all parts of the province in the Department of Education that work with locally elected boards — and they are aware of the situation.

Many school boards have begun to increase their mill rate. Some have not. But those that have chosen not to increase their mill rate have the right to make that decision. They can wait until the year 2000 to deal with the cap.

Mr. McLane: — On amalgamation as well, some of the meetings that I attended with some of the school divisions in my constituency, one of the common themes that I heard from some of the local ratepayers and parents of children was that . . . the question was asked, first of all, what are the benefits of amalgamations? And most often we didn't hear a lot of advantages. If two school divisions were amalgamating, there was a saving of one director. But then there were also a couple of assistants brought on line, so there wasn't huge savings.

And one of the things that I thought were quite odd was a number of the people, certainly with school-age children, were saying that . . . is our school closing? If we don't amalgamate, is there a threat of our school closing? If we do amalgamate, will our school stay open?

If the answer to those was both, no — your school is safe; we're not closing your school in this particular community — then they really didn't give two hoots about whether there was amalgamation. Does that cause you any concern to hear those types of comments? And I'm sure you've heard them in many places.

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Well I think it's fair to say that we've just begun to see the benefits of amalgamation because boards of education were just elected on October 21, 1997. So we're only about eight months old in terms of the benefits.

I do know that certainly those boards of education that have

amalgamated believe that there are many benefits — not in terms of saving money. They have not saved money. But what they've been able to do is redirect the advantages of only having one director of education, one secretary-treasurer and so on . . . redirect those funds into supports for students.

And I know in the case of Blaine Lake — and this is the one that I'm most familiar with — when they amalgamated with Sask Valley they had access to the curricula support people, their special education people, their technology people; all of those people were available to support those students and teachers. I think the same can be said when it comes to the Battlefords-North Battleford amalgamation. All of those teachers and students in the rural part of Battleford now have access to all of those services that urban kids have had for years. And that's part of the advantage of that particular amalgamation.

But certainly we are just doing a follow-up to restructuring. I think we'll have that information by the end of June where we've asked school boards to specifically indicate to us what benefits do they believe that their students received this school year as a result of school board restructuring.

Mr. McLane: — Some of the things that you've just related here, is there anything in place that's sent to people when they are questioning what are the advantages of amalgamation? How does the message get out that there are more advantages than just the combining of a directorship and adding a couple of secretaries on to handle the extra duties?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Once we're familiar with all of the benefits, which we should have by the end of June, it's our intention to send this across the province to boards of education so that they can actually see what restructuring has meant. And I just want to make the point that restructuring may not work in all parts of the province, and maybe what some parts of the province will want to do is look at other kinds of sharing or partnership. But certainly restructuring can work in areas where there is more of a population. I'm not sure it works in the south-west part of the province where there are few students and large distances, but it certainly can work when you have the town of Humboldt, for example, that I think has four school boards located in the town.

Mr. McLane: — Some of the problems that school boards have talked to me about with amalgamation are certainly . . . many of them are economic. Some school divisions are in very good financial shape. Some school divisions are ahead in their curriculum they tell me. Other school divisions maybe own their own buses. So what role does the government play and what role as minister in your department do you play in helping the school divisions to overcome that? Where you have a very rich school division trying to marry up with the pauper on this side and of course this one doesn't want anything to do with this one and this one would love to go with this one? What do you say to them?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Well I just went on a little tour around the province talking to school boards about this very thing. And I indicated at the time that we have said that we're not going to force school board amalgamation. I'm not going to force school board amalgamation. The people are given a real opportunity

here to work out the various arrangements on their own and some day some other minister and some other government — maybe yourself, Member — will decide that these folks had a long enough time to discuss this. They could have got it done on their own and they haven't; and you know, the boundaries will be drawn for people.

I think people have a real opportunity to do it for themselves. They asked to be able to do it for themselves and now what they need to do is cooperate with each other.

Mr. McLane: — Of course in this province there's been many rifts from community to community for years, whether it's resulted from hockey or baseball or all those types of things. So we know what kind of problems that's created.

We saw it in health reform and certainly we saw what happened, I guess, because of your government's wellness model and its plan to reform health. We saw many people from the Department of Health running around the province trying to convince and coerce communities, people, boards, into going along with the reform model and forming up some boundaries — of course today many of which make little or no sense. And of course it's a system that's caused your government a great deal of problems, certainly not only in the last three years but more lately in the last year — huge problems because we have an ailing health system.

I guess my question would be — as I heard you talk earlier today, you're not in favour of forced amalgamations and you will never do it as minister — do you genuinely believe in that or is it simply because of what happened with your government's exercise in health care reform?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — No, I genuinely believe in the notion of community development. I genuinely believe in the notion that people can make decisions for themselves and they don't need Regina telling them what to do. I genuinely believe, though, that people, when they say that they want to make the decisions for themselves, then they need to make the decisions. They can't use it as a delaying tactic.

(2100)

Mr. McLane: — So I'm glad to hear that you have that commitment. I guess I'm just wondering, how do you go about tackling some of these problems that we just talked about, then, of the rich sister and the poor sister and all those types of things? And what's your plan to see that that proceeds?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Well I think one of the things that we did just recently was we went around the province and had meetings with school boards. And we had meetings in Swift Current and the people from the south-west corner came in — Weyburn, Yorkton, Melfort, Humboldt, Rosetown, Spiritwood — I think that's all. So all of those folks came in and we had another discussion about this. One of the things that I believe in is talking and you talk and you talk and you talk.

I would be extremely disappointed if there are some people that are into obstructionist tactics, and I think that it's fair to say that there is a view in some parts of the province that some trustees and directors of education are into obstructionist tactics. So I

have spent several weeks in April and part of May, I think part of March as well, talking to trustees about getting on with their plans to have the discussions at the local level and to keep talking. And there are many examples in the province where trustees and directors of education are sharing services and are talking, and I think we'll see many more restructuring initiatives that will have been done by the people themselves.

As I said earlier, we've moved from 119 school boards to today when we introduced the legislation where we will have 99 school boards. That's pretty good progress in a matter of a year, and I think we'll see many more by the time we have our next set of school board elections. But it's not going to happen everywhere in the province.

Mr. McLane: — I think of course the reason that . . . I guess I shouldn't speak for you, but I probably, I'm quite assured, that the reason that we were interested in seeing things move on amalgamation would be for the benefit of the students of this province. And certainly that's my goal and I'm sure it's yours.

However, if there are some real benefits for the students in amalgamations, then I want to know about them. The parents out there want to know about them, the parents tomorrow want to know about them, and certainly the school divisions will need to know about them as well. So if there are some real benefits for our students, and I'm not talking about closing schools because I don't like that either and having less access for our rural kids to get to school in particular, then we all need to know about that.

Then the question is, is how do you go about ensuring that if those benefits are real and they're there and they will help our students out in getting a better education in rural Saskatchewan. If somebody doesn't want to go that way . . . we all know that the numbers are down for local school elections. Nobody wants to run to begin with and when they do, you have trouble getting people out. We see that with health boards; we see that with all sorts of things. As a matter of fact, we have even seen that with the last provincial election.

So having said that, how are we going to go about ensuring that these positive changes that may mean a better school system in rural Saskatchewan are going to be done because of amalgamation? How are you going to do that without actually forcing anything?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Well I think information is extremely powerful and influential and that's why we want to have a real good description of what amalgamation has meant for students and their teachers in classrooms across the province. And I think once parents see what the advantages are of restructuring — and it doesn't have to mean loss of services and that it does not mean school closures — I think that parents will put trustees in a position where they will have to begin the discussion about amalgamation. And there are many, many trustees in the province that know of the benefits; they've already seen them in talking to fellow trustees; and there are many boards in the province that are beginning to have this discussion at the local level.

