



STANDING COMMITTEE ON HUMAN SERVICES

Hansard Verbatim Report

No. 58 – May 7, 2007



Legislative Assembly of Saskatchewan

Twenty-fifth Legislature

**STANDING COMMITTEE ON HUMAN SERVICES
2007**

Ms. Judy Junor, Chair
Saskatoon Eastview

Mr. Wayne Elhard, Deputy Chair
Cypress Hills

Mr. Lon Borgerson
Saskatchewan Rivers

Ms. Joanne Crofford
Regina Rosemont

Mr. Peter Prebble
Saskatoon Greystone

Mr. Don Toth
Moosomin

Mr. Milton Wakefield
Lloydminster

[The committee met at 15:18.]

**General Revenue Fund
Health
Vote 32**

Subvote (HE01)

The Chair: — Good afternoon, thank you all for waiting. Today's agenda is Health estimates, vote 32 on page 85 of your budget book. Would the minister with us today and all of his officials which you've introduced to us before, but you can do that again. And I'm sure if you have anything to say you can say it now. I know you have had an opening statement already since this isn't your first time before the committee, but you can proceed.

Hon. Mr. Taylor: — Well thank you very much. I appreciate the opportunity. I will introduce officials. I do have a couple who were not introduced previously. But I — in the interests of time and questions — I will not be making an opening statement.

To my left at the head table here is Kevin Wilson, executive director of the drug plan and extended benefits branch; directly to my left, Lauren Donnelly, assistant deputy minister; and to my right, John Wright, the deputy minister. Behind me at the table, Roger Carriere, executive director, community care branch; Dr. Louise Greenburg, associate deputy minister; and Rod Wiley, executive director, regional accountability and regional policy branches.

Other members of the Health team who are here today to ensure that we have as complete answers as possible: Bonnie Blakley, executive director of our work force planning branch; Patrick O'Byrne, director, community hospitals and emergency services, acute and emergency services branch; Donna Magnusson, executive director, primary health services branch; Brad Havervold, executive director, medical services branch; Ted Warawa, executive director, finance and administration branch; Jeanette Lowe, director, finance and administration branch; Tracey Smith, assistant to the deputy minister of Health; and Jill Raddysh who is a Master of Public Administration student intern.

The Chair: — Thank you. So we're ready for questions right off?

Hon. Mr. Taylor: — Yes.

The Chair: — Thank you. Mr. Allchurch.

Mr. Allchurch: — Thank you, Madam Chair. Mr. Minister, welcome to your officials here this afternoon. Mr. Minister, you're probably aware of the line of questioning that I'll be pursuing today, and that's in regards to the hospital situation and the lack of physicians in the area west of Prince Albert.

To date, Mr. Minister, has there been any word of improvement to that area as far as doctor positions to areas like Shellbrook, Spiritwood, or Big River?

Hon. Mr. Taylor: — Thank you very much for that question. Of course physician recruitment and retention is a priority for this government. We are actively engaged province-wide with regards to filling vacancies that exist within the physician community, and of course the area that you are referring to is certainly a priority within our priority of physician recruitment and retention. Shellbrook, Spiritwood, and Big River residents have expressed their desire to have this issue dealt with as expeditiously as possible, and therefore not only Saskatchewan Health but the region and the community are all actively engaged in dealing with this situation.

As of today I can't say that a physician for Spiritwood or a physician for Big River have been located to fill the vacancies that exist. But I can tell you that a number of things have occurred, including the fact that Sask Health has approved funding to the region for four nurse practitioners to function within the communities. Three of those positions have been filled, and one we are continuing to recruit on that.

We are also aware that for Shellbrook and physicians, two physicians, two additional physicians are being recruited to Shellbrook, and they may be visiting the community by middle of July. We are hoping to re-establish the stability of the physician community within the town of Shellbrook. There has also been some contact with another physician who is also interested in working in the community of Shellbrook.

We have to acknowledge the efforts that are being made by the communities. The community of Shellbrook has been very active in engaging itself in recruitment efforts. I had the opportunity on an informal basis to meet with the mayor of Spiritwood, middle of last week. The community is very interested in ensuring that they know all that they need to know to participate in recruitment efforts. And the region, Prince Albert Parkland region will utilize all of the tools that they have available to them and ensure that the communities are as aware of the tools available to them as possible to help with recruitment efforts.

So I think what the member has to know, recruitment is actually a partnership of four parties. The province is very engaged in increasing the physician community recruited from outside Saskatchewan into Saskatchewan. We have a large number of initiatives including rural incentives in place.

The second partner is the region. The regional health authority actually does the recruiting and the hiring for positions. And if you look on the website for Prince Albert Parkland, three family physician positions are posted. Those three family positions are Big River, Shellbrook, and Spiritwood.

The third partner is the community because once a physician is recruited to Saskatchewan, to the region, then the communities actively are engaged to a certain extent in competing against each other for those physicians within a region.

And then fourthly, the partnership with the physician community itself. The best recruiters in fact are the doctors themselves. And I think we're seeing some of that reflected in Shellbrook where we have an active, reasonably stable physician community that wants to expand the physician

resources in that community and are having some effect in attracting other physicians to that community.

So while this is a challenge to the residents of the three communities and the surrounding rural areas, all of the partners are actively engaged to try to improve the situation as quickly as we can.

Mr. Allchurch: — Well thank you for that, Mr. Minister. That update was, I'm sure, welcomed in all those areas. If the two doctors, or potentially two doctors, come to the Shellbrook in, hopefully, July that will maintain a stable situation in July or a safe situation in Shellbrook at least so that areas like Big River and Spiritwood have somewhere to go until there's physicians in those areas filled.

You mentioned about nurse practitioners, and one is already working in the hospital of Spiritwood. I also believe that the two doctors, husband and wife, in Spiritwood are writing their exam; either they wrote it last week or they're writing it this week. If that happens and they pass their exam, with the help of the nurse practitioner already in Spiritwood as we speak now, will that hospital be opened up for emergency services?

Hon. Mr. Taylor: — Well one of the dilemmas that rural practitioners face — and therefore the regional health authorities and the residents — is the on-call commitment required to ensure that emergency services are available 24 hours. Ideally you want to have three active physicians to ensure that your on-call is a one-in-three circumstance.

Without an additional practitioner, a locum, or an additional physician from Saskatoon or Prince Albert or North Battleford coming in to fit in the on-call rotation, it's a challenge for a two-person office to fit into a one-in-two on-call circumstance, especially when the two live in the same residence. So what we are doing in Spiritwood is also working with the Saskatoon physician community and the Prince Albert physician community to seek their support to expand the on-call circumstances there to assist with the physicians in the community.

With the nurse practitioner in place it also might be able to provide some greater daytime flexibility which could provide the physicians greater opportunities to do their on-call evenings or weekends. But there's still a fair bit of discussion that needs to be had with the two physicians that are currently in Spiritwood. It's part of the challenge that we face.

I think the people of Spiritwood need to understand and recognize — I think as they are already coming to understand and recognize — nurse practitioners work in an expanded capacity in conjunction with the physician. But they also have the ability to work autonomously; in other words, they can manage the facility during the day. They don't have what I would call the full capacity of a physician. But of the types of activity that present at what would be called the Spiritwood clinic or hospital circumstance, they can deal with about 80 per cent of individuals who present at the hospital. So they have the ability to initiate care and monitor health outcomes.

They are educated to perform detail and comprehensive patient assessments; diagnosis and treat common ailments; order,

interpret, perform laboratory and radiological tests; prescribe medication; and make referrals to other health professionals. So the nurse practitioner will be a useful addition into the community as people get to know the nurse practitioner and recognize the value of the skills that a nurse practitioner brings to the table.

But in terms of dealing with the on-call emergency room activity, this is another matter of continued negotiations and discussions.

Mr. Allchurch: — Well thank you, Mr. Minister. In regards to nurse practitioners, if the doctors in Spiritwood — and after they've passed their exams and are not spending a lot of time studying for an exam — they have more time to doctor and wish to open up the Spiritwood Hospital for emergency services with the help of the nurse practitioner, will that be allowed? Or do they have to have three doctors in Spiritwood in order to open up the hospital?

Hon. Mr. Taylor: — The answer is both yes and no. The answer is yes, basically by practice they could do that. But the reason I say no is, there's still a chance that the two doctors aren't willing to do a one-in-two on-call rotation. They have to be prepared to step up and do that — the ideal circumstance — to provide everyone with a, sort of, a two on-call weeks off and one on-call week on. It's much more conducive to family life, to activity in the community, and those sorts of things.

So the physicians may be willing, and they're certainly capable. And the regional health authority, I'm sure, would welcome the opportunity to open the doors, but they'd need the regional health authority to ensure that the public knows they have access to physician-delivered emergency care and evenings and weekends. The regional health authority would have to know that the physicians are prepared to provide for a long-term and ongoing basis that one-in-two on-call response.

Mr. Allchurch: — Can the hospital at Spiritwood be opened up for weekday services, 24-hour a day, and not on weekend? Or is it a cut-and-dry situation where it's open 24-hour services all the way through, or as it is right now with the status quo?

Hon. Mr. Taylor: — Well again regional health authorities make these decisions as to how to interpret the responses of available staff and the needs of the facilities. I think what you're suggesting is certainly allowable, but the regional health authorities have to make decisions based on safety and the communications with the public, so there's some certainty for the community to understand what services are being provided at the facility, over what period of time.

Mr. Allchurch: — Thank you, Mr. Minister. I make those comments for the simple reason, as you know, I was given petitions from residents from Chitek Lake and Leoville which is a half-hour drive just to get to Spiritwood. And they understand that the doctors have to write exams, and therefore they can't study and work under the same workload, and it's heavy to begin with. But if when they pass the exams, they may have time to open up to at least partial emergency services.

The reason being is if . . . Take residents from the Chitek or Leoville area that have to drive half an hour just to get to

Spiritwood, and it's not open. Then they've got to drive to Shellbrook. Well then you're looking at an hour-and-a-half drive. And it's only going to be time before you may result in a situation where a death occurs simply because lack of services. That's why I was using the words potentially dangerous if Shellbrook was to go that route where they could not provide emergency services. Then we've got to go to Prince Albert.

So that's why residents were saying, if when the doctors do pass their exams and have more time for doctoring, will they open it up partially for emergency services, part-time or whatever, rather than a cut-and-dried situation where it is today?

Hon. Mr. Taylor: — Let me clarify something first of all. If someone is driving from Chitek Lake to Spiritwood, the chances of that being an emergency circumstance are a lot less than if they were calling the ambulance.

True emergency circumstances, the regional health authority, the communications into the community would argue that with the uncertainties of the hospital's emergency cases, the first phone call should be to the ambulance because the ambulances will know which emergency rooms are open, where they are, and get the individual with an emergency need taken care of. They can also deal with some of the immediate emergency issues in the ambulance during transport.

That having been said, if it is not a true emergency, not life-threatening emergency, obviously nurse practitioners and the physicians will be able to handle a number of these things. But would they present to the hospital as an emergency or would they present simply as a, we need this matter looked at right away.

I simply caution the people in circumstances like this in these communities to utilize the ambulance service as a first resort. Secondly, in terms of what negotiations or discussions occur between the physicians and the regional health authorities are ones that I can't comment specifically on here because there are a lot of other factors involved.

In other words the regional health authority is in discussions with the Saskatoon and Prince Albert physicians to try to relieve some of the stress in the Spiritwood area. That having been said, those discussions would likely continue because the desire of the region and the desire of Sask Health is the same as the desire of the people of Spiritwood — to have that hospital open and operating as a hospital as soon as is practically possible.

Mr. Allchurch: — Thank you, Mr. Minister. Well there's a lot of people in the area — and I don't care where it is in the province — that look at maybe what they think as an emergency service and instead of phoning the ambulance, because the ambulance is very expensive, a lot of people just take it under their own hands and drive the person to the nearest facility where they can get health services, especially after hours. And it's a cost factor.

If the people coming to — let's use Spiritwood — and there is no 24-hour emergency service there, then they got to go to Shellbrook, and if things pose problems two months down the

road then you're going to have to go to Prince Albert where it's overloaded already.

Those emergency services may be of emergency cases but they don't come by ambulance. That's why the sooner we can get facilities like Spiritwood open to emergency services 24 hour because of the time factor that it takes for residents there to find emergency care . . . And that's the problem. So yes, they can use emergency through with ambulance because it's there. It's available right in Spiritwood but a lot of people can't afford to use that service.

Hon. Mr. Taylor: — Just in answer to that comment. In times of uncertainty — and it's well publicized in the area that there is uncertainty in the emergency department at Spiritwood Hospital — people should be trusting the ambulance services and not the potential of the hospital, which is why the regional health authority wants to have some certainty in terms of reopening the emergency room at Spiritwood. There needs to be certainty that the physicians are available, that when someone comes in to the community . . . because we recognize that that indeed happens. Whether it's good judgment or not all the time, it does happen.

But at times of uncertainty people should be aware that regardless of the other circumstances, if it is a true emergency or what would be considered close to an emergency, calling the ambulance is the safest and the best thing for them to do. And maybe it is even if the Spiritwood Hospital was open, simply because the ambulance operators are trained to provide the type of care to ensure that the half hour on the highway is not deteriorating a wound or a illness.

And I simply want to ensure that the people of Chitek Lake and Leoville, who are faced with this challenge — and I think you're aware I know that area quite well; I've travelled it for many years — those people need to know that in the time of uncertainty the only way to provide some certainty in the system is to utilize the ambulance systems for what they were designed to be used for.

And the regional health authority, in conjunction with Sask Health and the community, are doing its very best to ensure that in this very competitive environment we have physicians available to open this on an ongoing, regular basis in the town of Spiritwood.

Mr. Allchurch: — Thank you, Mr. Minister. In regards to nurse practitioners . . . And there's two of them. I don't know if they're working now in Shellbrook or plan to be working very, very shortly in Shellbrook. And with the situation that's presiding in Shellbrook as we speak with doctors going from five down to possibly three, the nurse practitioners would be welcomed. What happens if the husband and wife that you just mentioned before about coming to Shellbrook — which will bring the doctor situation back up to five — what then happens with the two nurse practitioners that are in Shellbrook right now?

Hon. Mr. Taylor: — I can say they'll remain in place. I have a strong commitment to the nurse practitioner program in Saskatchewan. I think we should be utilizing nurse practitioner skills to a greater extent across the province, and our

commitment to those nurse practitioners in those positions in the communities that you've referenced, that commitment is there for the long term.