There are some boards however that haven't had the discussion, don't want to have the discussion with their folks. But I think

once more information is out and once we can really show people that there are advantages for students, I think that many more people will be interested in restructuring than we now have. And I know that the member from Canora — his area has gone through a restructuring initiative — and I think that we are starting to see the fruits of the collective labour of the people out there in terms of better programs for students.

Mr. McLane: — Yes, I know the trustees are talking and sometimes that doesn't translate into the local people, the moms and the dads. I've been on local boards and I know what that's all about; you sometimes get all caught up and you think that you have a lot of the answers, but they don't relay it back to the local people.

As I've said earlier one of the things that I was hearing as I went to some of these amalgamation meetings was the fact that the parents' biggest concern was that their school was going to close. If the school wasn't going to close then they didn't care about amalgamation. If somebody would've said to them, well you have to amalgamate and that'll save your school, then they would've been all for amalgamation. Otherwise they were indifferent; they couldn't care less.

My question is how do we get that out there to the moms and the dads? That's where it needs to be, not necessarily at the trustee level because they're in it everyday — they deal with it all the time. How do we get it to the moms and dads?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Well every board of education was asked to put forward a proposal to the department about how they were going to talk to the public about the very issues that you talk about. And 60 boards of education in this province did that — they submitted their plan to the department — and they are either just beginning or have been involved in a discussion with their public.

The other boards did not — they did not submit a plan for whatever reasons, I guess they don't think that they have to have this discussion with the public — and I think that's one of the disappointments in this whole process. Because if someone who does believe in community development, that local people can make good solid decisions for themselves, it's disappointing when you enter into a process with people and they don't keep up their half of the bargain. And their half of the bargain is to begin the discussions with the folks at the local level to talk about what could restructuring mean. Could it mean better services for our students? Here is what they did in P.A. (Prince Albert) rural. Here's what they did in Wilkie-Kerrobert. Here's what they did . . . and start to show people that there are advantages.

But you're right. Some people don't want to go through the process and that's disappointing. But I think once the message gets out, and more and more boards have the discussions, and more and more ratepayers are aware of those discussions, they'll demand it from their boards of education, to involve them in this kind of process.

Mr. McLane: — Do you have a list of those bad boys, and is that a public list?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — It's not a public list yet.

Mr. Belanger: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and welcome, Madam Minister. I just want to express for a few moments please, if I may, a couple of points I want to raise on northern Saskatchewan issues. The particular point I want to pick up on, Madam Minister, is the fact that you alluded to my hon. colleague here from Arm River the fact that you in essence are subsidizing the North in terms of some of their educational needs. Is that a correct assumption that you're making at this point in time?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Yes. I believe that we provide about 90 per cent of the funding to the northern part of the province to provide educational services for their kindergarten to grade 12 students.

Mr. Belanger: — Thank you, Madam Minister. The reason why I'm bringing up that point, Madam Minister, is that it certainly lends a lot of credence to the whole myth out there in Saskatchewan that the government is offering extra dollars to northern Saskatchewan. It's doing all it can for northern Saskatchewan. When the fact of the matter is, to be very clear and to be very fair, northern Saskatchewan does not take part in revenue sharing. They do not have any income directed right to the local school boards from mining, from the forestry, from the tourism activity, from the personal income taxes, from the hydro generation.

So it's very unfair of you to stand up in the Assembly today and give the impression that northern Saskatchewan is being subsidized to the tune of 90 per cent. I think the key thing is that a lot of northern communities don't have a tax base. And I think in general, northern Saskatchewan should not be put in that perception that they are in essence being subsidized to the tune of 90 per cent. Would you want to comment on that, Madam Minister?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Subsidy is absolutely the wrong word, Member. I never used the word subsidy. Here is how the foundation operating grants work. I've mentioned this many times but I'm going to mention it once again.

The foundation operating grant is the grant that is in the blue book of some \$384 million. This is the money that the province transfers to school boards to help educate our young people in this province.

Now what determines the amount of money that the school board gets? The answer is, if I am a school board in Leader, Leader School Board, I've got lots of oil and gas and there are property taxes and school taxes on those wells. I have agricultural assessment. I might have light industrial. I will have my towns and villages where people pay property taxes and education taxes. Now Leader has a tremendous capacity to raise money locally through the assessment system. They also have few students so they would get a small amount of the foundation operating grant from the province.

Now Northern Lights School Division — Northern Lights School Division has some places that pay no taxes, no property taxes. They have some places that pay property tax such as Ile-a-la-Crosse, Pinehouse, La Ronge, and Air Ronge. Some of the communities pay property taxes or education taxes. There's a great deal of Crown land. Well taxes are not paid on Crown

land.

The fact of the matter is the North has many students, many children. The population is growing. They have a small capacity to raise money from local assessment so they get more money from the province. Ten per cent of their money is raised locally through assessment on property, privately owned property, and 90 per cent comes from the province. They are considered a low-assessed, high-grant-from-the-province area, as is Northern Lakes and other parts of the province.

Mr. Belanger: — Thank you, Madam Minister. I think the key thing here is, as you're probably aware now after three years of me sitting as MLA for Athabasca, I become very defensive when I hear the word that's often spoken in this Assembly — the impression that the North is being subsidized by southern Saskatchewan. And on many occasions the member from Cumberland has used a phrase that for every dollar we take out of the North we put a dollar-sixty back in, when in fact nothing could be further from the truth.

So the fact of the matter is here — I want to be very fair and very forthright with you, Madam Minister — is that no matter how the formula works, and I understand the formula in terms of what you want to talk about here this evening . . . the fact of the matter is I do not want to leave anybody in the province of Saskatchewan with the impression that the North does not contribute anything to the province in general and that they're being subsidized 90 per cent on education. They're being subsidized . . . for every dollar we take out, we'll put \$1.60 back in. That myth has to stop. It's got to stop. The North has contributed significantly to the province of Saskatchewan and the economic fortunes of Saskatchewan. And that, Madam Minister, is the bottom line.

So that's the reason why I took exception to your comment about you guys taking care of 90 per cent of the educational costs of northern Saskatchewan. The fact of the matter is yes, you're right, absolutely correct. Because of the economic misery in some of these northern communities, there isn't a high tax base. There isn't a tax base that we can tap into and readily fund some of our educational needs.

However northern Saskatchewan, as I mentioned, accounts for half the land mass of the province. They have made a significant contribution to the province of Saskatchewan. And that's the point I want to make very clear this evening, Madam Minister.

And the other fact that I want to talk about is that, as you're probably aware, northern Saskatchewan does have a lot of capital needs. And for the sake of some of the teachers perhaps or perhaps some of the people that may be watching this evening, if say Pinehouse needs a new school, they come to you and they say, Madam Minister, we have a whole pile of students here. Our buildings are ageing. There's some concern about the fire department having regulations or rules that we can't meet — all in all, all these are very good arguments, very good points. What's the process and what's your response to them?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — What Northern Lights School Division would do is make an application to the department which they already have. The department would assess the criteria. They'd

be put on the list in order of priority. Pinehouse will know where they are on the list, and as the money becomes available, they'll be funded.

(2115)

Mr. Belanger: — Thank you, Madam Minister. The second part of the equation is . . . the other example is Ile-a-la-Crosse. They also have a growing population. I believe it's something like 500 students in that small school. And there has not been any major construction in Ile-a-la-Crosse for a number of years. And in fact, Madam Minister, as I speak today, there are portable trailers set up outside of the school in Ile-a-la-Crosse to accommodate the ever-increasing student population. And yet of course there's been a long list of processes that the school board has followed, and the people of the community of Ile-a-la-Crosse have also talked about some of the needs of a newer facility. The whole community needs a brand new community gym.

All these different concepts, and yet year after year, we hear a number of arguments that there's processes. There are budget, there are things to follow. And yet when it's available to you to use the whole process to your advantage as Minister of Education, be it consulting and negotiating with professionals out there, you can do what you want. But the people of these communities continue to wait.

And the other fact I want to raise here today is the fact that at a P.A. meeting when Ile-a-la-Crosse eloquently spoke about the need for the new school and Pinehouse spoke about the need for the new school, your comment was well, unfortunately, Ile-a-la-Crosse and Pinehouse are not priority at this point in time. Could you elaborate on that statement you made in P.A.?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Obviously you weren't there, and obviously you're not getting the right information. What I said is that Pinehouse is on the list. Pinehouse will get a school, as the money becomes available. And in fact I'm going to be visiting Pinehouse to look at their school.

I should tell you that as of April 30, 1998, no formal request had come from the Ile-a-la-Crosse School Board for a major capital project at Rossignol School. So just to set the record straight member, as of April 30, 1998 — now maybe something's come in in the last month — no formal request has come from your Ile-a-la-Crosse School Board for a school or a renovation at Rossignol School.

Mr. Belanger: — Well Madam Minister, according to the school board meeting, you know, that I attended, they have tried on numerous occasions to approach your department to ask for some specifics on some construction of a school in Ile-a-la-Crosse, for improvements to the school system. Now I guess the problem that I have today is that you indicated to me that there has been no application as such as of April 30. And certainly the information that you're providing me today will go back.

And the question I have is that in the event that they do apply — if it's Pinehouse or Ile-a-la-Crosse or any other school in northern Saskatchewan — how long would they have to wait before they get some kind of formal answer from your

department as to yea, they are getting some capital construction dollars in these northern communities, or nay, they are not?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — The answer for this year, if they get their application in, will be no because all of the money has been spent. They'll be put on the list. And I can tell you this that Pinehouse will get a facility before Rossignol School gets a facility because Pinehouse is in much deeper need for a school.

Mr. Belanger: — Thank you, Madam Minister. I most certainly agree with your comment that Pinehouse is in dire need of a new school. They have talked at great lengths with you on that, and that goes to my other part of the question. Has Pinehouse since submitted an application for a brand new school, and what was the submission all about, and how soon will they find out whether they are getting this new school or not?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Okay, just for the record, Pinehouse does have their application in. We're going to have to see a significant increase in our capital budget in 1999 in order for Pinehouse to be approved in 1999. Obviously it all depends on the money, and obviously it depends on, you know, where health care is . . . or education is in terms of the public's mind when it comes to health care. Because basically, you know, people are really talking about health care, and health care always seems to get all of the money in our budget . . . or a lot of the money in our budget. So I would say it would depend on where the state of health care is in the province whether or not there's a huge increase in my budget.

Mr. Belanger: — Madam Minister, could you say today that at no time did you indicate to any school division, Ile-a-la-Crosse and Pinehouse, that you need not apply for capital construction dollars because there is no money available?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — People can apply, but it doesn't mean you're going to get your project approved this year.

Let me tell you how the list works. It's not like the old list under the former Tories. It's not like that. It's like this. You make an application to the capital planning department in the Department of Education. Based on criteria they put you on the list, and as the money becomes available, you go down the list and you fund it. And sometimes a crisis might happen and you go up the list. You might jump ahead because you got a huge occupational health and safety issue or you might have a huge increase in population. But that's the way it works.

I have never told anybody, don't apply because you're not going to be on the list. You can always get on the list. It depends on how much money is available whether or not you get your project funded. It may take . . . you know, as I said, there's \$300 million worth of applications. We may have to find \$300 million in new capital before you get on the list. Do you understand?

Mr. Belanger: — Thank you, Madam Minister. I guess the question I asked you answered for yourself. But at no time did you officials or your department tell any community in northern Saskatchewan, which includes Ile-a-la-Crosse and Pinehouse, you need not apply because there is no dollars available in the capital construction budget? Is that correct,

Madam Minister?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — I have not said that.

Mr. Belanger: — And how about your officials and various departmental people that you have available to you?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Well, I guess I'd have to take a canvas of them, and they're just not all here. So I can't speak for my officials, but if you can tell me whether one of my officials said this, I'd like to know their name. So you know if you're going to make the allegation that one of my officials said this, you give me the name and then I'll find out if the allegation is right.

Mr. Belanger: — Well, Madam Minister, we will certainly find out the information. When the information does come available I'll certainly present that to you.

I guess my argument, what I'm trying to get at, Madam Minister, is — we made the point, and I may have belaboured the point in the last three years, in fact — that the northern part of Saskatchewan contributes a significant amount to this province as a whole. And secondly, that there have been ongoing, continual capital construction needs in northern Saskatchewan, in particular Pinehouse and Ile-a-la-Crosse. They have been talking about this for a number of years.

And the fact of the matter is, Madam Minister, is I don't do this from a political perspective. I'm not trying to do this to try and prop up my future political endeavours, Madam Minister. I'm fair to the process and I want to make sure that the people that are out there certainly get their concerns heard here.

And I guess what I'm trying to do here, Madam Minister, is I'm trying to speak on behalf of the teachers that are living in northern Saskatchewan. And as of this year talking to a number of teachers . . . I understand there's going to be a significant amount of teachers leaving northern Saskatchewan and seeking employment opportunities elsewhere, primarily because of a number of reasons. Frustration is one of them. It just seems there's a lack of appreciation for some of their skills and some of their commitments in some of these settings.

And the other fact of the matter is the huge amount of students per classroom, primarily because some of their capital needs have not been met for the last 5, 10, 15 years. Would you care to comment on that, Madam Minister?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Well I do know this, that there's no question that there are people that have been teaching in certain parts of the province for, you know, several years because there weren't opportunities available in other parts of the province.

And as I mentioned earlier, we have a large number of teachers that are retiring. And when large numbers of teachers retire then that opens up their positions in various centres across the province. So I think it's . . . two observations I think we will see people moving around the province because of retirements, I also think we'll see a number of new teachers coming into the field because of retirements.

Mr. Belanger: — Madam Minister, I think a lot of teachers are leaving northern Saskatchewan, not so much in Ile-a-la-Crosse

and Pinehouse — not to have those two communities dominate the discussion here — but in general across the North there are a significant number of teachers leaving northern Saskatchewan this year and seeking employment opportunities elsewhere.

And the one primary reason I didn't mention was the fact that the cost of living in northern Saskatchewan has increased a significant amount of dollars over the past years and those dollars are coming at the expense of the teachers. And all of a sudden the attraction of working and living in northern Saskatchewan as a teacher is no longer there.

So first of all, you have all these problems associated with substandard facilities, overcrowded classrooms, a lack of appreciation for some of their skills, and then you turn around and you talk about the fact that many of the incentive packages to attract people to northern Saskatchewan — which is a vital part of this province, Madam Minister, for the resources they put into this province — there's nothing there for them, to keep them there.