Mr. Allchurch: — I think you've also mentioned, Mr. Minister, that one of the nurse practitioners will be going to Big River, or is it Big River area?

Hon. Mr. Taylor: — As I understand it, we'd like to see two in that area, one serving the community of Big River and one serving the Big River First Nation.

Mr. Allchurch: — If that happens then, will one of the nurse practitioners from Shellbrook be moved up to Big River to operate out of that facility? So that you have just what you've said, one for Big River because they've only got one doctor and also want to look after the First Nations in that area.

Hon. Mr. Taylor: — It's not my intention to move one from Shellbrook.

Mr. Allchurch: — So with that then, Mr. Minister, will you be looking to hire another person for that area so that we could have two in the Big River area?

Hon. Mr. Taylor: — Actually just a little bit of confusion at the table here because the intention always was, was to serve the communities with nurse practitioners — Big River, Big River First Nation, Shellbrook, and Spiritwood. There are currently two in Shellbrook. One of them may be servicing the Big River or Big River First Nation community. It doesn't mean we would move them but there could be a service component to it. So our commitment is to four positions to service the region. Three of them are currently filled, two of them presently in Shellbrook.

Mr. Allchurch: — Well thank you, Mr. Minister, for that clarification. In a news article, I think it took place February 13, 2007, you mentioned in there that the province has been providing funding to develop "a team medical approach in the area," said the minister. What did you mean by team medical approach?

Hon. Mr. Taylor: — Really what I'm talking about here is primary health care. It's models that we're developing across the province and are proving to be very effective. And actually it's a model developed on a national scale. Primary health care essentially is a multi-disciplinary approach to providing direct care and it ensures that you have a team that's available to do the work that traditionally in some areas has been done only by the physician.

As I indicated earlier, the nurse practitioner have the skills and training to deal with about 80 per cent of the issues that would present themselves at a clinic or a hospital setting. Not that they have — just to clarify and to be very clear — not that they have 80 per cent of the training of a physician, but 80 per cent of the presentation to a facility, they have the capacity to respond to.

So if you have a capacity to attract physicians to an area and you've got actively engaged nurse practitioners working in an area, you can develop a team approach to health care that requires less physical presence of physicians in a particular

area, and the delivery of the same and perhaps even a higher-quality care delivered because of the ability, the time factor involved. So a primary care model can also include a testing laboratory capacity, dental care, mental health care, those sorts of things, that are all built into a single location that services a number of locations.

So what I could see in a hypothetical situation, if we continue to have difficulties in providing a residential physician support in Spiritwood or Big River — and this has been a historical challenge for the region — but you have stability in the physician community in Shellbrook, we can build a strong, stable, physician community in Shellbrook servicing on an out-call basis Big River and Spiritwood, ensuring that those facilities are able to provide all the care that they need to provide and not necessarily have the physician directly in the community. This is sort of the team approach that I'm referring to. But we want to develop the team approach regardless of the residential status of physicians within the three communities that we're referring to here today.

Mr. Allchurch: — Thank you, Mr. Minister. That leads me into the next question I have, and that's regarding Shellbrook and comments that you had made referencing this, and that was that Shellbrook could serve as the hub for medical services in the area, which is exactly what you mention.

So what is the plan for Shellbrook in regards to being the hub for medical service in the area? Is it doctors from Shellbrook would be going out to Big River and Spiritwood to assist them? I can see that helping now in the situation we have but what would happen if Big River or Spiritwood got doctors of their own? Then what would happen to Shellbrook being the hub?

Hon. Mr. Taylor: — The regional health authorities have the responsibility for managing these matters on a day-to-day basis. The regional health authority has to take a look at how best to provide all of the quality of care required by residents.

We've got three very reasonable facilities there in Big River, Shellbrook, and Spiritwood, and there are physicians that are actively engaged there. The primary care model, or the team development is something that we would like to see further developed right across the province. It's certainly being discussed for improving delivery of health care within that region, within the regional health authority.

And so I can't speak for the board or any of the practitioners within the Prince Albert Parkland Regional Health Authority because a lot of things are based on what if this happens, what if that happens, relationships with physicians and other care providers in Prince Albert, Saskatoon, maybe even Prairie North, North Battleford.

So all I can say is that Saskatchewan Health supports the regional health authorities in developing primary care sites. There's 43 of them currently in the province of Saskatchewan and we'd like to see more of them developed around the province. But there are unique circumstances that are specific to challenges in recruitment and retention in these three communities — historical challenges — and the regional health authority knows best how we are going to be, what capacity we have to ensure stability in the physician community in

particularly Big River and in Spiritwood.

But I have to let the regional health authority work its way through the challenges that it's currently facing and ensure that they have the tools and the support they need from the province to best meet the needs of the people of the area.

Mr. Allchurch: — Thank you, Mr. Minister. Well your comments are I'm sure welcomed in those areas, and I know they'll be pleased to hear what you had to say. With that I have no further questions.

The Chair: — Mr. Kirsch.

Mr. Kirsch: — Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Minister, and your officials, for being here. I've got a few questions on Wakaw Hospital. Wakaw Hospital's been closed since around Christmastime for emergency services. What is the status of that situation?

Hon. Mr. Taylor: — I'll be with you in a moment. Let me try to answer because this is a little different situation than what we're facing in Prince Albert Parkland.

There are two physicians in Wakaw, both of whom previously handled on-call circumstances. One of the physicians has indicated he's no longer interested in doing the on-call and as a result the other physician has indicated he can't do seven days a week on call. Therefore the regional health authority has had no choice but to remove the capacity of the facility to provide emergency services, and as a result that affects the emergency status of the facility.

This is not an issue of recruitment. It's not an issue of retention. It's an issue of the ability of physicians to meet the on-call requirements, and failing the ability of Saskatoon or the province to provide ongoing permanent locum support, we're left with the situation whereby the emergency room at the hospital is not able to be open.

Mr. Kirsch: — Mr. Minister, the one doctor is over 80 years of age. So I think it's not just a case of a locum; I think you need another doctor there, wouldn't you say?

Hon. Mr. Taylor: — I will not dispute that. But there is a doctor practising who previously did on-call activity. If this doctor is surrendering a practice and the regional health authority is looking to replace that physician in that community, they would be actively engaged in recruiting to do that.

But I think that I certainly haven't been notified, provided notice that the doctor in question has indicated a desire to surrender his practice. The regional health authority is left with managing the circumstances that they have to manage.

Mr. Kirsch: — What would be the quota of Wakaw Hospital for physicians, all things being perfect? Like two is not where they're maxing out at, I'm sure. Is it?

Hon. Mr. Taylor: — I think as I indicated previously the ideal circumstance for a one-in-three on-call is a three-physician practice. Off the top of my head, I do not know why in the circumstances of Wakaw they have managed and have managed

well with a two-physician practice for the period of time that they have done so.

Mr. Kirsch: — So we're not even recruiting right now for a third doctor in Wakaw?

Hon. Mr. Taylor: — The regional health authorities are responsible for day-to-day operations and managing facilities and staff. I have not personally been informed of any additional recruitment efforts.

That's not to say that the regional health authority is not doing that. There are currently, if you look on the website today, the regional health authorities are advertising for 82 physicians for the province of Saskatchewan to fill their requirements across the province. Whether or not the regional health authority in this case is specifically advertising or looking for Wakaw, I can't answer that today. But I can easily get that information for you quite quickly, probably.

Mr. Kirsch: — I've also got a question now. I met a young lady that has immigrated from the States and she's married to a Canadian and they're living in Saskatchewan now. And she's a nurse, and said she can't get work. What steps would she have to fill that she hasn't filled? Why would she not be working?

Hon. Mr. Taylor: — Okay. I'll come back to that question in a minute. I was just reviewing some notes on Wakaw here. So to be completely, to completely clarify this issue, the health region is indeed recruiting for the Wakaw Hospital. They do recognize that they need to fill that position.

At one time, I'm told, there were three physicians operating in Wakaw and they've managed quite nicely up until recently with two in place. But apparently the region is well aware of the circumstances and is now engaged in recruitment efforts so that we could go back to the one-in-two if there's an agreement, or if it needs to be a one-in-three to facilitate it actively. But there's at least one physician being recruited for the hospital. Now, I'm sorry, your second question.

Mr. Kirsch: — Thank you for that answer. The 80-year-old doctor has just received his Order of Canada and he's put in so many hours and he's dedicated to this community, so it would be nice. I don't think he's going to let go until we bring in enough doctors to keep his hospital going. So thank you for that.

The next question was a young lady I met. She's a nurse from down in the States. She married a Canadian a number of years ago and they've finally now just made the move to Saskatchewan and she said she can't get work. What steps does she have to fill? Why would this be the . . .

Hon. Mr. Taylor: — Let me just say this is both simple and complicated. The simple thing is she has to have a job. The complicated thing is there are lots of reasons sometimes involved in employment circumstances. The offer of employment generally follows interviews with employers who make employment offers based on a number of factors. And I can't, I'm not a human resource person. I just know that skills and ability to work in an environment that's designed are important parts of a job offer.

Secondly if they come from outside the province, outside the country, there are other factors involved including Immigration Canada and including credentialing by the associated colleges, the registration bodies. On the Health Canada matters, sometimes it seems like they put up a lot of red tape. That having been said, Saskatchewan has been working very closely with Health Canada on health professional matters to try and ensure that people can come into this country. But sometimes there are things on people's records that immigration knows about, but none of us do.

As far as credentialing is concerned, we do have an arm's-length relationship with the various regulatory bodies, whether it's the Saskatchewan Association of Licensed Practical Nurses, Saskatchewan Registered Nurses Association, or the College of Physicians and Surgeons. They have the ability to review credentials as presented. So essentially we need three things. We need to have a job offer. We need to have immigration papers in place, and we need to have the credentials approved. If those pieces fall together, it's a very simple matter.

Mr. Kirsch: — The job offer really shouldn't be a problem though. We've got lots of those, right? For nursing.

Hon. Mr. Taylor: — On the surface you're absolutely right, but sometimes an individual is not suited for a specific position based on interviews that may have taken place in various human health resource offices. I'm not party to any of that; I have no knowledge. But skills are assessed, and those skills include the credentials and the people themselves.

Mr. Kirsch: — Now does she have to be sponsored for any of this because we always hear this term when a worker's coming up from the States.

Hon. Mr. Taylor: — No to that.

Mr. Kirsch: — Okay. If she was offered another job and they were willing to sponsor for this job . . . But I guess that doesn't apply with nursing.

Hon. Mr. Taylor: — I'm just told by Bonnie that indeed nurses do have some . . . Nurses can be expedited through the process once the job offer is in place, so it's primarily the job offer and the willingness of an employer to hire a particular employee and individual.

Mr. Kirsch: — Okay. Thank you. That concludes my questions.

The Chair: — Mr. McMorris.

Mr. McMorris: — Thank you. I think what I'll do is start and kind of just continue on with the line of questioning that my two colleagues had. I will, if we have time, get to the letter that you sent to me regarding the seniors' drug plan which I appreciate. And I do still have a number of questions arising from that.

But to begin with, regarding the doctor and nurse recruitment and retention, that is the biggest issue, I believe, in health care, facing health care right now, and it's a issue in urban

Saskatchewan. But as I said, I think, in the House before, that if you lose one or two doctors or one or two nurses in urban Saskatchewan, it doesn't close the emergency facility. And in rural Saskatchewan when we lose a nurse or two, it closes the facility, or a doctor or two. Services are suspended. And so it really comes down to the whole issue of do we have enough doctors and nurses.

There are a lot of questions that arise, and you touched on it, Mr. Minister, about the arm's-length relationship that you have with the professional bodies, whether it's SRNA [Saskatchewan Registered Nurses' Association] or the College of Physicians and Surgeons.

I want to talk about, first of all, doctors and the College of Physicians and Surgeons, and I'm not sure how that works with the relationship between the College of Physicians and Surgeons and the Department of Health. I know that we have a higher reliance on foreign-trained doctors of anywhere in Canada, and in rural Saskatchewan, it's like 75 per cent. Of that 75 per cent, the majority come from South Africa. Obviously the College of Physicians and Surgeons look at the training credentials in South Africa and they say it mirrors ours I guess, although there's still the CAPE [clinicians' assessment and professional enhancement] exam that they have to go through.

Does the department, working with the college, ever suggest that we should look at other jurisdictions? And I'm not even sure how many other jurisdictions or other countries that have medical schools that we will look at as far as accepting foreign-trained grads. I know there are some countries that we won't accept their credentials at all. Do you have any idea of what countries we are looking at to accept? Because, I mean, right now, I mean, I think there are very few rural communities that have health care facilities that haven't had experience with South Africans. That seems to be the main area, but there has to be other countries that have doctors that the college would accept their credentials.

Hon. Mr. Taylor: — This question begs an answer that goes beyond the obvious. I'm told that the countries whereby credentials are generally accepted include the UK [United Kingdom], the US [United States], Australia and indeed South Africa, with a few colleges within South Africa being subject to question.

I had a very good conversation with a South African doctor not too long ago who had indicated, of course, that the educational components of South African education — medicine — had changed quite a bit at government direction a couple of years ago. That change reduced the educational component from a six-year program to a five-year program in order to ensure that South African educated doctors remained in South Africa and not exported to other countries. This meant that the clinical education, the sixth year of the six-year medical program, the clinical education was dropped from the curriculum and added to the residency component.

So as a result of government policy in South Africa, doctors recruited from South Africa, now recent grads from a number of schools in South Africa are coming without a clinical component, the sixth-year component to their credentials. And as a result we've implemented, along with Manitoba, the CAPE

exam which tests the clinical capacity of physicians to deliver quality care.

A number of physicians have failed to meet the standard set by the CAPE exam, and as a result previously they have been sent back to South Africa. But over the course of the last year this government, working with the physicians and the college, have developed a program to assist with physicians to complete the CAPE exam. We call it a remedial program, and it means that we are prepared to provide assistance to physicians — either in terms of their approach to the exam or in terms of getting help if they've failed to succeed — to keep them here for a longer period of time.