Now have you got any idea how serious that problem is in terms of facing the teachers of northern Saskatchewan?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — I think it's fair to say that this is not something that the teachers' federation raised at the bargaining table with the government-trustee-employer group — that this was a major problem, where teachers were finding it more and more difficult to teach in the North because of the cost of living.

I'm reminded that there is a northern allowance on top of the teacher's salary. But I would suggest to those teachers that you're talking to that they need to take this up with their teachers' federation so that the next time they go to bargain the next collective agreement, which comes in a year and a half, this is something that they can discuss at the table.

Mr. Belanger: — Well, Madam Minister, I've spoken to a number of teachers and one of their primary concerns is the fact that there is a great concern on the part of a lot of teachers leaving northern Saskatchewan and it's primarily because of the cost of living in northern Saskatchewan.

We spoke about the power rates. We spoke about the gas rates here. We spoke about some of the heating costs, and the list goes on and on. So the fact is that if the average citizen were paying those costs in northern Saskatchewan then of course your average teacher would also be paying those costs.

And I guess the important issue that I want to raise here is that one of the biggest challenges northern Saskatchewan has, Madam Minister, is keeping the qualified and committed teachers in our communities. And we have a number of examples in Ile-a-la-Crosse alone, and I say this now, Madam Minister, because I don't really know all the teachers in northern Saskatchewan but I say it from my own personal perspective.

Back in Ile-a-la-Crosse we have a number of teachers that have throughout the period of time contributed a significant amount. Some of these people are local people like the Bouviers — Karen and Glen. Others are like our vice-principals, Barb Morin and Vince Ahenakew. All these people have contributed a

significant amount to their community.

And we also have people coming into the community like the Schommers and the Zingers. They come and add to our community as other communities have also witnessed other teachers adding.

So Madam Minister, when you get some qualified teachers that are dedicated to community service and that are doing all that they can to try and make Ile-a-la-Crosse and La Loche and Pinehouse and Beauval and Buffalo Narrows a better community, then your government should recognize that. And respect some of their demands, and respect some of their wishes by being able to teach in decent-sized classrooms, in decent facilities, with the respect that they need . . . and the fact of the matter, with the incentives they need to stay in these northern communities.

These teachers are very, very valuable to us and we want to keep them there. And, Madam Minister, some of the policies and some of the directions you're taking are simply not complementing the wishes of those people that want to keep those teachers there.

So I urge you today to give me some kind of response as what are you going to do to specifically address the challenge of many teachers leaving the North?

(2130)

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — I think the member will acknowledge that he has a locally elected board of education in Ile-a-la-Crosse and Northern Lights. Will the member acknowledge that?

Mr. Belanger: — Yes I would.

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Okay, he acknowledges that he has a locally elected board. The other point that he needs to understand and recognize is that we pay about a third more to Northern Lights, Ile-a-la-Crosse, and Creighton for students because of the northern factor — a third more of the recognized expenditures.

So if you were in the South you get 100 per cent; in the North you get 133 per cent more, okay? So there it is . . . this government does recognize the importance of northern Saskatchewan.

I would say to you, if you have trouble keeping teachers in the North, you have representatives from each of your communities on that Northern Lights school board. You live in the community of Ile-a-la-Crosse, where all of the people on that school board are from the community of Ile-a-la-Crosse. Those people . . . if you're so concerned about it, you have an obligation to go to those people and ask them — given that huge amounts of money come from the province for education — to see if there's something that they can do to keep their teachers in their communities.

We don't negotiate collective agreements at the local level — we do provincially. We've just succeeded in negotiating a provincial collective agreement which teachers have ratified.

And as I said, we give lots of support to rural students in rural Saskatchewan through the small-school factor. We had that discussion earlier. We also give lots of support to northern students by recognizing all of the expenditures and giving them a third more than anybody else.

Mr. Belanger: — Madam Minister, here we go again. Again, the impression you're leaving is that you're doing all these great and wonderful things for northern Saskatchewan. The fact of the matter, Madam Minister, as I've said before and I'll say it again and I'll continue saying it, the North contributes a significant amount of dollars to the province of Saskatchewan.

And what we've got to learn here in Regina is we've got to learn to stop apologizing for what the North gets and start . . . what the North gets and start finding what the North needs. And the key thing here, Madam Minister, is rural Saskatchewan is much the same as northern Saskatchewan. These specific areas are seeing depopulation. They're seeing some economic challenges in certain sectors.

And as a government you should recognize that and respond to that, respond to that with innovative and exciting approaches that people can help you design. And all it takes, Madam Minister, is a little bit of effort on your part to really sit down and hammer home a plan. Okay Pinehouse, instead of saying if the sky is blue tomorrow, we might get you a facility. Well Ile-a-la-Crosse, I'm sorry, Pinehouse is first on the list. If the sky is blue tomorrow, then maybe by Wednesday it'll be overcast and you'll get your new facility.

Madam Minister, we need more than "if." Madam Minister, we need more than a list. We need commitments that within five years, within ten years that you'll have some serious projects in northern Saskatchewan to address what I've been talking about here for the past half-hour. Would you comment on that, Madam Minister?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — You know what I find so interesting about the member's comments is that he doesn't acknowledge anything, any of the good work that we've done. For instance, there are now community schools all across the North. In fact your school boards and schools have written me letters thanking the province very much for putting in place northern community schools.

There was a huge conference in La Ronge, and people from your community — where you grew up and represent — all communities across the North were there. I didn't hear any of them talking like you're talking. They were talking in a positive way. They were talking about all of the collaborative work that's being done across the North with communities and the province and local governments coming together to provide important public services to those communities.

So, Member, I hope you're not misrepresenting what communities are saying because that's certainly not what I've heard.

I guess the final point I'll make to the member is that, you know there's only so much money. There's a huge commitment in last year's budget and this year's budget to northern community schools. There is a huge commitment in terms of increased

capital spending, \$7.4 million. A big commitment in increased spending of \$21.8 million in the operating grants to school boards across the province; that's \$30 million.

But I think I remember that this member is one of the people that's going to chain himself to the Plains hospital to save the Plains. He wants more money put into health care. And I would say, as you're putting more money into health care, Member, there's only so much money that goes around. We can put all the money into health care, but there isn't going to be a school in Pinehouse. There isn't going to be a renovation at Ile-a-la-Crosse. And there isn't going to be everything else that you want.

So I would suggest to you, Member, make up your mind. Are you going to represent your northern residents, or are you going to represent the supporters of the Plains hospital?

Mr. Belanger: — Madam Minister, I must say that I was very confused by your response and those types of petty politics obviously don't work — they never work. People in northern Saskatchewan will not be fooled by these very feeble-minded efforts of trying to direct or misdirect the questions we have today.

I guess my point, Madam Minister, is that much like you stand up today and say this is what we're committing to northern Saskatchewan, and today as I'm speaking and asking a question and you're not paying attention here. But however, Madam Minister, the key point I want to make today is that you cannot convince me that we have the same level of commitment to education and the same playing-field and educational field in northern Saskatchewan that you do in the rest of the province. That's my argument to you.

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — I'll take this commitment that we'll do everything we can to enhance the status of education in northern Saskatchewan and all across the province.

Mr. Belanger: — Well, Madam Minister, I guess the point I'm trying to make today is that if you are doing all that you can to enhance education in northern Saskatchewan, then:

- (a) We must have some serious commitments in order to meet some capital construction dollars, some capital construction projects;
- (b) We need to make sure we retain some of our teachers and some of the staff, the support staff in northern Saskatchewan;
- (c) We must also make sure that we begin to work with the parents with the boards of education to make sure that some of these things are real that I talk about today, they're not something that we're making up in our mind.