The College of Physicians and Surgeons has, if I'm not mistaken, eight physicians on the board. Those physicians will come from a wide variety of practices and backgrounds. The physicians on the board are quite aware of the circumstances in the province. In other words as you'd described it earlier, we rely heavily on foreign-trained physicians. I think fully 55 per cent of physicians in Saskatchewan today are foreign trained. And we have done a number of things now in recognizing that with regards to settlement of physicians and their families when they get here. We've recently just in the last year announced an international medical program through the University of Saskatchewan to assist families in getting settled here when they come to Canada, and to work with them to ensure that there is less pressure and less stress to assure them of having better ability to pass both the national and the CAPE exams set by the physician community.

But it is a challenge for us and for the college. But indeed we rely on the college to determine the educational credentials of an individual who would then be eligible for licensing in the province of Saskatchewan.

Mr. McMorris: — I don't know if that really got to the question that I asked you. I realize that we rely extremely heavily on foreign-trained doctors. And you know that for the doctor shortage, I was interested and I would be interested to know how you came up with the number that we're 82 physicians short right now. And you'd mentioned it in an earlier answer.

But if we seem to be so reliant on foreign-trained grads . . . And you know we can talk, and I do have some questions regarding CAPE and the Medical Council of Canada exam. But we've got a block of countries that we look at and accept credentials. I believe that Germany isn't one of them.

Does the department have any . . . And I don't know whether it's influence or do you ask the College of Physicians to expand the number of . . . and not just expand for the sake of greater numbers. But as long as the qualifications are equivalent, does the department have the ability to talk to the College of Physicians to look at expanding the number of countries in which we are so reliant on to import their grads?

Hon. Mr. Taylor: — I'll try to answer that to the best of my ability. I have to come back to the fact that the College of Physicians and Surgeons itself is best equipped to manage the issue and in fact to answer questions about how they establish their credentialing criteria. But that having been said, your

question was about Sask Health and the relationship. It was also about the way the college responds to certain things.

Saskatchewan Health, indeed myself as minister, have a very good working relationship with the College of Physicians and Surgeons. In fact I meet with the board at least twice a year to discuss matters of mutual interest, recognizing of course that to a certain extent these are discussions. The college has jurisdiction, and so when I meet with them and I talk about our activities with regards to recruitment and retention, it's up to them to take into account what to do with the type of information that I put on the table. But we are talking with the college, both the board members and the senior officials at the college, on a regular basis about matters of importance like this.

You specifically mentioned Germany, but you could have picked any number of countries out of the air or out of your notepad, but the college will review any application that comes forward regardless of where it comes from. They will on a case-by-case basis evaluate credentials as they are presented because indeed there could be specialists recruited or individual physicians recruited by regional health authorities through family doctors or specialists that are already practising within the region. And as a result when those applications come forward, there are certain things that are required. The national exam for example is one thing and, then secondly, recognizing the specific credentials for this province compared to others.

So a physician review panel, peer review of the individual, and the organization's review of the credentialing of that person from the school that they graduate from are all taken into account on an individual basis if an application comes forward.

Mr. McMorris: — Okay so I gather from your answer then, it's totally up to the college if they want to look at other jurisdictions. For example a GP [general practitioner], not you know a specialist, comes with a whole pile of credentials, and the college looks at him. And that person, he or she, and says yes they would be welcome. But as far as a GP, I mean we recruit a pile of GPs from South Africa. Why just South Africa? Why not some more from Germany? And is it . . . Not that I'm ever saying that this is a solution for our shortage in physicians is always relying on other countries to train a doctor so that we can import them, just like we don't like when people are poaching our nurses. But having said that, it's up to the college then which credentials they're going to look at and accept, completely, with no gentle persuasion from the department.

Hon. Mr. Taylor: — I can't speak for the college. Legally, jurisdictionally, it's up to the college to determine credentials. I respect that authority and the jurisdiction that they have. And how much they want to take our discussions about the need to fill shortages, you know, that's another matter. But the majority of the board are practising physicians. The college, the majority of the board of the College of Physicians and Surgeons are physicians. They are all aware of the stress that vacancies cause their colleagues, and I think they are as concerned about the shortages that exist as others are within this province.

You had questioned about the 82 number that I put out. Currently on the healthcareersinsask.ca, the regional health authorities post physician positions. And the number today is 82 that are posted. That's where that number comes from. There

are other physician positions that are not posted. That would include some private practices where individual doctors are simply recruiting individuals to practice with them in their private practice clinics or offices. But generally the regional health authorities are the recruitment centre, and that's what's posted today under the title physicians, 82.

Mr. McMorris: — Just a quick question on that. Then would that be all health authorities, including all 13 health authorities that would be listed there?

Hon. Mr. Taylor: — That is correct: the cancer agency, the health authorities and the cancer agency, yes.

Mr. McMorris: — Because I know we've asked before about, for example, the Saskatoon Health Authority and their projections on how many vacancies they have, you know, what's their optimal number. And they've never had those numbers. Those numbers aren't . . . They haven't been keeping track of that, and they're working on that. So I'm interested that you would say that that's all the health authorities because the Saskatoon Health Authority has never really come forward with, you know, their numbers like perhaps the Regina Qu'Appelle Health Authority has.

Hon. Mr. Taylor: — We've been working with the Saskatoon Regional Health Authority on this. The Saskatoon Regional Health Authority has begun — in fact they're probably well through a lot of the effort that they need to make — to do a complete physician inventory and projections. Obviously what is posted are simply the positions that they're currently recruiting for and that they're currently filling. But there is a considerable amount of activity with regards to program review and facility review in the Saskatoon Health Region. And along with that goes the review of physician needs.

So we should have — I don't know, maybe somebody will tell me — but we should have shortly the information from the Saskatoon Regional Health Authority with regards to their inventory, both current and planned. Let me take a moment to consult, and maybe I can give you an even fuller answer in just a moment.

I think the only thing I can add to this is, that to provide even additional credibility to the work that's being done, the Saskatoon Health Region has contracted an outside consulting company to work with them on this physician capacity review, and that work is currently being done. We've had no report provided to us at this point.

Mr. McMorris: — Continuing on the line of physicians and numbers, I was interested in the budget when it talks about increasing the number of seats next year by four at the College of Medicine. You know, looking at the different colleges across Canada, and our University of Saskatchewan is I guess tied you could say with Memorial University in Newfoundland-Labrador at 60 seats, and we're going to be moving up as they will be, but we're far below every other college of medicine in Canada. We've just had, you know, a short talk I guess, but over the amount of estimates, a long talk on physician recruitment because in rural Saskatchewan that's huge. I'm interested in how you came up with and how the department or you came up with — and I realize that it's post-secondary but the directive

would come from the Department of Health — how you would come up with four additional seats for the College of Physicians and . . . or for the College of Medicine, I mean, to put it from 60 to 64.

Hon. Mr. Taylor: — Let me just say that there was a great deal of discussion and consultation with regards to this whole planning process. At the end of the day, the government on budget day announced about 2,100 new seats across the board. We have a strong economy. We have an economy in this province that is creating vacancies, not just in medicine, but amongst welders and truck drivers and other, you know, many skilled components that make up our economy.

And so when government sits down and takes a look at the proposals that are being brought forward by Advanced Education and Employment — who have the responsibility for delivering on training seats, the total dollar value that's necessary to be able to support the training needs of a growing economy — Saskatchewan Health participates in this discussion, both as a department that is very interested in increased number of seats but also as a member of government recognizing that you have X number of resources available to you government-wide and they've got to be shared across a great number of sectors.

So Saskatchewan Health brought forward to the budget process a number of ideas and suggestions. Mostly we were supporting an increased number of seats in health professions that would include physicians and nurses and others. And at the end of the day, the package that came out indicated support over the next three years for about 5,600 seats totally across all sectors — an increase, over those three years, of nursing seats and of physicians, an increase of 12 which basically is 4, 4, and 4. And then in the out years, additional residency positions of 4, 4, and 4 to match those needs.

That having been said, we are all aware that as additional resources become available, whether it's further discussions with Ottawa on labour mobility agreements, labour training agreements, I should say, labour force training agreements, whether there are additional resources available to us, we will go back to first and foremost the Advanced Education and Employment people. They will consult with the College of Medicine, or in the case of nurses, with the College of Nursing and SIAST [Saskatchewan Institute of Applied Science and Technology] to address capacity issues — being the availability of instructors and that — to further increase the numbers that are available.

But based on the resources, the fiscal resources available to government at this point in time, we are supportive of the package that's been brought forward by Advanced Education and Employment. And you have opportunities to discuss with them their priorities and whatnot in their estimates.

But we recognize the Saskatchewan Medical Association had indicated that they wanted 20 seats over three years. We were able to negotiate and put in place 12 seats, given the resources we've got, and add to that the residency component of an additional 12 in the out years. It's what we could negotiate at this point in time. And we will continue to work with the Saskatchewan Medical Association and the others as future

resources become available.

Mr. McMorris: — I find that interesting. I know and, you know I imagine it's a battle to try and work the numbers out. And yes, you're right, there's a shortage in many different professional areas. Health seems to be, I would say topping the list. Yes, there's a shortage of truck drivers and there's a shortage of welders and there's a shortage of many different professions and skilled workers.

I question though, if I was to recruit I would far rather be recruiting truck drivers and welders from other countries than relying on keeping your health system going by relying on recruiting from other countries' doctors. And that's what we've got to.

I mean, right now if we don't continue to bring in . . . Because we do a good job, a fairly good job of recruiting. We don't do a very good job of retaining. And partially I believe that is because these people are coming to Canada, to Saskatchewan from a totally different environment. And they try it for a couple years and they move on.

I just really think that until we start training more of our own . . . And it's not that we have a shortage of qualified people wanting to get into med school. I mean, talking to the dean, we had over 200 people qualified — easily qualified — to attend any medical school, and especially ours here in Saskatchewan.

So we've gone from 60 to 64. We have more than enough smart people in Saskatchewan to fill many more seats. And not that I'm going to knock, you know, or say that we don't need more truck drivers or welders, but I hate to think that we're relying on foreign-trained grads to keep our health system going because frankly that's what we are, especially in rural Saskatchewan.

If we don't recruit more grads from other countries, places like Wakaw and Spiritwood don't stay open. And it's not an immediate fix, it absolutely isn't an immediate fix when we're looking at seven years to graduation, but until we start moving in that direction we're going to continue to face the problems. In fact they're going to get a whole lot worse according to all the experts. All the experts will say the same thing.

And it was a great opportunity. You say that the economy is growing, and I agree with you things are looking good. And so then to see our number of training seats only increase by four — I don't know what it's like around a cabinet table but I would say that whoever's in charge of welders and truck drivers got more seats than medicine and I think that's a shame. We need to increase those number of seats because otherwise the system, and especially in rural Saskatchewan, is not sustainable five years down the road.

Hon. Mr. Taylor: — I can't argue with much of your comments. I think that you and most people within Sask Health acknowledge and understand that the more Saskatchewan residents we can graduate, the better chances we are to have them available to work within the province. We recognize that with nurses and with technologists, pharmacists, others within the health care profession.

It is a matter of resources available. It's a matter of trade-offs

on occasion, and it's a matter of capacity. And we think that the capacity at the College of Medicine can be pushed somewhat as well. So this is certainly an evolving area of government and resources. We have announced what we felt we were capable of delivering with the resources we had available to us. As additional resources become available, we will continue our discussions with the College of Medicine. These will not be the last seats that we announce but they're all that we can announce at this point given the dollars that are available to us.

So I accept the premise of the argument. I acknowledge that there is a will to move forward beyond where we are today, but I support the decision that government collectively has made to allocate the resources available today.

Mr. McMorris: — I guess maybe in closing because we have a number, we have three Bills to go through too . . . [inaudible interjection] . . . Okay, two or three Bills to go through this afternoon and I don't have a lot of questions on those Bills, but I . . . So maybe we'll just extend this portion and I'll make sure we get through the Bills by 5 o'clock.

I had said earlier that, you know, and I mean I think everybody in the medical field were a little disappointed at only increasing by four seats. And I've heard the minister's answer for that and he accepts the government's position. And if opposition votes against the budget that only increases by four, I think you'd understand why then because you accept the premise that we cannot continue a medical system the way we are with only increasing by — I'm not very good at math so I won't use the percentage — by 4 seats over 60. You know that's a huge issue.

We also have talked a little about the issue around retaining foreign-trained grads, and we may do a great job in recruiting but we don't do a very good job in retaining. And I have an example in an area that I represent, where there's a doctor that's been there for a long time, and a foreign-trained grad that has come in, and I don't know if there's anything — I don't think there's anything — that the department can do. I don't know, or maybe it's the health authority, but the conflict that a lot of these foreign-trained doctors seem to get into — and I don't know who's right or who's wrong — but quite often from what I've heard from foreign-trained doctors is, they become very frustrated with the system.

They don't feel the system, when they have complaints, reacts. But they often feel that it reacts if the complaint is about them as a foreign-trained doctor. But if they have a complaint about a doctor that has been practising in an area for a number of years, those aren't nearly as seen as well-founded.

I guess an easy question then will be: what are we doing to better retain the foreign-trained doctors that we have? Because, you know, I think and I've heard from the minister's mouth before and I would agree, that it's very frustrating when you see provinces come and take our nurses. But we seem to have no problem in relying on foreign-trained doctors to keep our health care system going. And it must be very frustrating for those countries that have put the money in to train their own citizens, only to have them leave to countries like ours and provinces like ours.

So you know, I use one example of where there is conflict —

and I don't know if there is anything that the department or the regional health authority can do — but I know what is going to happen there is that the foreign-trained doctor is going to be leaving not very far down the road, I don't think. I think he's put up his fight, and I think he's frustrated and looking to move on.

So what is the department . . . You know, I know there is initiatives to retain the foreign-trained doctors. Maybe you can mention some of those and what happens when there is a just a real conflict between doctors. Is there anything that can be done?

Hon. Mr. Taylor: — Thanks very much. I appreciate the, almost the softball lob you threw me there because there are indeed a number of programs. And we've concentrated on this effort actually quite a bit because it is a challenge to us in the province with 55 per cent of our current physicians being international medical graduates. I mentioned earlier the program that's designed to help IMGs, or internationally medical trained graduates, deal with the CAPE evaluation. And we have a program in place to assist those physicians work through that.

But in addition to that, we have initiated a number of other programs, one of which is the internationally educated health professionals initiatives, IEHPS. This provides a couple of million dollars over about a five-year period to assist in analyzing barriers that international educated health professionals have, and approximately half a million dollars is being used to enhance the assessment process to further assist them.

We also have the IMG, or international medical graduate orientation initiative. This is one of the things I referred to earlier as well. In conjunction with the College of Medicine, the college of physicians and services, we've all collaborated to create an orientation program for IMGs in the province. This includes two annual conferences whereby international medical graduates can meet to discuss barriers to their own work. We've funded these initiatives.

And I also want to add, because I think it's important, we have now four dedicated IMG seats at the College of Medicine to ensure that international medical graduates who want to upgrade their skills and enhance their skill sets, whether it's moving into internal medicine or general surgery or obstetrics, an international medical graduate has access to College of Medicine seats to assist them in that regard.

In terms of retention initiatives, we have negotiated as part of our contract with the SMA [Saskatchewan Medical Association] a number of retention initiatives primarily in the rural area to benefit IMGs. And these would include: a family medicine residency bursary program, a rural practice establishment grant, a regional practice establishment grant, undergraduate medical student bursary program, rural practice enhancement training program, specialist re-entry program, rural emergency care continuing medical education program, rural travel assistance program, rural extended leave program.

In actual fact, our total package of recruitment and retention initiatives that have a significant rural component to them, but the total package is almost \$29 million that we've negotiated

with the SMA to provide physicians practising in Saskatchewan — and obviously 55 per cent of them in rural Saskatchewan — with a reason to stay here, to ensure that Saskatchewan remains competitive with other jurisdictions.

Mr. McMorris: — A number of those initiatives, are they new? How long . . . I mean I don't expect a timeline on every one, but are we looking at a lot of these initiatives as being the last year or two?

Hon. Mr. Taylor: — Well the most recent contract was just negotiated 12 months ago and is in place till 2009. Some of the dollar values might have changed. The original contract was negotiated — just a moment — 2002 and just prior to that were the original negotiations with regards to these. So it's not that long ago, just before the last general provincial election.

And oh, we do have a new initiative that's in this particular agreement and that's information technology, ensuring that physicians have the ability to move on the electronic medical record within their own offices to ensure that they have the capacity to work with the electronic health record as Saskatchewan brings it in to prescription drugs, laboratory activity, diagnostic testing, and the health facilities across the province.

Mr. McMorris: — Well it's interesting. There certainly are a lot of programs. I guess you wonder about the effectiveness when you see the number of doctors in the revolving door. I mean every community's gone through it. Communities that hang on to, or the doctor stays in that community for five, eight, ten years are fortunate, because quite often it's only two or three years.

I guess my question would be: it was the softball that you have all these programs, but my question is, is are you winning? And I think the answer is no. If it's a ball game analogy, that are we keeping the doctors here — and we're not doing a very good job of that — so do you think from your estimation that we're hitting the mark?

We have done not very well in retention, and I know some of these programs may be newer, but it seems like we haven't done a very good job. Now is it the program or is it sometimes the doctors are coming here just expecting this is a jumping-off point to go somewhere else?

Hon. Mr. Taylor: — Well I don't think so, and actually our record speaks better than you are giving us credit for. Since March 2002, we've got 7.4 per cent more physicians practising in the province than we did at that time. So we are actually increasing the number of physicians in the province. That having been said, we are also aware that a lot of the new graduates, or newly recruited physicians, are not prepared to work in solo practices or even in two-person practices in rural Saskatchewan, primarily because of the on-call and the lack of individual quality of life that they will engage in.

When you and I were young, we had communities where there was a single doctor who worked 365 days a year and made house calls — at least when I was young. We don't have those physicians any more.

The nature of the practice has changed over the years and in rural Saskatchewan we have been reliant in the past on a lot of single or two-physician practices, and those types of practices are becoming very difficult to recruit to. That's why the primary care initiative is receiving a look, not only in Saskatchewan, but on a national basis.

So we are increasing the number of physicians coming into the province. We are seeing a change in the way in which practice is occurring. We are trying to evolve as quickly as we can to ensure that the public has the care that they deserve, and that means a multi-disciplinary approach, in some cases including paramedics and ambulance personnel, practical nurses, and a greater use of scope of practice for all of those who are in the health care field.

Mr. McMorris: — I think that because of the time and my colleague from Weyburn-Big Muddy would like to ask a few questions, I think that's all I have for now. And I look forward to next week where I think all my colleagues will be questioned out and then maybe I'll have the whole time myself.

The Chair: — Mr. Duncan.

Mr. Duncan: — Thank you, Madam Chair. Good afternoon, Mr. Minister, and to your officials. Mr. Minister, I was wondering if you are aware of the announcement by the Sun Country Health Region last week to suspend maternity services at the Weyburn hospital.

Hon. Mr. Taylor: — Yes I am.

Mr. Duncan: — I am led to believe or it's my understanding that the region is saying that it's for the month of June. How confident are you in that these services will be returning after this summer, later this summer and into the fall?

Hon. Mr. Taylor: — I am very confident actually because the temporary closure of the obstetrics unit is a management issue first and foremost — managing holidays, the normal summer slowdown, and the basic capacity in place. It's hospital-wide, where you've got physicians in the emergency room that might need to be on call for emergency Cesarean sections, that sort of thing. So if there are a reduction in summer hours in the emergency rooms it will have an effect on the obstetrics unit and additional summer hour considerations there.

I believe the regional health authority is managing this issue as conservatively as they can to ensure that people will be able to have care without a great deal of complications. I should add that I've been informed that there is still capacity within the Weyburn hospital to deal with emergency deliveries, but those planned deliveries will now be directed to either Regina or Estevan.

Mr. Duncan: — Just so I'm clear on that, for the month of . . . And my understanding is that it's only for the month of June. You might correct me on that. But for the temporary suspension of these services, planned deliveries, people are being advised that they'll need to either go to Regina or Estevan. But in an emergency situation, a baby could be delivered at the Weyburn Hospital. Is that correct?

Hon. Mr. Taylor: — That's correct. The emergency circumstances will be there, but in order to ensure that we can safely prepare for those emergencies, we want to make sure that the hospital isn't at capacity in other manners. So it's a management decision to ensure quality of care for those requiring emergency services.

Mr. Duncan: — Okay. I'm glad to hear that you're confident that these services will be returning. I know there was a lot of concern and a lot of rumour going around that this temporary suspension will lead into, will become permanent. Is it — now perhaps I should be directing this towards the regional health authority — but is it an issue mainly of staffing over the summer holidays in terms of juggling people's holiday schedules both on the nursing and the doctors side?

Hon. Mr. Taylor: — Yes, it's basically system-wide, trying to manage the human resources in all of the units and concentrating and ensuring that the emergency room, the emergency wards, and the subsequent admissions that come about as a result of emergency room activity are able to be handled during what is considered — sometimes referred to — as summer slowdown in facilities.

Mr. Duncan: — It was my understanding as well that it was mainly a staffing issue. But I would say just for your information, and, you know, you can do what you will with this — and I will be letting Mr. Tant and the members of the board know this — but there were also concerns for people that had recently had their baby delivered in the Weyburn hospital. There were some concerns over the actual delivery room and some of the, I guess, the condition of the room. So I would just pass that along to you and I thank you for your answers this afternoon.

Hon. Mr. Taylor: — Thank you very much.

The Chair: — Seeing no further questions, thank the minister and his officials but don't go away because we have your Bills up. And the first Bill up before the committee is The Paramedics Act.

Bill No. 8 — The Paramedics Act

Clause 1

The Chair: — So welcome back. If you want to just make any comments, Mr. Minister, on Bill No. 8, The Paramedics Act before we start moving through? We're going to vote it off actually.

Hon. Mr. Taylor: — In the interests of time I'll just prepare to answer any questions.

The Chair: — Questions? Mr. McMorris.

Mr. McMorris: — Yes, I'll have a couple of questions, I guess, seeing that there is no opening statement and we have a bit of time. This paramedics Act, it's been a long time in the making, roughly about 10 years. Can you tell me what has been the holdup? And why has it come in front of us in the year 2007 when there's certainly been a call for it for many years prior?

Hon. Mr. Taylor: — I think I'm going to call on our director of community hospitals and emergency services, acute and emergency services branch, Mr. Patrick O'Byrne, to help with answering some of these questions. Mr. O'Byrne has been very actively engaged in the development of the Act. And again in the interests of time to make sure that it's not the minister who tends to go on and on about these things, and we can simplify it. And if I have anything to add, I will. Mr. O'Byrne.

Mr. O'Byrne: — The process of developing the legislation began through consultations with the stakeholders in 2000 and proceeded to the beginning of the drafting of the legislation in 2002. As we moved along the process of developing the legislation, there were some stakeholders, particularly the firefighters — the Saskatchewan chiefs of firefighters and the Saskatchewan Professional Fire Fighters Association — had some concerns about content and their being regulated by the Bill.

Through a consultative process with these interest groups, we've been able to gain a consensus among the Saskatchewan Medical Association, the paramedics, the SEMSA [Saskatchewan Emergency Medical Services Association] members, and the firefighters, and all of these parties are now interested in proceeding with this legislation. And yes, it has taken some time to get everyone on board, but I think this has been very well-spent time, and we've gathered a consensus, which is often difficult in health care.

Mr. McMorris: — Well that's interesting because it started . . . Well the start of the legislation was seven years ago, and everyone was on board. What were the concerns then voiced by the, for example, the fire chiefs or the professional fire fighters association, and how has that been rectified to see the Bill go forward now?

Mr. O'Byrne: — The firefighters were concerned that they were being regulated by the emergency medical technicians, by the paramedics, without their involvement in the regulatory process. However a series of meetings was held with the firefighters, and now we've consolidated our bylaws.

It is very unusual for the regulations that follow the legislation to be completed before the legislation actually proceeds. But in this case actually, the regulations, the subsequent regulations for the Act are already completed and agreed upon, and these regulations ensure that the firefighters have an active role in the administration of the Saskatchewan College of Paramedics.

Mr. McMorris: — Yes, that is . . . And I don't know. I mean I can't draw on a lot of experience from Bills that have passed, but that is unusual then to have the regulations written before the legislation is passed. But I guess in order to find an agreement, that was what was necessary, I take it then.

Mr. O'Byrne: — Yes.

Mr. McMorris: — Okay. I don't think I have a whole lot more questions on this. That's fine.

The Chair: — Seeing no further questions then Bill No. 8, The Paramedics Act, short title. Is that agreed?

Some Hon. Members: — Agreed.

[Clause 1 agreed to.]

[Clauses 2 to 57 inclusive agreed to.]

The Chair: — An Act respecting Paramedics and making consequential amendments to other Acts, Her Majesty, by and with the advice and consent of the Legislative Assembly of Saskatchewan, enacts as follows: The Paramedics Act. Could I have a member move that we report this Bill without amendment?

Mr. Prebble: — Madam Chair, I'll move that the committee report the Bill without amendment.

The Chair: — Is that agreed?

Some Hon. Members: — Agreed.

The Chair: — We've agreed that the Bill is as we've gone through it as agreed, and we'll report it to the Assembly without amendment. Thank you.

Bill No. 61 — The Vital Statistics Act, 2007

Clause 1

The Chair: — The next item up for consideration is Bill No. 61, The Vital Statistics Act, 2007. Are there any questions of this Act or any statements the minister wants to make?

Hon. Mr. Taylor: — Well I should introduce two people that have not previously been introduced around this table. I was saving them specifically for this time on our agenda. I'd like you to welcome to the committee and my table Mr. Ronn Wallace, director of vital statistics and health registration branch; and next to him, Lian Schwaan, the department's legal counsel; both of whom have been instrumental in the developments of The Vital Statistics Act and the consequential amendments that come later.

The Chair: — Any questions?

Mr. McMorris: — I just have one or two.

The Chair: — Mr. McMorris.

Mr. McMorris: — Thanks. I just have one or two. Are there any financial ramifications, I mean, when to change over . . . So that I understand roughly what the Bill is all about and it's, you know, it's you know being able to electronically transmit and transfer. Are there any financial ramifications of the Bill?

Hon. Mr. Taylor: — I think we'll go straight to Ronn to answer that question.

Mr. Wallace: — Yes, in response to the question, there is some development work in terms of creating the electronic interface with the service providers. In fact we have already developed the death registration module, so the cost has already been incurred. It was not a large cost already because the department has experience in these types of linkages with other areas.

Mr. McMorris: — I also see that there's a proposed amendment to the Bill. Could I get some explanation as to why that amendment is put forward?

Mr. Wallace: — Basically what had happened was when we were putting the final package of the Bill together — I believe it was clause 24(3) — in fact an error occurred where it was from an earlier draft of the legislation; that is not what we wanted it to be. We caught the error unfortunately after the Bill had moved forward and therefore brought in the House amendment.

Effectively what was going to happen was we would be legislating what name a person could use from their hyphenated compound name. That was not our intent. We were not looking to change the way the current legislation is set up which allows a parent to choose either of their names for use in the child's surname.

Mr. McMorris: — Yes, and could you give an example of that then for . . .

Mr. Wallace: — Sure. The way it was originally worded in subsection 3, if you had a name like Smith-Jones and you wanted to give one of those names to your child, the way it was set up was you would have to basically take the name Jones because it alphabetically preceded Smith. So you had no say. The legislation stipulated it had to be alphabetic. That was not intended. So with the name Smith-Jones, you have the choice of either the Smith or the Jones that can be taken.

Mr. McMorris: — Okay. I don't think I have any further questions. I'm just surprised we didn't catch that as I went through the Bill earlier. But anyway I have no other questions.

The Chair: — Ms. Crofford.

Ms. Crofford: — To facilitate that change.

The Chair: — We'll do that when we come to the clause by clause.

Ms. Crofford: — Okay, when we come to the clause by clause. Then I will be patient in my motion.

The Chair: — Seeing no further questions, then we'll go to the Bill itself. And it also is an extensive Bill with 116 clauses, and it is divided into parts. So if the committee would agree, we'll vote it off in parts. And part 1 is preliminary matters which includes the short title. Is that agreed?

Some Hon. Members: — Agreed.

[Clause 1 agreed to.]

[Clauses 2 to 23 inclusive agreed to.]

Clause 24

The Chair: — Now we're at clause 24 which Ms. Crofford has an amendment to propose.