And, Madam Minister, the point I'm trying to make above all else is that we have to have a plan. Northern Saskatchewan, you don't hit and miss. You sit down and you make a serious plan.

And I guess the point I'm trying to also clarify here, Madam Minister, when you look at northern Saskatchewan communities, there are serious housing problems, Madam

Minister. There are serious employment problems. There are also some serious challenges facing the community socially. So as a result of all those challenges, there's two places that these challenges show up — one is in the court system and the other is in the school system.

So the point we're trying to make here, Madam Minister, is that that is the reason why we need to make sure that education is prioritized. Education is something that we feel is very important to northern Saskatchewan people, and that we begin to appreciate the efforts of the local school boards and the teachers to try to get an economy going, to try to get the people educated so they're able to fight for what they believe is right, and fighting with the proper education is the first step that they feel is necessary.

So, I think the key point I'm trying to again stress here, Madam Minister, is that northern Saskatchewan, to me, is probably the one area that your government has not paid enough attention to. And you can stand here and you can spout off numbers all night if you wish, you can talk about all the great things you're doing, but until you begin to realize that there are some serious shortcomings in northern Saskatchewan because of your allocation in terms of the budget dollar, then that problem will continue to fester, and of course the teachers will continue to subsidize other areas that haven't been taken care by the government.

And I guess the couple points I want to make before I sit down, Madam Minister, is that one point I, we always speak about in Ile-a-la-Crosse, is the amount of teachers that have lived in the North and the many years that they have stayed there. And you should talk to them teachers sometimes, the teachers that have served 20, 25 years in northern Saskatchewan. And they'll tell you about the frustration that they face. They don't get up from their home, drive to work at 8 o'clock and come home at 4 o'clock, and their day is done. Many times, Madam Minister . . .

An Hon. Member: — Who does?

Mr. Belanger: — A lot of people do. Many times . . .

An Hon. Member: — Teachers? Teachers? I don't think so.

Mr. Belanger: — Madam Minister, these people are up at 9, 10, 11 o'clock at night talking to young children about certain things in the community. It's very frustrating. It is very frustrating to talk to a child about education when they have a housing problem or to a youth when he has got a crime problem or to a young parent trying to come back when he hasn't got an employment opportunity.

The bottom line, Madam Minister, is that the North, the only commitment I see to education, Madam Minister, are the teachers, the school boards, the parents, and the students. I don't see any of the appreciation coming back from this particular government when we talk about the Pinehouse situation, the Ile-a-la-Crosse situation, and all the other communities that have capital needs in northern Saskatchewan.

And the one person that I want to pay some tribute to this evening, Madam Minister, is the principal that has seen most of

that happening in his school, and the principal's name of course is Stan Chomey. And Mr. Chomey's leaving Ile-a-la-Crosse this year, and certainly we've gone through the pleasure of having him at a supper. We've spoken to him about his contribution and his service.

And one of these days, Madam Minister, talk to Stan and ask him what are some of the unique ways that we can handle education in northern Saskatchewan. What were some of your frustrations as a principal of a northern school? What are some of your challenges? Spend five minutes with him and ask him, and he'll tell you about the challenges because he was there most of the mornings talking to the teachers. He was probably there being a referee between the administration services and between the teachers' disputes. He was probably being a referee between a parent and a child and perhaps maybe between a school board member and a teacher.

So, Madam Minister, when you go North talk to the long-term teachers like Stan Chomey that has put a lot of time and effort into their home community, and ask him, what can we do different in northern Saskatchewan that would help you as an educator and help the other staff that are coming or hoping to come North to make the northern part of our province a better place to teach and thus create a better student? Ask him that.

And what we will not tell you, Madam Minister, you won't stand up and you won't say oh, I'll go chain myself to the school. Those types of politics don't work. They never have in northern Saskatchewan. So I'm quite surprised, Madam Minister, that you brought that up.

So the point that I'm trying to again clarify, Madam Minister, is we need unique, fresh, and innovative approaches. And today I'd like some kind of commitment, some kind of indication from you as to what you're going to do to address some of those problems that long-term teachers talk about when they talk about the specifics of working and teaching in northern communities.

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — I acknowledge the problems that are distinctive to the North. And I think it's fair to say that we're committed to addressing them with the communities in the North. And I expect that I'll be attending the round table with northern leaders in the fall to have this very discussion.

Mr. Goohsen: — Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Madam Minister, we may as well clear up a couple of things before we begin. I'm not planning on chaining myself to the doors of any hospitals. And I might chain myself to a school if it were the right one, for the right reason. But you know, I think the member makes a valid point when he says that when you claim that there's only so much money and you have to choose between the hospital or the North, that that's not fair politics because I don't think you can mix the two.

I want to follow up on the member's discussion about the North because I think in a lot of cases we don't, in the South, take enough time to try to understand these folks. So would you tell me, alluding back to his conversation, do the resource sectors like mines and lumbering and that type of thing, do they pay education tax, and who collects the taxes, and who gets them?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — The forestry companies, the natural resource companies, do not pay any property or education tax . . . or they do not pay school taxes to the Northern Lights School Division, or the Creighton School Division, or the Ile a La Crosse School Division. They don't pay those kinds of taxes. Royalties are collected by the province.

Mr. Goohsen: — So why aren't they paying taxes on their properties the same as the oil and gas industry does?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — These resources are located on Crown land.

Mr. Goohsen: — Well, Madam Minister, are you suggesting that oil and gas wells in The Great Sand Hills, that are located on Crown lands, do not pay education tax?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Just to familiarize the member, if they do pay school taxes, it's part of their ability to raise revenues locally which means that their foundation operating grant from the province is decreased. If they don't collect the money, that means that they can't raise that money locally which means that their foundation operating grant is increased from the province.

(2145)

Mr. Goohsen: — Madam Minister, there's no use you trying to jump ahead of me with your answer because you're not even close to the question that I'm about to ask. The reality is that in the South the resource industry pays taxes, and those taxes go to local communities, and local communities have the sense of self-respect of being able to choose for themselves how they spend some of that money even though you set all the wages and those kind of things. The reality is that, in the North, you collect all the monies through resources and resource taxes. You take all of the money. Then you give it back to the northern people and you say, you should get on your knees and be grateful to us because we're big brother, giving it to you. And you have taken and stripped away the dignity and the self-respect of those people.

And if you were to collect those taxes in the North exactly the same as you do in the South and then give that money to those school boards and those school units, they could then administer that money for themselves and their school units and their school boards, just like people in the South. And they would have that feeling that they have done something for themselves and that they haven't had their hat in hand, begging from the government all the time.

So, Madam Minister, do you have any plans to restore the dignity and the self-respect of northern people by putting into their hands the education tax from the resource sector that should be theirs to deal with exactly as it's done in the South?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — I think it's fair to say that this issue has been raised with our government in the past, and it's certainly something that we're prepared to examine. I will say this, that potash mines, oil and gas industry, coal mines, diamonds, gold, any natural resource pays royalties, and all of that money is accrued to the province, and then it's redistributed through the General Revenue Fund. So it's certainly something that we're aware of, that potash mines in the South pay school taxes and

uranium mines in the North don't. And that's something we need to take a look at.