Ms. Crofford: — And, Madam Chair, on clause 24 of the printed Bill, the motion is to:

Amend Clause 24 of the printed Bill by striking out subsection (3) and substituting the following:

“(3) If more than one parent completes a statement and one or more of the parents has a hyphenated or a combined surname, only one of the names in a parent's hyphenated or combined surname is to be used in the surname of the child”.

I so move.

The Chair: — Okay. Any discussion on the amendment? Seeing none, all in favour of the amendment as read? Agreed?

Some Hon. Members: — Agreed.

The Chair: — Then the clause as amended, clause 24 as amended, is that agreed?

Some Hon. Members: — Agreed.

[Clause 24 as amended agreed to.]

[Clauses 25 to 116 inclusive agreed to.]

The Chair: — Then Her Majesty, by and with the advice and consent of the Legislative Assembly of Saskatchewan, enacts as follows: The Vital Statistics Amendment Act. Could I have a member move that we approve this Bill as amended? Mr. Borgerson.

Mr. Borgerson: — I will so move, Madam Chair.

The Chair: — Thank you. All in favour?

Some Hon. Members: — Agreed.

The Chair: — Agreed. Then we also need someone to move that we report the Bill to the legislature as amended, with amendments. Mr. Prebble.

Mr. Prebble: — I'll move we report the Bill with amendments to the legislature.

The Chair: — And is that agreed?

Some Hon. Members: — Agreed.

The Chair: — Agreed.

Bill No. 62 — The Vital Statistics Consequential Amendment Act, 2007/Loi de 2007 portant modifications corrélatives à la loi intitulée The Vital Statistics Act, 2007

The Chair: — Okay. The next one up then is Bill 62, The Vital Statistics Consequential Amendment Act. Any questions on that one? Seeing none, then short title, The Vital Statistics Consequential Amendment Act, 2007 is that agreed?

Some Hon. Members: — Agreed.

The Chair: — Agreed.

[Clauses 1 to 6 inclusive agreed to.]

The Chair: — So all in favour of the Bill? We have a member move that. Mr. Borgerson. Thank you. All in favour then?

Some Hon. Members: — Agreed.

The Chair: — Agreed. Now we need a motion to report this Bill without amendment. Mr. Prebble would like to do that.

Mr. Prebble: — I move that we report Bill No. 62 without amendment.

The Chair: — Thank you. All in favour?

Some Hon. Members: — Agreed.

The Chair: — Agreed. Well and we're right on time, 5 o'clock. Thank you to the minister, the committee members, and we're now recessed until 7.

[The committee recessed for a period of time.]

**General Revenue Fund
Learning
Vote 5**

Subvote (LR01)

The Chair: — Everybody's ready here, I think. Good evening and welcome to the Human Services Committee meeting. Our first item tonight on the agenda is the consideration of estimates for the Department of Learning, which is on page 117 of your budget book and it's vote 5. The minister has been here before and so I don't think you need to introduce a whole bunch of people, but you can if you want. And if you have anything you want to say, you can start off the evening by giving us any of that information.

Hon. Ms. Higgins: — Well, Madam Chair, I'm sure there's a fair number of questions, so what I will do is introduce the officials that are here with me this evening, and then we can go right into questions which would probably be a good use of our time.

With me this evening is, to my right, Ms. Wynne Young, deputy minister of Learning. To my left is Mr. Darren McKee, assistant deputy minister of Learning. And sitting behind us in various spots is Ms. Karen Allen, executive director of corporate services; Mr. David Tulloch, director, financial planning and management; Ms. Lois Zelmer, executive director, early learning and childcare; Ms. Valerie Lusk, executive director, education finance and facilities; Mr. David Steele, consultant, education finance and facilities; Ms. Edith Nagy, director, policy and evaluation; Mr. David Barnard, executive director, Teachers' Superannuation Commission; and Ms. Margaret Ball, director of facilities.

And with that, Madam Chair, we can turn it over for questions.

The Chair: — Thank you. Mr. Gantfoer.

Mr. Gantfoer: — Thank you very much, Madam Chair. And

welcome this evening, Madam Minister, and to all of the officials that have joined us this evening for, I believe, an hour and a half of time.

What we'd like to accomplish this evening is a number of members have various issues that they would like to raise with the department, and we'll do that first. And then I would like to take the time remaining to talk somewhat about budgeting and the delightful little nuances in the funding manual that everybody loves to read. And then I also would like to tonight make sure that we have time to deal with the issue that has been raised by Mr. Kirk Kelln, both with myself and with the department. So that's the evening. So, Madam Chairman, I would like to invite members.

The Chair: — Ms. Harpauer.

Ms. Harpauer: — Thank you, Madam Chair, and welcome to the officials as well. The issue that I would like to talk about this evening is the unique situation of the Humboldt Collegiate. It is the only high school in Humboldt and is in a unique governance situation of being shared by both the Catholic and the public school divisions.

With the amalgamating of the school divisions, my understanding is that the minister at that time told the school divisions that it couldn't remain under that authority and needed to be moved into either the Catholic school division or the public school division. There was a public meeting held last year and there was another public meeting hosted by the Horizon School Division a couple of weeks ago. At both of those public meetings, the message was fairly loud and clear — if it's not broken, why fix it? So my question initially would be why the minister feels that this governance or management situation needs to be changed.

Hon. Ms. Higgins: — What I will do, I'll make a couple of comments, Ms. Harpauer, and then what I will do is turn it over to the deputy to give you a more detailed answer. I think all of us would acknowledge that the Humboldt high school is a unique situation and has worked well over the years, and I've had a number of briefings on it and how this is progressing.

I think it would be preferable for all of us to reach some kind of an agreement to maintain the services that are there and my understanding is that's the direction hopefully the divisions will, the path they'll travel and be able to put together an agreement that's satisfactory. So what I will do, I don't have an update as to exactly where it is right now, so I will turn it over to Wynne to give you a couple more comments on it.

Ms. Young: — Thank you. Yes, as the minister said, it is a unique situation. There isn't anything in the province like it. There was actually a notice given almost a year ago by the Horizon School Division to end the arrangement. And at that point several months went by when they weren't particularly coming together to deal with it.

In the recent past couple of months, both school divisions have approached us and each other around their interest to find some sort of resolution around this. And it is my understanding that . . . I mean it is a decision they have to come together to decide on how to manage it. Over the past I think week or two, it's my

understanding that the two boards have come together to meet and discuss this issue. And my understanding is that they are going to be continuing discussing. We have supported them in this by the support of a facilitator to help those discussions through and they have asked us to stay back from those discussions as they work them through.

What they did tell me though was they were optimistic that something could be reached because as you know, June is the . . . It's a year's notice date, and June will be the end of the agreement. And so I think that they certainly are trying for something. I can't tell you what it might look like but I can tell you that both of the school divisions were quite interested in reaching a solution.

Ms. Harpauer: — I know that the school divisions are working very, very hard at this and in trying to come with a solution. Would there be, if there isn't a common ground agreed upon, would it be possible, is it even a consideration to continue with a shared management of the collegiate?

Ms. Young: — It's a bit difficult the way that it stands now if there isn't an agreement past June. If they mutually agreed that they were close but they couldn't, you know, they weren't quite there yet, we could continue on. They certainly have the department's support for understanding that it's a unique situation and it probably will take a unique agreement to get there. So we are trying to be open and flexible with it because there isn't another situation that's like this in the province. But I guess all I can say is what they said to me so far. And I am encouraged that they are working towards a solution.

Ms. Harpauer: — I know the minister can appreciate and the deputy minister can appreciate as well that this particular community of Humboldt has had a division within the community due to the recent situation with St. Elizabeth's Hospital, and that has divided the community quite seriously. So that situation, a situation that may have been fairly easy to resolve will now have resistance just because of a carry-over of hard feelings or whatever over the authority of the St. Elizabeth's Hospital.

If necessary, will the deadline be extended?

Ms. Young: — The deadline is between the two divisions, not the department, so I'm not able to speak to that. Again, we are willing to be flexible if there is progress but not quite completion. But the actual agreement or notice is from one school division to the other. So they would have to mutually agree to manage it.

Ms. Harpauer: — What would the process be if there is no, like if there isn't an agreement that can be met? What's plan B for the department? Because the direction came from the government or from the department that the authority of this particularly unique situation had to be changed. So is the department prepared with a plan B if the two school divisions cannot come to an agreement?

Hon. Ms. Higgins: — I think everyone realizes that there's been a number of things happen in Humboldt that have caused some consternation amongst the citizens, and no one wants to go there again. And I'm sure the school divisions are well

aware of that and the people that are involved are well aware of that.

And in any of the comments that I've got from Humboldt, they talk about the high school. It's just Humboldt high school. They don't talk about which division it is attached to or affiliated with. You know, it's the way it's viewed in the community. And I think both school divisions, from every indication that we have got, are working at achieving an agreement that can continue on. And we will, as the deputy minister has said, we will be flexible and try and facilitate that however we can.

Ms. Harpauer: — The reason why the community refers to it as the high school is because it's the only one. So that you know, there's two Catholic elementary schools, one public elementary school, so they get named. But there is only one high school.

If the proposal or the agreement between the two school divisions is to continue with a joint board, will the department be prepared to accept that?

Hon. Ms. Higgins: — Of course.

Ms. Harpauer: — Thanks. That's all my questions on this. Thank you very much.

The Chair: — Mr. Duncan.

Mr. Duncan: — Thank you, Madam Chair. Good evening, Madam Minister, and to your officials.

Madam Minister, you may recall in I believe it was late January, you had a chance to tour the Family Place in Weyburn and meet with the board and with some parents and the staff and of course the children. I'm wondering if there's going to be any new announcements coming out of Sask Learning on top of the grant that is already, that already comes to the mini-go program.

Hon. Ms. Higgins: — You bring everything you can but there's always something that you've missed. So we'll look for a briefing note. If you want to go on to the next question, we'll go through and look for the briefing note, okay, or do an updated information.

Mr. Duncan: — Okay. Well from the most recent board meeting that the Family Place had in discussing the upcoming budget, I guess where the board is, is going on the assumption that the grant would be in place. And there's also — as you would know — there's agreements with the local school boards about tuition, per-child tuition and those sorts of things.

I guess really what the question is, and what I'm asking is, you've had a chance to tour the program and to meet with the people involved. From your perspective of somebody in government, where do we go next with this program in terms of helping to ease the financial burden that — maybe burden's probably not the right word — but the financial difficulties that this organization is incurring? It seems that, and I think this was expressed to you during your visit, that when you talk to different levels or different departments of government, it seems like everybody points the finger in the direction of

somebody else.

And it just is getting to the point where the amount of fundraising — and I think the board and the parents spoke to you about this — the amount of fundraising that is being required to continue this program is overwhelming. And we know and we're confident that the community and the area will come through again. But it just gets to the point where you're, you know, when you're fishing from the same hole and you're wondering if the people are going to respond the same way.

And I think everybody that comes through the program just marvel at what is being accomplished with this program and how well these children are doing as they enter the school system. And it just, it's to the point where — sorry for rambling on — but it's to the point where there's a concern that everybody sees how well this program is doing and how good it is for these children, but when it comes to funding it, every year it's up in the air.

Hon. Ms. Higgins: — Well I've been to Family Place twice, once when it was in the Souris Valley, toured it there, and then the day that I was invited down and you were there at the facility and we had a number of meetings with staff and board members and some of the parents that were involved.

It's a interesting place. I mean it's a great place. It's great to see the kids. It's great to see the community involvement. And I guess when you say kind of moved from here to there, and what to apply for, and where do you go next, I know both school divisions in Weyburn are involved in helping with programming plus also financial support whether, I think, it's in through wages is the support that they do. So I think all the connects have been made.

The other piece through the Department of Learning would be through child care. And what we would do is subsidize licensed child care. So while this doesn't fall into that area, I don't know whether it's a direction they would be looking at expanding. It's a pretty unique program. And the difficulty is the programs that you fund and the resources that you have, what you do in one place you need to do in other places in the province also. So it's always that balancing act.

And I know the school divisions, and I was really pleased to see a number of . . . Well there was the principal — and I apologize I have forgotten his name — talking about the transition into the school system and how much better the children did coming out of Family Place. So everyone we met speaks highly of the programming and the people that are involved and the benefits.

Where do you go next? I guess it's, what are we looking for and what is The Family Place looking at? That's the difficulty. I can't offer you any easy solutions, sorry.

Mr. Duncan: — Perhaps some additional money though you could offer? No, I appreciate your comments and I think that this is something that, you know, the board is grappling with at this point, and you know this.

And you're right, though. The community and the area has, you know, really stepped up. In fact you know there's fundraisers going on all the time. I think they have me pegged in at the

co-op on Saturday for three hours selling raffle tickets. So definitely the community . . . And when you talk to teachers that see the results for, you know, when these kids go through this program and enter the school system.

So I guess that's the end of my questions. But I would just, you know if I could leave with, you know one thing with you, that we're certainly looking for more money. And if there's anything that comes out of the budget, that would be, on top of what Learning already provides because we're, you know, we certainly are aware of that and very appreciative of the funding that we do receive.

But it's just a terrific program and there's, as you would have heard on your tour, there's so many different communities and groups from across the province and from out . . . I mean there was a group from, I can't remember where they were from but from the United States that came and toured because of the things that they've heard.

And it would just be a shame if, as other communities are trying to replicate this program, and if we're forevermore, we're figuring out how to mothball it. So I would just leave that with you and I appreciate your answers tonight. Thank you.

Hon. Ms. Higgins: — Thank you.

The Chair: — Ms. Heppner.

Ms. Heppner: — Thank you, Madam Chair. I have a few questions on the daycare spaces that are called for in the recent budget. I was wondering first of all, do you have a current breakdown of the not-for-profit and private daycare facilities operating in the province?

Hon. Ms. Higgins: — Right across the province of Saskatchewan, there is 179 licensed child care centres that have 6,548 spaces, and they are all operated by non-profit corporations or co-operatives. And there are 275 individuals licensed to care, for a total of 2,294 children in family child care homes.

Some provinces will add in their pre-K [pre-kindergarten] and kindergarten, is my understanding, but we never have in the province of Saskatchewan. We've always just . . .

Ms. Heppner: — This is just pure daycare?

Hon. Ms. Higgins: — Yes, pure daycare.

Ms. Heppner: — The money that is allotted in the '07-08 budget, I think, calls for 500 daycare spaces. I was wondering how that money is going to be delivered and how those 500 spaces are going to be created.