Mr. Goohsen: — Thank you, Madam Minister. I appreciate your finally conceding that this does need to be looked at because it seems to me in having listened for a number of years to people in the North, what they've really said to us is not that they want to rule as an independent nation, they only want to have some respect. They wanted to be treated, I think, with some feeling and feelings given to them that they have some self-worth of their own, some ability to handle the money in their systems that everybody else handles within their own structures and systems, and to allow them to have the money from the resource sector to spend in their school boards and in their school units the same as school boards and the school units in the South do. Even if they made a few mistakes and spent a little bit of this money wrong to start with would not necessarily be a bad thing because they're naturally going to have that adjustment period.

And I think it's important that your government take a look at doing that because it almost seems to me that after many years of listening to our native people in the North asking for more from governments, they are saying now, at this point in history, we no longer want to live that way. We want big brother to stop being big brother. We want to now have the right to handle our own money and to show to you that we achieved enough education and enough ability to be able to do that.

And therefore I'm led to another area of course in the North which is lumber. And again, lumber is a major industry up North, and I think we could be looking at the encouragement of more private lumbering operations where we would encourage people to go back out into the woods and harvest small amounts of trees as individual groups and resell them to the big timber companies.

And now I know that that has been done in the past, but it seems somehow we've lost that up North. There's a few operations left, but not nearly enough of that sort of community-based or family-based sort of enterprise that should be encouraged. And then we could expand that for a tax base for the North, a tax base that Northerners could then use to build that self-respect and dignity that they're after.

Madam Minister, we talked the other day to people in the Department of Agriculture. There's a huge need in this province right now . . . And I guess I could throw in right now that by the end of this week the Minister of Agriculture is going to want to trade you jobs after I heard the weather forecast. But the reality being that we in the South up until this last couple of days have been facing a drought in this province.

In those discussions, Madam Minister, we talked about how could we solve some of those problems. And this goes right back to the North, because we said in the North we could be expanding community pastures especially in those area where we have logged out some of the timber. Why not put some of that ground into grass and have the native people operate it as community pastures and have a tax base there and pay taxes in lieu of the properties to those native communities so that they would develop a tax base. I believe there's a lot of expansion for that sort of area.

Madam Minister, in the area of renewable resources like fishing and hunting, we pay taxes, education tax, on licences when we buy them, do we not? Does any of that money then of course accrue back to the school units?

I'm just trying to feed you ideas of how you can put money legitimately — that you collect from the people in the province, and now in this case from the people in the North — legitimately say that's tax money that we can legitimately now put into the hands of northern communities in order for them to have the dignity of saying this is money that we have earned from our properties, from our enterprise, from our industries in the North, and we are not taking handouts from the South.

These are monies that we have to use because we earned them up here and the government simply put them into our hands because they were the collection agents. And that would give you a whole different perspective on the dignity and the self-worth that people would feel in the North.

And I guess I should let you comment on that before I ramble any further.

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — I really am interested in the member's comments. I think that the member is right. And certainly the member from Athabasca is aware of this — that Northerners are looking at a way to generate their own revenue, to create a revenue base and an economic base in order that they can be more in charge of their own future.

So any ideas that you have, certainly our government would welcome discussing those ideas with you.

Mr. Goohsen: — Well thank you, Madam Minister. We have quite a few ideas. The member from Humboldt is going to ask a few questions after my next one because of course it's only proper that she should have a chance to talk about education that concerns her community.

I do want to talk to you, Madam Minister, a little bit about problems of isolationism. Naturally I think you will understand that a constituency like the Cypress Hills where we have 10,000 square miles within the constituency, there are five different school units and miles and miles, as I've said many times before, of miles and miles . . . low population and a long ways to go.

We face many of the same problems of isolationism and the feelings of isolationism that people in the North do. You can feel isolated; you can feel lonely and depressed and cut off surrounded by prairies just as easily as you can surrounded by trees. In fact maybe sometimes it gets worse if you get a winter snowstorm where you're blocked right in and you can't see for more than a couple of feet with miles and miles of snowstorm around you.

So we want to talk about those kind of things and what you do to cope with teachers staying in those atmospheres and maintaining their sense of balance, their ability to remain in those areas long enough to get to know the school units and the children. And what programs do you have to counsel the teachers or to bring them some kind of relief from those kind of pressures?

I'll let you allude to that. And of course I want to talk a little bit then about the Cypress Hills. But after you answer this question, I'll let the member from Humboldt ask her questions first.

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — For the teachers in the province who are experiencing duress and stress, the Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation has an outstanding program of teacher-support services whereby there are folks available to support teachers when they're experiencing difficulties.

Ms. Julé: — Thank you, Mr. Deputy Chair. Madam Minister, I would just like to ask you a couple of questions referring to home schooling. In my constituency I have a number of people that are doing this and a number of people that are contemplating it.

Madam Minister, earlier you were speaking with the member from Canora-Pelly, and you did indicate that there's a portion of money, I believe, that is allotted to divisions for home schooling, if there's home schooling taking place in those divisions.

I'm wondering who makes the determination of how much of that money is in fact targeted towards home schooling. And is there a certain portion of that, that money, that must go directly to parents? Or is that at the discretion of the division board as to how much they choose to give out?

I guess in addition to that question, I would ask if parents chose to home-school, must they follow the curricula of the school division or do they have some leeway as to what subjects they would teach their children or could teach them in any given year or at any given level?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — The parent would have to follow the provincial curricula as approved by the director of education. As I indicated earlier, there is a sum of money that is given to the school board in terms of recognizing that they have some involvement with the parents of the home-based student.

The school is expected to provide support to the parents as they home-base their student, particularly in the area of, you know, standardized testing, special needs assessment, and so on. I know that there's been some difficulty with some boards of education where they haven't wanted to provide some of the materials, use of library, use of gymnasiums. But it seems to me that those kinds of disputes are becoming less so. And more and more boards of education, the directors of education, and the home-based parents are working out their various problems.

Ms. Julé: — Thank you, Madam Minister. Madam Minister, the next question I have is referring back to another comment you made earlier this evening. And you were referring to your method of interdepartmental sharing of all services within a school division or a school that may be needed as far as services that students need nowadays — social services, health, etc.

I'm just wondering, again with the distribution of funding for that, is that above and beyond the allotment for each student — the foundation grant? Is there money above and beyond that or is that the money that is allotted to a school division for each student? Do they have to deal then also or use that money for

extra social services or extra health needs that may be a part of their services?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Now in the case of . . . I'll just give you the example of the Nutana high school. The department did . . . It has its normal way of funding the local school division and then funds are directed to the schools, Nutana being one of them. The department did provide \$160,000 which includes \$50,000 for getting the project going. At the end of the day, there'll be \$110,000 per year from the department for the Nutana full-service school.

The health board is going to provide a person to help in the area of addictions because we're finding that lots of young people have issues of addictions.

As well, the Department of Social Services is providing two people from the department into the school to support the students. So these are resources that don't come from the school board. They come from Social Services, they come from Health, and they come from the Department of Education.

Ms. Julé: — Madam Minister, I'd just like to close this evening with a comment. I have received certainly some opposition to the bargaining that is going on and the way it is going on. The members of division boards are really very, very unhappy with the fact that at the end of the day government will make the decisions on what happens as far as bargaining goes. And any grievances they may have are, they feel, going to be sort of pushed to the side.

I wonder if there's anyway that you could — I'm sure you hope that this is going to work — so I'm wondering if there's anything that you would like to say this evening or that you could say to give them some assurance that their concerns will be honoured and that they will not simply be sidelined.

(2200)

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Well I think what I can say about this issue is that we introduced second reading of the education Act today, and that's where the whole issue of grievances are dealt with; and when we go to the Committee of the Whole we could have a discussion around the education Act.

I will say this, that I know how important it is for the trustees of the province and the government to work in the most collaborative way that we can. There are times when we just can't agree — we meet and we meet and we meet and we meet and we just can't seem to solve the problem. And sometimes government just has to take a leadership role and make the decision.

We try not to do that very often in education. We try to be as collaborative and enter into as many partnerships as possible, but sometimes you just have to solve a problem by making a decision.

Mr. Osika: — Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I've been listening to this with a great deal of interest as I'm sure that people who may be watching. On some of these new programs, earlier you were talking about the four-day school week, Madam Minister. There is another program that I have some interest in and

people in my area. It's called a balanced school year program. I wonder if you might just be able to explain that for us just exactly what type of a program that is?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — The member will recall that last year during the session of the legislature we introduced amendments to The Education Act whereby school boards could make the decision to go to a balanced school year without receiving the approval of the Minister of Education. What the balanced school year is, is a school year that runs from about the middle of August to Christmas, and that would be called one semester. And then the next semester runs from January 1 to about the middle of June.

So in fact instead of students coming back around the first week of September and leaving school around the third or fourth week of June, the school year ends earlier and begins sooner.

Mr. Osika: — I understand that that is in place in some of the school districts. Have you had any feedback on the... any comments or any feedback from those areas?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — It is in place in the Regina Catholic elementary and secondary school system and the Saskatoon Catholic elementary and secondary. Buffalo Plains, which is a rural school division, has the balanced school year and one school, the high school in Moose Jaw, Vanier, has the balanced school year.

The feedback that I've got, the initial feedback at one stage was this: the high school students had the balanced school year in the Catholic division but the elementary students didn't. It was a real inconvenience for parents. They had kids leaving school the middle of June, then the end of June, going back in the middle of August, and at the end of August. And so there was basically only a six-week holiday where the family could all be together.

That was one issue, but I think the boards have worked that out whereby the elementary and the secondary systems are both on the same school year.

The only other difficulty that I've experienced is from a person — a business person in Saskatoon — that runs a gymnastic camp. It's a highly sophisticated camp for young people involved in gymnastics. And it makes it difficult to run a camp when you only have a six-week period, really... Or yes, closer to five, right. So if you want to run a two-month camp or a month camp and a month camp, it just makes it very, very hard. And that, from a business point of view, it's difficult; but also from just trying to administer point of view, it's difficult.

Otherwise, I haven't really heard any complaints from people. I know that some parents don't like it, many parents do. Some teachers don't like it, many teachers do. So I would say it's been somewhat mixed, but overall people like the balanced school year.

Mr. Osika: — Thank you. So I take it the information with respect to that type of a program is strictly the responsibility of the school district with no input from your department whatsoever. At what point, if there's a real impasse and it creates a great deal of animosity or becomes a problem, is there

at any time at all that you or your department would get involved to balance the scales, either promote or at least make an effort to bring the sides together in a global picture to say, calm down; perhaps there's been some misunderstandings and here's what we'd like to give you the opportunity to do?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — There are many times when the department, through our regional directors or other personnel in the department, assist boards and communities in resolving difficulties. So if the community were to request the department to be involved in trying to assist people in coming together, certainly we can be involved in a facilitative way.

Our department does a lot of facilitating, mediating, and working with, you know, people that have disputes with each other. That's something that we do quite regularly.

Mr. Osika: — Thank you. I was just wondering if in fact the feedback that you get from those places that are trying out these new types of programs, not unlike the earlier questions to you about the four-day school week where you're now into the second year and you said that at the end of five years... Do you not funnel or is there not a report card funnelled to you that you could pass along to other areas that may be interested? That might be one way of perhaps even fending off any misunderstandings.

I guess what I'm suggesting is the more information people have... It's always the fear of the unknown that primarily causes consternation and confrontation. I was wondering if there was any way that you might be able to, in advance of any of these programs even being discussed, promote it through your department to school districts, to parents in a way that might alleviate in the event that you're moving at a different direction. Again as I mentioned that it's fear of the unknown that people oftentimes create a great deal of consternation and concern.

So if there was that kind of a program... Is there one being thought of, or are there any plans to report on any of these new initiatives, perhaps experiences from other areas that your department may be aware of, and to give people some comfort?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — A very good suggestion and I'm sure it's something that we can actively look at. I think that there is some experience in the province with the balanced school year, and that could be shared with other boards or communities that are looking at going that way.

I should say this: that the balanced school year is difficult for those boards of education that do not have accredited teachers, where they don't have departmental exams. Because we haven't quite got the departmental exams balanced in terms of the balanced school year. I think we have five sets of departmental exams throughout the year but this would require another set, and it's quite costly. I think it's about \$300,000 to write another set of exams.

So the balanced school year for those school boards that do not have fully accredited teachers is not quite operational yet because of the whole issue of departmental exams.

Mr. Goohsen: — Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Madam Minister,

a few minutes ago we were talking a bit about things that are going on in the Education department. And I wanted to allude to how these are going to affect the school boards in south-west Saskatchewan, in the Cypress Hills constituency.

For example, I visited in the past couple of months with four out of the five school boards that are operating in that constituency, and at those meetings, Madam Minister, we had a sort of almost unanimous common call for action in the same areas. Each meeting, I would go there and I would sit down and I would say, here I am, what would you like to tell me? And they would quite happily tell me what was on their minds. And it turned out that just about all of them were telling me exactly the same thing without having me say what I've heard before from the others.

And what they were saying to me is basically that they were unhappy with the way that the negotiations are done these days. That was one of the areas — the way that negotiations are done on their primary cost, and that of course being the salaries of teachers and those things that are related to it.

They indicated to me — and I'm sure you've heard this before, but from the south-west maybe they say things differently — they said to me that when you set the wages in Regina for the teachers, you must forget that the janitors and everybody else in the system ties their salary to those adjustments, and that those adjustments come 100 per cent out of the pockets of the local taxpayer because that wasn't included in your formula or your attempt to address the equalization of your formula.

Have you done anything to correct that in the last few days?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — We've had this discussion earlier this evening, or was it this afternoon? It's been quite a lengthy discussion.

We increased the foundation operating grants to school boards by \$21.8 million. Teachers' salaries represented \$15 million. In addition to the increase in the foundation operating grant, we also brought in a program called grants in lieu of taxes of \$1.6 million to the school boards. So in essence we've got close to \$24 million in new money for school boards — 15 million of that goes to teachers' salaries; \$9 million of that can be used unconditionally for whatever else school boards want to fund.

So I would say that generally across the province we saw an increase, a significant increase. This is the largest amount of money that we've had in the foundation operating grant ever, and it's a lot better than the old days when we were reducing our grants and not increasing them.

Mr. Goohsen: — Thank you, Madam Minister. The other issue that was common was the method in which negotiating is done. And they complained bitterly that they felt that they did not have enough input into the process. Have you any plans to change the methods that you're going to use in the future?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — We've had this method of the trustee-government bargaining team, I think, since 1973 — 25 years. We've never had a general strike in this province. We've always been able to negotiate provincial collective agreements without a general strike.

In the last round of bargaining, in order to get a provincial collective agreement, it was important that we adjust our mandate. We held nine meetings, nine meetings to try and see if we could change our mandate — this is nine meetings between the government and the trustees — and at the end of those nine meetings there was absolutely no change in position.