Hon. Ms. Higgins: — What we do each year, we have priorities and where the needs are highest or where demand is strong, so what we are looking for is spaces being allocated to children zero to six years of age, and the priorities include school-linked services, support for immigrant families, northern and rural development, non-standard hours of services, and links to post-secondary education.

We currently have a list of spaces that have been requested right across the province, so what we will do is go through the list. Are they ready to go? Is it, you know, down the line, just in the process? So what we will do is go through the list and we'll be probably be announcing within about a month where the 500-plus spaces will go.

Ms. Heppner: — So is the money then, is it going to capital costs? Or for those institutions that already have the space, does it go towards hiring more workers so they can take more kids in? Or is it a combination of both?

Hon. Ms. Higgins: — A combination, yes. Breakdown, oh here, just a sec, I will get . . . 1.4 million. Of the 8.2 million in new investment in ELCC [early learning and child care], 1.4 million goes to 500 additional licensed child care spaces, and that will build on in the Child Care Saskatchewan. And what was developed there was 1,600 new spaces over the last four years.

731,000 of the new funding will go to school divisions for 15 targeted pre-kindergarten programs for vulnerable four-year-olds, and that will bring our total pre-K programs to 134. 1.4 million in supports for licensed family child care homes including 1.2 million for nutrition grants, 200,000 for start-up grants and alternate caregiver arrangements.

2.5 million in capital funding for maintenance and renovation of existing child care infrastructure — that goes along with the 500 child care spaces because what we're finding is many are in older buildings that will need to be brought up to code and just to make the adjustments that are necessary or the renovations necessary.

Plus there's another 2.1 million that goes into a system-wide parenting/provider supports including an ELCC program guide, enhanced accessibility grants, and early childhood education tuition reimbursements for people that work in the sector to be able to return and upgrade to meet the qualifications that are out there. So we have to support the tuition costs.

And there will also be this year 3.4 million for ELCC that were commitments made in prior years and these are related to care worker wage lifts, Child Care Saskatchewan, KidsFirst, and supports for special needs children and teen parents.

And there is also . . . Oh I guess that's it. That's it for the ELCC money. So the 8.2 is new money this year and 3.4 is money that was previously committed that will come into effect this year.

Ms. Heppner: — I want to ask about the federal private member's Bill C-303 that's been introduced and my understanding is that it has the majority support in the House of Commons. And it seems to indicate that the federal government would regulate how daycare is delivered in each province. I know that the Northwest Territories, Nova Scotia, and Prince Edward Island made representations to the human resources committee in Ottawa and voiced their concerns. And I have letters written from Northwest Territories and PEI [Prince Edward Island] as well and their concern is that it's an infringement upon provincial jurisdiction. And I was wondering if your government had any concerns with Bill C-303.

Hon. Ms. Higgins: — Well I guess early on when we have had various discussions with the federal government on child care, that has been our contention too here in Saskatchewan, that Saskatchewan has a system of delivering child care spaces and the services that are needed.

We've put a great deal of time and effort working with stakeholders and people across the province to put in place a plan that will address our needs. Saskatchewan's very different than Ontario or British Columbia, and northern and rural areas need to have a different fix than a child care centre. I mean that just isn't appropriate in many areas. So we've put a lot of time and effort into this, many people have, and instead of reinventing the wheel, our comments to the federal government is, you know, if you have the restrictions or whatever criteria or wherever you wish to target the money, that's fine but we would be more comfortable if you would do it through the provincial government jurisdiction and support what we already have in place.

Ms. Heppner: — C-303 isn't a federal government Bill, though. It is an opposition Bill. So I'm wondering if you have voiced your concerns to the sponsor of the Bill who — I don't have the name in front of me — it's a federal NDP Member of Parliament. And I'm wondering if you have voiced this concern. And my other question, Quebec, in the draft Bill as it sits now, has an opt-out clause, and if you've requested the same for Saskatchewan considering our unique needs here.

Hon. Ms. Higgins: — I have not and I haven't spoken to Ms. Chow directly about the Bill.

Ms. Heppner: — Okay. I have one other quick set of questions. Many of my colleagues that represent rural constituencies are facing imminent school closures. My riding is not in the same position as it's growing. Our problem in our riding is that our schools are filling up faster than they're being built. I was talking to a school board member a couple of weeks ago and the one school's operating at 136 per cent. I'm sorry I can't tell you off the top of my head which school it is, but their kids are in desks in hallways which obviously is not the optimum learning environment.

And it was his understanding that capital funding for an additional, I believe it was, a junior high school — that's the age group which is growing — a junior high school in Warman, Martensville and then upgrades to a school in Duck Lake were at the top of the list if there was money in the budget. But there wasn't money in the budget and I'm wondering if there's a long-term plan to provide funding for the schools in that school division considering that they're full to capacity or beyond.

Ms. Young: — Thank you. We actually have quite an extensive system for assessing and prioritizing capital, both major capital which is the building of a whole new facility, or block capital. And you would know that in the past I think few weeks there was 30-some-odd block capital announcements given. In terms of major capital, which I think you are referring to, I'm going to get Margaret Ball, who is the director of facilities to just take you through this. And, in particular, if we can talk about — you said Duck Lake and Warman?

Ms. Heppner: — It was my understanding from the discussion

that I had that what the school board is looking at is junior highs for Warman and Martensville and then they had, it almost seems like a restructuring of the school in Duck Lake to include access for adult education and that sort of thing as well.

Ms. Ball: — We're in the process of reviewing all of the requests from school divisions right now. They were requested to send their major capital requests in to us by the end of February so that we could go through the process of reassessing all the requests in preparation for updating the major capital request list in June. And so we're in middle of that process right now.

Based on the 2006 list, the Duck Lake request is third in order of priority 2 category, and Warman is eighth in our priority 2 category. And so they're near the top of the list. But there are a number of health- and safety-related priorities that are in the priority 1 category that we'd need to address first.

We would be in a better position to respond in terms of potential timing around those projects in June when we update the list.

Ms. Heppner: — Great. Thanks.

The Chair: — Mr. Cheveldayoff.

Mr. Cheveldayoff: — Thank you, Madam Chair, and to you too, the minister and her officials. And thank you to the critic for giving me some time here to ask some questions.

I'd like to ask questions regarding the possible building of a school in the Arbor Creek and Willowgrove area of Saskatoon. It's something that I've been asking questions about since I became a member.

And it's really the reason why I am a member here, because the area that I represent is, if not the fastest growing area in Saskatchewan, amongst the fastest growing areas, and it created a new seat in this Legislative Assembly through redistribution because of the needs. And some of the very urgent needs right now regard learning facilities and a school for the Arbor Creek and Willowgrove area.

Can the minister outline for me of any discussions taken place recently with the greater Saskatoon Catholic Board or the Saskatoon Public Board? Can you give me any type of update on where this particular proposed facility is at right now?

Hon. Ms. Higgins: — I'll turn it over to Margaret. She will be able to give you more detailed information on the capital plan.

Mr. Cheveldayoff: — Okay. I'm aware of the category 1, about the health and safety, and the category 2 and where the school lies. But I'm just wondering if anything has been done in the last, say, year; any discussions that have taken place or any plans. I want to know what to tell the residents when they ask me what is happening with this school.

Ms. Ball: — In 2005 we had provided approval for the school divisions — both school divisions — to undertake a facility study around the planning for the northeast section of Saskatoon. And so both school divisions have done work

around that. They have submitted their proposed plans to us, and we have meetings set up within the next two weeks with both school divisions to go over those plans and see if we can reach sort of a mutual agreement as to what the next step should be. And then that will lead in again to our updating of the major capital list in June so that we'll have a better sense of where they fall on the list at that time.

Mr. Cheveldayoff: — Thank you. So there will be a new capital list coming out in June? I know last year you had various delays and I think it came out on December 1. But we're to expect a new list in June?

Ms. Ball: — Yes.

Mr. Cheveldayoff: — Does the minister have a breakdown of the \$18 million that is budgeted for, for school capital transfers in '07-08? Do you have a breakdown of where that's been spent and what money is yet to be allocated?

Hon. Ms. Higgins: — I've got everything, but just hang on. If you want to go on to another question and we'll get the list . . .

Mr. Cheveldayoff: — If you don't have it handy, if you could just undertake to get it to me before the end of session here, that would be quite acceptable, Minister.

Hon. Ms. Higgins: — We'll dig it out for you. So yes, if you want to carry on with something else, Ken.

Mr. Cheveldayoff: — Thank you, Minister, I appreciate that. My next question, I guess, was going to be to you is, if there was indeed any reason for hope for these individuals to hope for a school or to plan on a school . But I think that it's been answered in that there are ongoing discussions taking place. And would you consider it fair to say that there is hope for this area as far as a new capital construction taking place?

Hon. Ms. Higgins: — Well the facilities branch will continue to follow through with the discussions. And the list, as you're well aware, can always change depending on the needs that may arise with health and safety being top of the list and depending on the resources that are available.

Now you will know that this year and last year there was some extra money that was put in, advanced it because, with the cost of construction, the coordination is important to make sure that the resources are there to continue on with the projects. So this year we'll see a lot of projects finishing and then move on to continuing with the list as it sits and when it's released in June.

Mr. Cheveldayoff: — Thank you, Minister. Well I can tell you that constituents in my constituency in this particular area are getting somewhat frustrated because they have been fairly high and every year they seem to be moving up a little bit in the second category, but they still seem to be below the line where new construction will take place.

And as you know that people that are moving back to our province and wanting to locate here, especially those with young children, one of the first things they ask about when they are considering moving into an area is if there is a school there.

And in fact I had a call a couple of weeks ago from a single mother in Calgary who wants to move to this very area, to Arbor Creek and to Willowgrove. And she phoned me as the MLA [Member of the Legislative Assembly] for the area and asked me to, you know, asked me my opinion on whether we will get a school in this area seeing that it is one of the fastest growing areas of the province.

I can tell the minister and their officials that over 400 lots have been sold in this area. And if we, you know, give an average of one child per household — I know it's above that — but one child per household, you know, that's going to increase that need. The children right now are filtering into Father Robinson and to John G. Egnatoff. Some are being bused further now, but those two schools are the largest elementary schools in the province presently. So there is a concern.

But can the minister tell me what I should tell this individual from Calgary, this single mom that is looking at selling her house and coming to Saskatchewan and living mortgage free but wanting a school in her neighbourhood for her children?

Hon. Ms. Higgins: — Well what I can tell you is that their MLA will probably keep lobbying for a school in that area, and the discussions from the department will continue on with the school board because that's the process that we have. You will know that we have a well-defined system of assessing capital projects and how they move through the list.

Can I guarantee you something in a year or two years? I don't know because it depends on what other issues may arise and what other projects may come up. Because you will know space is one of the top determinants where schools go but also the health and safety issue and construction costs. Construction costs I think have been big in any area, so the concern is you need to make sure that the resources are there and that we are very diligent in our planning with the school divisions to make sure that the resources are there when we move ahead with any of these projects.

And Saskatoon's had a number of projects. A couple that are still on the go with two on the west side — two new schools on the west side that is going to be a community centre also by the planning and the comments that I've seen. So that's a pretty exciting project. And also the Centennial high school in Saskatoon has been a wonderful addition.

So I think there are many signs that Saskatoon school divisions are planning well and moving ahead with their plans. And I know that the department will continue to work with the divisions to make sure that we move ahead with all of our plans and get this done.

Mr. Cheveldayoff: — Thank you, Minister, for those comments. I am somewhat pleased that discussions are taking place. And to the answers that you've given here, and certainly, I hope that your department in their negotiations with the Saskatoon school boards that we'll have some positive news to tell the local residents and to tell people from Calgary that are looking or anywhere else if they're looking to move to Saskatchewan, that we will have a school in their neighbourhood.

Thanks to the minister. Thank you, Madam Chair. And thank you to Mr. Gantefoer as well.

The Chair: — Mr. Gantefoer.

Mr. Gantefoer: — Thank you very much. I think the member from Saskatoon is taking his leave with his comments and leaving us here to carry on.

Madam Minister, could you share with me how many school facilities there are in the province currently being operated by school divisions?

Hon. Ms. Higgins: — Active school registry — how's this — 676 schools with enrolment and that does not include approximately 81 First Nation schools that are in the province.

Mr. Gantefoer: — Okay. Thank you, Madam Minister. I know I've seen or heard somewhere — maybe from the school boards association — an estimation of how many I think billions of dollars that these facilities would represent in terms of a capital investment over the years by the province in these schools. And I'm wondering, when you talk about facilities — and listening to the discussion about a new school in the northwest of Saskatoon — does the department have a long-term plan for the replacement and refurbishment of many of these schools? Some of them I think were, you know, built in the '60s and '70s, and some of them are getting towards the end of their planned life, if you like.

Has the department gone through an exercise of kind of categorizing these 676 facilities as to the ones that perhaps are not going to be viable and will be closed and converted to other usages with the community? Perhaps there's various scenarios. And then for the ones that are clearly viable as learning centres, a long-term plan. I know that, I've heard tonight and I'm aware that there's discussion with the school departments and school boards and things of that nature. But I'm thinking, is there leadership being undertaken by the department for a long-range plan that'll address this whole facilities issue over the long haul?

Hon. Ms. Higgins: — Mr. Gantefoer, I think the Department of Learning has always had a good capital planning process, but this past year with the amalgamation of the school districts, and now that we're dealing with 28 instead of the larger number, and what we're looking at is a more updated overall plan. The department has hired a consultant to work with the school divisions to put in place a new plan looking at long-term planning for capital projects right across the divisions. So it's kind of going above and beyond where we have been before, but we're looking at the longer term and a more overall plan.

Mr. Gantefoer: — Minister, will that plan then address the refurbishment, replacement, all of those issues? And are you looking at a 10-year plan for the realization of that, or when we're talking long-term plan, where are we at? Are we going to have to increase the capital contributions that need to be made and budgeted for or where will we be in relative terms to where we are now?

Hon. Ms. Higgins: — Mr. Gantefoer, I guess one thing I do want to stress is this project is being done in conjunction with

the school divisions, who have the ultimate authority for delivering the services in the facilities within their divisions. So what we're looking at is working with the school divisions, looking at — it's a little bit beyond, or more comprehensive planning maybe that's been done in the past — looking at the changing demographics, the changing role of the schools, and also taking that view of long-range planning. So we're getting into this but it's going to be, I think, an ongoing project to make sure it's updated and long term.

Mr. Gantefoer: — Well if you look at the numbers that you provided of almost 700 physical school plants that are in existence today, there may be undoubtedly some more of them that aren't going to be used and appropriate to where they're located now. There are obviously some areas of the province that are looking for brand new facilities, so that may offset to some degree.

But it would strike me as that, you know, even if you start doing 10 schools a year, you know it would take you a long time to replace all of these schools. And as they're deteriorating, it would seem to me that compared to the way we've operated in the past, the time is quick approaching where we're going to have to be much more aggressive in terms of a replacement plan for these facilities, recognizing that a huge number of them were built 20 and 30 years ago. And these facilities are now reaching, you know, what would be the end of their design life.

So I do agree that we're going to have to be more aggressive and more thoughtful and long-term-plan, because even if we're thinking 10 years out, we might have to build 150 schools in 10 years or in the next 10 years. Is that the way you're identifying these facilities and sort of saying okay, facility one has a 10-year life left in it, and facility two has a five-year life, and facility three has whatever. And then look at the plan and say okay, it's going to cost us X number of dollars per facility, best guess we have today. And the way inflation is going in the construction sector, I mean this could be a pretty significantly increased financial commitment, I think, compared to where we've been in the last decade.

Hon. Ms. Higgins: — Well it depends on many things. I mean how well the building is kept up for one thing, the maintenance that's been done on it, and I would think fundamentally how well it was built and put together in the beginning.

So there's many things that you have to take into consideration. Part of it also is these are shared costs with the school divisions, normally 65/35. You will know that over the past couple of years we've put just over \$62 million into school facilities between block funding and capital projects, and you will know when you see the capital list that they are still long.

So it is a concern and I think the long-term planning will serve us well and serve the divisions well. Because you're right — many buildings out there, demographics are shifting and changing and we see the members from Saskatoon both in Mr. Cheveldayoff's corner and on the south side of the city, where it's growing quite quickly, you know, looking for expansion in those areas. And there are other school divisions also just shifting population. And it's pretty difficult to shift a building with the population. So it's part of the challenges that go with it.

Mr. Gantefoer: — Yes, that's very true. And I'd like to turn my attention to another part of the shifting realities that are there. From the information that I have, I believe that the change in enrolment from 2006-07 to 2007-08 is projected to be slightly in excess of 3,500 students of a decline.

I have a document from the department called Saskatchewan Learning, *Enrollment Projections for Kindergarten to Grade 12, 2004-05 to 2013-14, February 2004 Update*. And I'm wondering, is this the latest update that the department is working from to start with?

Hon. Ms. Higgins: — What we're dealing with right now is the new Stats Canada data that's coming out and it's 2006 numbers. Not sure if there is a newer version of what you are holding. If not, there will be shortly, with using the StatsCan data.

Mr. Gantefoer: — Thank you, Minister. Then with some apologies in that my information may be slightly dated, it states in the projection summary highlights that over the next 10 years — and I guess that's from 2004-05 — that the enrolment declines are anticipated, in the rural area 21 per cent, and the urban area at 18 per cent. And the statistics from this past year's enrolment drop would indicate that it is true in that, as I read it, the Regina school district enrolment decreased by 384 students, and the Saskatoon school district no. 13 decreased by 283 students. The Regina separate school division decreased by 256 and Saskatoon separate by 331.

Now I know they're a little bigger regions but the point is, it's not just a rural population student enrolment decline; it's rural and urban. And while there are neighbourhoods in Saskatoon that are requiring, you know, or asking for greater facilities, overall in the city it would seem that there's actually an enrolment decrease.

Would those numbers be relatively accurate still? And the new update I'm quoting, I was quoting from, in terms of the current enrolments, from the Sask Learning K to 12 [kindergarten to grade 12] operating grants by school divisions, the operating grant, the taxable assessment, and the enrolment.

Hon. Ms. Higgins: — I think when you look at overall school divisions, there was four or five that had a little bit or slight increases. Pretty well every other school division saw a reduction in enrolment.

Mr. Gantefoer: — Echoing what the minister said again, looking at this very quickly, the increases that I see here as the highest one was 65 students, which isn't very much, and the largest decrease was 437 or so. So I mean fairly significant decreases and very miniscule increases overall.

Madam Minister, of course in the way the foundation operating grant works, one of the components — and there's a whole book full of components — is the per-student allocation. When school divisions lose students, it would be very much appreciated, I suspect, that if they would lose whole classrooms of them but you don't. You lose one child in this grade and another in another grade and so while the income decreases for each child that you lose, the expenses do not decrease maybe at all and certainly not proportionately.

In the new calculations under that basic reality, it seems to be that we're moving away for adjustment factors for those type of situations and moving to a more pure per-student grant system. Is that a fair comment on the basic direction that the foundation grant review process is heading for and simplifying its structure?

Hon. Ms. Higgins: — You will know that when the Boughen Commission was tabled, one of the recommendations in the report was that there be a simplified, clarified foundation operating grant put in place, and that's been ongoing over the past two years. Phase 1 was implemented last year; phase 2 was implemented this year. And it's really striving to achieve equity, transparency, simplicity, and accountability. But I still believe — and I think the department believes — that there are still some factors that will remain because there is some situations that need to have dedicated funding addressed to them. And that will show up in a number of areas, but overall it has been simplified a fair bit and we hope clarified.

Now after you work on, you read through and work on it for a number of years, I'm sure it's still much clearer to others than it is to some of us but it is, I think, much improved to make sure . . . And a number of areas, there was a number of entries, like a huge amount of entries that would be necessary for the divisions to make for a small amount of money. Some of it was just unexplainable as to why it was there. There was no rationale as to why the factor was distributed the way it is. So what we have done is work through it in two phases. There is one more phase that will be continued now — phase 3. And that will just be some unusual factors that are there or some outstanding factors that are there that we need to just have a look at and make sure they're appropriate to be left in the foundation operating grant.

But one thing that I do want to say. Any of the divisions, and I believe there were three that actually lost operating grant because of the changes to the factor, what we have done last year and this year, we backfilled those for the year to make sure that there was time for any adjustments to be made. So there was no loss of revenue to any of the divisions purely because of the changes to the foundation operating grant or to the factor changes within the operating grant.

Mr. Gantfoer: — Thank you. Madam Minister, one of the factors in the calculation of the amount of grants that a school division are going to achieve is the computational mill rate where . . . I don't know if they call it computational mill rate any more, they call it the recognized revenues which for . . .

Hon. Ms. Higgins: — You lost me for a minute there, sorry.

Mr. Gantfoer: — I'm going back to my school board days. I'm letting my time in the mid-'80s show off the school board.

But from the information, I understand that it was set at 17.2 mills for 2007-2008. And as the minister is aware, this is the mill rate that the department sets that is an equalization factor, or whatever it says, every school division should be able to operate at this level.

Can you tell me what the level of the equalization factor, the recognized revenue mill rate, was last year as compared to this

year?

Hon. Ms. Higgins: — The weighted average mill rate in the province is 19.2, but the equalization factor was 16.2 last year and this year it was increased to 17.2.

Mr. Gantfoer: — Thank you, Madam Minister. And so what that 1 extra mill is then doing is saying to school boards, this is 1 mill now that we're expecting you to raise as opposed to what you raised last year. Because it's based on their assessment that this amount of money is then expected to come from own-source revenues, right?

Hon. Ms. Higgins: — Instead of me trying to explain this, I am going to ask David Steele if he can come up and explain it to you. I can give you a rough one, but I might confuse you more than . . . [inaudible interjection] . . . That could happen too.

Mr. Steele: — Thank you. Not sure exactly where we should start. But the assumption that raising the equalization factor by 1 is based on the idea that that's what school divisions should be able to operate on. If their recognized expenditures were equal to actual expenditures that would be correct, but the recognized expenditures are lower than actual expenditures. So all divisions basically are operating above the equalization factor.

But what the equalization factor does is it distributes the money differently when it's increased. And so the school divisions who have a low assessment per student benefit when the equalization factor increases; and the school divisions who have a high assessment per student get less grant when the equalization factor is increased.

So when there's a big difference between actual mill rates and the equalization factor, then the school divisions with a high assessment are benefited by that gap. And the school divisions with a low assessment per student are really penalized by that gap because the divisions are collecting money at 19.2 mills — or whatever their actual mill rate is — and their recognized revenue is set at 17.2. So if they have a high assessment, they really benefit by that gap.

Now in equating the recognized expenditure and recognized revenue, by increasing the equalization factor by 1, it allows about \$260 increase to the basic rate. So the school divisions who have a low assessment per student, they gain more on the basic rate increase than they lose on the recognized revenue side. The school divisions who have a high assessment per student, they gain less on the basic rate increase than they lose on the recognized revenue side. Does any of that make sense?

So the two have to be equal. So when the equalization factor goes up by 1 mill, it allows the basic rate to increase by about \$260 a student. So if you multiply \$260 a student times the number of students and then multiply 1 mill by your assessment, you will either gain or lose on that equation.

And so the divisions that have a low assessment per student — like North West Catholic would be a good example; there's a very low assessment per student — they'd benefit when the equalization factor increases. The divisions that have a high assessment per student get less grant when the equalization

factor increases.

Mr. Gantefer: — Thank you. And I understand that marvellous formula of A minus B equals C process. But it would seem to me that if there's a 1 mill shift provincially, that there's now the expectation that another mill is going to come out of the property tax than what there would be previously. So my question is, is what is the provincial taxable for education purposes assessment?

Mr. Steele: — Total assessment?

Mr. Gantefer: — Total assessment that educational property tax is levied on.

Mr. Steele: — Okay. That's in . . . I know the printout I need.

Mr. Gantefer: — I mean, I realize that the change has been, there's been a \$326 million increase in assessment. But what is the total assessment?

Mr. Steele: — The taxable assessment is 40,598,876,182. And then there's the derived GIL [grants-in-lieu] assessment of about 1.3 billion for a total of about 41.9 billion.

Mr. Gantefer: — What is the revenue shift that would occur on 1 mill on \$40 billion?

Mr. Steele: — Recognized revenue increases by 41.9 million. But the recognized expenditure also increases by 41.9 million.

Mr. Gantefer: — But it doesn't necessary follow directly, does it? The recognized expenses are based on a formula — while there's the basic amount to start with. Is that basic amount tied to this 1 per cent, this 1-mill assessment?

Mr. Steele: — In this past year that 1 mill increased equalization factor translated into about \$260 increase in the basic rate. Yes. That wouldn't necessarily always be the case because it could be used to increase something else on the recognized expenditure side. But in this past year it did translate pretty much directly into an equivalent increase in recognized expenditure.

Mr. Gantefer: — Thank you very much.

Minister, there are a whole lot of yellow tags in my book but I'm going to forgo going through them because it won't do justice to the issue that I had promised that I would ask the department some questions on and that of the issues that have been raised by Mr. Kirk Kelln over the last number of years, I guess, in fairness.

And I guess to lead off, Minister, Mr. Kelln in very short summary seems to be pointing fairly passionately to his belief that there is increasingly a gender gap in the achievement levels in our school system between males and females, between girls and boys. And he points to a number of studies and information that the department has and that is available through the learning community that would tend to indicate that it substantiates his assertion or his concern.

And I wonder first of all, Minister, if you would comment on

where the department's reaction is to this issue that has been raised by Mr. Kelln.

Hon. Ms. Higgins: — Well I do know that my office and the department have dealt fairly extensively with Mr. Kelln over the last . . . well since, I know since I've been in the portfolio and pre that point in time, so it's just over the last year.

I think there are many who would recognize that in some areas . . . Now I will say I'm not qualified to say in all areas, but I will turn this over to the ADM [assistant deputy minister] shortly, as to whether the outcomes are dropping for boys. I know we are seeing the outcomes for girls in many areas increasing. And there's been a number of things done to address the issue and to focus on the issue more than there has, I think overall, than what there has in the last while or maybe . . . I don't want to use the word compensate.

While the outcomes for girls have increased, I don't know whether the outcomes for boys have not increased as drastically or whether they are falling behind. Many are aware of it, but I should turn it over to Darren, the ADM, because I know he has dealt with this and is much more knowledgeable in it than I am, so I will turn it over to Darren.

Mr. McKee: — Thank you, Minister. Just I think to start with respect to the issue. I think the department is aware and has been for some time that there is a difference between both males and females with respect to the curriculum and the outcomes with the curriculum. And I think the only exception with respect to boys' achievement is with Math A30, where they're actually doing better than the females. I think the challenge is we're not sure why the difference exists.

As you are aware, when we start to look at indicators it simply tells us that there is a gap that exists. It takes some time to actually drill down to get to the real picture as to why it exists. We are looking at available research around best practices for both genders in all classrooms, and I think it's important to note that over the last decade several schools in Saskatchewan and school divisions have tried things like gender-specific programming and with limited long-term support from parents. I mean, when it comes back to whether it improves or increases, I think some success has been noticed. But parents generally have not been satisfied with the situation with respect to the gender-specific programming.

I think the other thing to notice within the continuous improvement framework and the learning program renewal that we're doing in the curriculum area, we are focusing on best practices for teaching and learning for all and it will allow us to begin to have a better understanding of what's happening. And I think the minister pointed out whether or not boys are actually losing achievement scores and going down or whether they're levelled off and girls are simply increasing. I think until we know the exact nature of that, it's really difficult to make significant change. But it has been noted by the department and are working towards trying to bring some solutions to that situation.

Mr. Gantefer: — Thank you, Mr. McKee. It would strike me from the information that Mr. Kelln has provided to me is that this is not a situation that is specific to Saskatchewan or perhaps

even to Canada. In fact he pointed to some research available out of the United States and other jurisdictions that are perhaps a bit ahead of us on this whole topic. And I'm wondering, is the department looking for information in other jurisdictions both as to validating that this gender gap is occurring and establishing as you indicated is that boys have stopped increasing or are decreasing and girls are increasing more rapidly? Is the department looking for other studies in other jurisdictions to validate this assertion first of all? And then second of all, are they also researching to see if there have been successful interventions that have occurred in other jurisdictions that are potentially available to us to mitigate this seeming pretty obvious trend?