And at the end of the day the province decided we needed to have a new collective agreement with the teachers. It's a responsible collective agreement. I haven't heard any trustee say that it's a bad collective agreement. It didn't give away the store. It's quite meagre relative to some of the increases that you see in the private sector, and we paid for it through an increase in the foundation operating grant.

Mr. Goohsen: — Thank you, Madam Minister, Mr. Chairman.

Madam Minister, you say you haven't had a strike, and of course I think some people would argue one way or the other that the reality is that the reason you haven't had a strike is because school boards don't go on strike and they're the ones who had their rights taken away from them. It wasn't the teachers that had their rights taken away — it was the school boards and school boards don't go on strike in this province; they don't have the facilities to do that, and it would be ridiculous to suggest that you have success because there was no strike when in fact the people who represent the taxpayers on the school boards just don't have that vehicle available to them. So I think your answer really is a non-answer. It's not related to the question whatsoever.

I wanted to ask a bit about the building program, Madam Minister. You indicated earlier that you have the grant formula which equalizes the funding. I wonder how that applies to the building programs that you have in the province. Are the building programs equalized so that communities get equal amounts of dollars spent on new buildings and renovations?

(2215)

Hon. Mr. Lingenfelter: — Mr. Chairman, in terms of the capital expenditures, it's been indicated to me by the deputy that those areas with less ability to fund capital projects actually get a greater proportion from the province. And as you debate the position of the teachers versus the trustees, what the changes that have been implemented do is really revert to what has been in place for most of the last 23 years. So when you talk about radical changes, really what you're talking about is moving back to what has been historically the status quo.

Mr. Goohsen: — Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Well, obviously the status quo is not what is making people very happy, so perhaps you ought to take a look at trying something different for a change and make the school boards in this province happy as well. And I'm sure that you would want to do that.

Madam Minister, you alluded to the fact that there's \$300 million being spent this year on new construction in this province for the schools. And you talked about a list. How many millions of dollars worth of expenditures are represented on the list that you now have? What criteria is required to be met in order for people to qualify to either get on the list or to get up the list? And how many school units in south-west

Saskatchewan — of the five school boards in the Cypress Hills — have applied for any construction, and how many of them have you either granted or refused?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — It's region 2 part of the province. The Herbert School Division received some funds for improving accessibility and washroom renovation. Christ the King in Shaunavon, an upgrade of the gym and the east wing as well as ventilation and temperature control. Shaunavon at Val Marie, a mechanical upgrade.

Swift Current Catholic School Board at St. Patrick's, which is formerly Dickson School, a mechanical upgrade. Eastend, Frontier School, . . . (inaudible) . . . drainage, replacing the furnace and ducts. Prairie West at Vanguard, two relocatable classrooms and Swift Current at the O. M. Irwin School, roof replacement.

In addition, there were some announcements of capital projects — that's called block funding — and there were capital projects announced across the province. Approvals continued for the North Battleford joint-use facility of 1.7 million; Estevan, joint use, 1 million; Yorkton, joint use, 2.5 million; Central Butte School, 680,000; and Biggar, 2.6 million.

In addition, Vanier Collegiate in Moose Jaw, 1.7 million; Neville Gossin Lloydminster, 1.2; Consul and Eastend, 600,000; Father Gorman in Lloydminster, 1.1 million; Estevan Public School Board, 250,000; Brunskill, 250,000, and a new high school was announced, 250,000. The 250,000 are for work to get the architectural plans, and all of the plans in place.

In addition, there is some money that's been set aside for some projects that have not yet been determined. But the Meadow Lake area, the school division there is looking at a joint-use facility along with the Flying Dust Band. It would be a co-managed high school in the town of Meadow Lake. It would be the first time that a band and a school division jointly came together to co-manage a school.

In addition, there may be a potential of a joint-use facility in Regina. And there's some money that's been set aside for that.

Mr. Goohsen: — Thank you, Madam Minister. That certainly was much more detailed than I required in that area and we do appreciate that. We will certainly send a transcript of that to the school units in my constituency so they can be aware of what's going on.

I think they would like to know that I have asked you, once again, what criteria is required to get on the list and to be elevated up the list as you alluded to earlier.

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — It's issues like occupational health and safety, joint use, as well as enrolment pressures. Those will determine whether you get to the top of the list. There are some places like Lloydminster where they've had tremendous growth in the population. Those schools could not handle the numbers of students that have come into the city of Lloydminster and that's why those schools were announced this year, because of the tremendous enrolment pressures in the city of Lloydminster.

Mr. Goohsen: — Thank you, Madam Minister, a few days ago

on the news we watched reports that hamlets in the central part of this province were considering disbanding in order to save themselves tax money. They alluded to problems with SAMA (Saskatchewan Assessment Management Agency) and what not. But basically what came out of that that concerns the Department of Education, I think, is that if they do disband, they won't have to pay education tax on those properties. And now, how would those monies be made up, and of course I have a couple of hamlets that now are saying, would this benefit us? And I would ask you to answer their question for them.

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — If a hamlet voted to disintegrate, it would become part of the rural municipality. Obviously their taxes would go down because they would be, depending on the amount of land, they could become part of 331(q)'s. If their school taxes were to go down, then obviously the revenue to that school division would go down and their grant from the province would go up. 331 (q)'s are under review at the present time.

Mr. Goohsen: — I'm sure somebody's going to ask you what those are and you can answer that when you next stand up to answer a question, because if I don't throw that in somebody's going to phone me up tomorrow and I'm going to have to say I haven't got a clue.

You alluded to the education Act that you introduced earlier today in your discussions tonight. How will that affect home schooling, religious groups, and those kind of, I guess, what you would consider out of mainstream educational processes that are currently occurring in my constituency, which is Cypress Hills. We do have quite a bit of that type of educational process because of our vast area. How will this affect our community and the people in it?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — The amendments to the education Act do not affect home schoolers or those members who are involved with the religious schools. There's no impact whatsoever.

Mr. Goohsen: — Thank you, Madam Minister, Mr. Chairman, I'm sure that the people in the south-west will be happy to hear that. We, of course, will fax the Act to them tomorrow morning and get their response from the school unit boards and then we'll talk to you about that at that time.

I only have this one last question, Madam Minister, for tonight before I promise to allow the Liberals another opportunity to get in to this debate and discussion. The universal testing program has been, of course, something that we've talked about a lot and you have acceded that you aren't really, I think, in favour of that. Have you changed your mind about that, and have you given any consideration to a universal testing program?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — The province participated in what's called the school achievement indicators program which is a program of the Council of Ministers funded in large part by the federal government.

We have just finished participating in the English language arts and the French language arts testing. We participated in mathematics last year and science the year before. At the end of

this participation in the three core subject areas, we'll determine whether or not we want to participate in the future.

Mr. McLane: — Thank you, Mr. Chair. Madam Minister, I know the hour is getting late and we have just a few more minutes. But you did raise some thoughts that I had to question you about and I guess we'll likely have to come back another day and finish them all.

But you were quoting some statistics to our colleague from the south-west a little while ago on capital projects. And I did have some concerns expressed to me from the folks in the community of Central Butte about a school project that was going on there and that maybe the commitment that was made wasn't being adhered to. I'm wondering if you have the statistics on the Central Butte project and how long it was initially scheduled to take and the funding that was pledged for that project, and if indeed there is a problem with the slowing down of that project to date?

The committee reported progress.

The Assembly adjourned at 10:30 p.m.

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