Mr. McKee: — I think on the first question we are hoping to continue some improvement framework and our assessment for learning will help us get better data to let us know what the issue is and clarify what it is exactly that is happening. And on the second one, when we talk about focusing on best practices we do look not simply within our jurisdiction and in Canada but internationally as well to see what it is that other locales and education systems are doing to address the issue. Because, you know, as you are aware, there are other jurisdictions that are having the same sort of issues and are trying to address it. And we are looking at those places for best practices.

Mr. Gantefer: — I think it's important to note that in this whole discussion everybody is very proud and excited about the fact that girls are making the progress that they are, and that there's nothing implied in anybody's comments that would indicate that we are somehow alarmed that they're achieving at these higher levels and accelerating kind of their outcomes — which is wonderful.

The question is the process or the way we're delivering educational programming to our students, is that somehow leaving the boys behind and it's not as appropriate for them? Has there been work done with the University of Saskatchewan, for example, the University of Regina, the professional teaching institutions in our province to see that there might be some alteration into our program in the training of teachers that might have some impact on outcomes in this topic?

Mr. McKee: — I think as, again as we sort of look at the challenge that we face and, you know, I appreciate the comment around, you know, notwithstanding the success of girls within the educational system, we're interested in high success for all students regardless. And I think we're challenged sometimes by looking at what we're doing within the education system and how it's meeting the needs of all students.

And whenever there is an issue that's an indication that there is a gap, we want to challenge ourselves to find it. And I think we have worked certainly with both local universities with respect to what research they've done, but again are certainly looking at other jurisdictions and other areas to find how people are addressing it, if they are addressing it, and what successes they're having so that we can begin to look at our indicators and our assessments, as we get more sophisticated with it, to put in place a solution that will address the issues as we face them in Saskatchewan and tell us sort of what is happening and how can we start to address it.

Mr. Gantefer: — I'm wondering, can you indicate when this first came on the radar screen, if you like, to the department, where you started recognizing that there was indeed an increasing gender gap issue in the outcomes that were occurring? How long have you been tracking this issue as a concern?

Mr. McKee: — Well the first I think publication certainly the department published was *Gender Equity Policy and Guidelines*. It was done in 1991. So as early as that time there were some, obviously, some work being done on gender issues. Now whether it's exactly the same as the issues we're facing today, I can't tell you. But I know that the department is really working towards addressing those issues and looking at those type of policies that we've had in place.

Mr. Gantefer: — Going back to 1991, were they the same issues where the girls were starting to demonstrate pretty clearly that they were having a more successful rate of outcomes than the boys were? Or was this perhaps a reverse issue where they were more concerned about the fact that boys were achieving better and that the curriculum or the programming might have to be more designed to assist the girls to achieve at a higher level?

Mr. McKee: — And I don't know the answer to that specifically, whether it was targeted at males or females. I think suffice to say that once you identify that gap, regardless of which one it is, it puts into motion particular things to try and find solutions.

Mr. Gantefer: — So I guess my point is it is not necessarily the same gap or in the same direction as is being manifest today. It might have been actually the reverse, might have been the situation. And the question then leads itself to that if we recognize that there was an issue then, and it's now reversed itself, is that because of something we have done in addressing, and our solutions to, that gender gap? And if that's true, I mean was it curriculum? Was it classroom structure? What was it if there was a solution in the past? And can we learn from those lessons going forward and maybe in some way assist the boys in this case who seem to be not achieving at as high as level as the girls are?

And I recall — I've been around long enough in Learning system — was where there was a concern about the girls achieving, especially in the sciences and some of those fields. And there was demonstrated that girls were not succeeding as much as boys in those regards. And so I'm delighted, being the father of three daughters, that girls are now achieving at a very high rate. And that's excellent.

But are we leaving the boys behind? And can we learn from directions we took from the past and apply them going forward? And I guess the other question that I have is, how long do you think this is going to take? Because I kind of get worried, if it's going to take a decade or more, that we could be leaving a fairly significant number of young men behind.

Hon. Ms. Higgins: — Well I actually have to jump in and add a few comments. While I understand the concern, there's also another issue that comes to light here in the province of Saskatchewan and that's Aboriginal or First Nations equity in

the education system. So while the documents that Mr. McKee spoke of may have dealt with gender in the broader sense of the term or the word, it's also something that we need to continue working on. So there's a number of fronts and I think especially here in Saskatchewan.

And I know the department has done some excellent work when it comes to First Nations and the equity that's needed to be addressed between off-reserve and on-reserve schools and the portability of skills and the consistency of education that's received right across the province. So there's a number of issues. So you know, we can look more into the specific issue that you're talking about, but I know equity in whatever form, or lack of equity, is an issue and will always be an issue for the education sector.

Mr. Gantfoer: — I would be surprised if the gender gap is not as great or larger in the First Nations community than it is in the non-First Nations community, so that the First Nations girls may be achieving at an even greater gap compared to the First Nations boys. So it's not just a First Nations, non-First Nations.

I know the point of the minister's is, in general, First Nations are at a gap between non-First Nations and those issues are important, and that's certainly true. I'm not taking away from that at all. And I am encouraged that the minister acknowledges that this is an issue.

But I would hope that the department gives it a bit more of a priority and concern because I think that we may indeed be experiencing something that's going to take a little time to find a suitable solution for. And that time is important because these young people are going through the system and, as we know, it's very hard to get those years back. And I trust that the department will continue to work on this and look for best practices that are available in other jurisdictions to find solutions for it.

Thank you, Madam Minister. I see we're very close to the time that's been allocated to us. I would like to thank you and your officials for being available for Learning estimates in this legislative session. And thank you and we'll look forward to doing this again in the future.

Hon. Ms. Higgins: — Thank you very much, Madam Chair, and to the members of the opposition for the questions. And I would also like to thank the officials from the Department of Learning that have been here in estimates, but also do a great deal of very good work right across Saskatchewan for young people and our education system on a day-to-day basis. So thank you very much.

The Chair: — Thank you very much. We'll take a five-minute break while we change officials and the minister for our next item up for consideration, which is estimates of the Department of Advanced Education and Employment.

[The committee recessed for a period of time.]

**General Revenue Fund
Advanced Education and Employment
Vote 37**

Subvote (AE01)

The Chair: — Welcome to the minister and her officials. The item up for discussion tonight is estimates of Advanced Education and Employment, vote 37 on page 29 of your budget book. Welcome to the minister and she can introduce her officials, and if you have anything to say tonight . . . I know you've been before the committee before.

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Joining me this evening is Rob Cunningham, the assistant deputy minister. Ms. Durnford is attending a deputy ministers' conference in Montreal on immigration. I'm also joined by several other officials, and depending on who is required, we will call on them at the appropriate moment.

The Chair: — So questions, then. Mr. Elhard.

Mr. Elhard: — Thank you, Madam Chair. And good evening, Madam Minister, to you and your officials. I wasn't available the last time Advanced Education was before the committee for consideration of estimates, and I had an opportunity to read some of the material that transpired as a result of that particular appearance. And tonight I think we're going to have a fairly wide-ranging discussion. At least I hope we will. The area of advanced education offers opportunity for some fairly specific areas of discovery and also some broader and more philosophical areas, and I'd like to touch on a few of each tonight if I may, Madam Minister.

I guess right off the bat I would like to get to maybe a specific. We've seen as a result of this budget an increase of about \$64 million in spending. And of course some of that is directed to immigration, which is part of this portfolio, but not much. There's been some increase there but not much. So I'm looking at the post-secondary area in particular, and I think we want to focus our comments on that particular part of the portfolio.

So out of the \$64 million increase roughly or just a little less, I'd like to ask the minister what area of spending would she characterize as the most beneficial for the long-term success of this province. If she had to pick one spending item out of this entire budget—which is significantly higher than previously—could she identify one that she thinks will make a real difference to the future of the province?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Well that's a hard question. But I will say this, that in order to continue to support economic growth in the province, the province of Saskatchewan is going to have to make some significant investments in, I would say, three key areas at the moment.

Obviously we need to increase our spending in technical and trades education. That's really where the job growth is occurring given the changes to the economy. Secondly, we are going to need to ensure that Aboriginal people, First Nations young people in particular, are fully engaged in our economy and have the basic education and then the technical education in order to participate fully. And third, in order to meet the reality of our boomers beginning to retire, boomers having not replaced themselves in terms of their . . . the number of children that they've had, we are going to have to engage people from outside of our borders to come to Saskatchewan. And when I

say outside of our borders, they're people outside of Saskatchewan in the rest of Canada and then of course people internationally.

So I would say, given the nature of the economy at the moment, we need to engage First Nations people; we need to make sure that our own citizens have the skills and technical education that is required; and we also need to engage people outside of our boundaries in order to have the labour force that is necessary to participate in the economy and to continue with the economic growth that the province is experiencing.

Mr. Elhard: — All three of those areas are pretty much upon us right now. We need a pretty exciting extension of capacity in terms of technical and trades education. We've got big demands there. In fact if I understand the figures correctly, that's where the largest number of jobs lie right now in our economy.

The Aboriginal training issue has I think been pending for some time. It's only recently that the provincial government has contributed money directly into that area, which has generally been ruled out as primarily a federal responsibility. And the boomer retirements, I can speak personally about that. You know I think I'm on the leading edge of that group of people, and you know I have friends who have moved into retirement. And through the Public Service Commission discussions we've had, Madam Minister, we've broached that topic pretty thoroughly I think, as it's going to impact the public service of the Government of Saskatchewan.

So these three areas are fairly critical to our immediate prospects and maybe our longer term prospects as well. The question I have to ask is, how well are you doing?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — How well are we doing? Well I think if you would have . . . And you'll recall a year ago, we were being criticized in the legislature for an economic growth that did not seem to mean that there were jobs available. And it was being suggested to us, now here we have all this economic growth, but where are the jobs? And if you now look at year-over-year increase in jobs, they have been significant — you know 20,000 jobs, 23,000 jobs each month. And so we've had several months of sustained job growth.

We're now in the position — and it's come very quickly — we're now in the position where we have more jobs than people. If you had said to us a year ago, do you expect to have more jobs than people, I think we were all trying to figure out why is it that the economy is growing, but we don't seem to see the job growth. And now we do. I think it's come very fast in terms of the economic change in the province, in terms of job growth, and we're now in the position where we are working as fast as we can to get training in place and then of course to have students.

And one of the issues that I think that institutions are going to be confronting, and maybe are confronting, is the reality that people can get very good wages at the moment. And so there may not be as much interest in pursuing trades . . . not trades training but technical training, university education. It's not unlike what we experienced in the '70s when people were going into the labour force and were delaying further education.

And I think one of our challenges will be to ensure that our institutions have students in all of the programs, that we really do require skilled people, and so I think a lot of effort is going to be, need to be taken particularly with high school students to suggest that they need to pursue post-secondary education or a skills training in order to have the kinds of skills that our labour market definitely needs.

Mr. Elhard: — I know the response that you gave has focused on how rapidly the jobs appeared on the horizon. And I do recall the discussions we had in the legislature previously with the, you know, the demands of the opposition that something be done on the tax front. And the response of the government — to their credit — taking our advice, but the result was pretty rapid and pretty positive. So the next question becomes, how well are we going to be able to address that demand? How quickly will we be able to put our post-secondary institutions and other training programs to best use to fill those jobs that have been created?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Well I could challenge you on your statements about we need to change the tax system. As you know during the province's centennial, we held an economic summit, and one of the recommendations from the business community was that we needed to change our corporate capital tax and corporate income tax, and those changes are being phased in over a few years. I don't think anyone anticipated this dramatic change. Now, because the phase-in was to come in over several years, there's no question that there are . . .

If you look at the capital investment in the province, it is growing. If you look at the economy, it's changing. We're moving away from a primarily agricultural economy, more to an economy that is resource based. As well we have some significant diversification, particularly in the manufacturing area. Now that has taken place over the last several years. We changed the manufacturing and processing tax when we came to government in the early 1990s.

But I also think that because of the growth in the Alberta economy and the difficulty that they're having finding goods, and particularly goods, that that has provided a real opportunity for our business people. And so I think that what we're seeing is some spinoff from that, particularly in the manufacturing sector, and it makes good business sense to locate your manufacturing company here, and that of course is where we're experiencing a lot of job growth.

What I will say is that I think we are nicely positioned to make sure that we have the training seats that are needed. We have a significant increase in the number of people that are becoming indentured apprentices. That's good news. I mean for years people couldn't. They weren't really needed or weren't wanted, journey-people. And we lost people to other parts of the country.

I think we have the opportunity to attract some of those people back to the province. We have made several trips into Alberta. We've made a significant advertising campaign in southern Ontario where they're losing manufacturing jobs. But of course in order for people to be attracted to the province, we're going to need to make sure that our wages and benefits are competitive.

And what's totally startling for me is that young people are talking about benefit packages, that it's not just the wages. They want benefits, and that's certainly something that my generation didn't talk about when we began our careers. But benefits seem to be a significant issue for people. And I hear it more and more that when employers are trying to recruit and retain people, they're looking at not only offering a wage but looking at benefits and pensions because that's what young people want.

Mr. Elhard: — Madam Minister, I don't think I disagree with anything you've said. And you'll probably be happy to know that when I was asked today about the department's advertising campaign in southern Ontario, I said it was probably the best money spent by this government in terms of advertising than some of the other campaigns that have been undertaken.

So you know I'm not so concerned about that kind of effort as I am the success of the effort and the impact it will have. And I guess that's why I'd like to come back to these post-secondary institutions and the role that you believe that they would be able to play in meeting the demands of our economy. What do you have in mind for these institutions? I'd like to pose the problem maybe in bigger language and say, what's the philosophy of this government in relationship to our two universities and SIAST, and what big dreams does the current administration have for our post-secondary institutions?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — I think when we look at our two universities, the two universities are institutions that have been around . . . particularly the University of Saskatchewan is celebrating its 100th anniversary this year. These are institutions that are governed by their particular governance model. There is a lot of input from faculty. There is clearly a distinction between the province and university autonomy. They aren't institutions that change quickly or easily.

When you're looking at the training system — and I'm talking about SIAST, the regional colleges, DTI [Dumont Technical Institute], SIIT [Saskatchewan Indian Institute of Technologies] — I think these are institutions that are quite nimble. They have the ability to change and to phase out programs in one area that's perhaps not needed, move into other areas of training and technical education. When we appointed the Labour Market Commission — and we're soon going to be announcing the members of the Labour Market Commission — there are people from business. There are people from labour. There are people from the training institutions. And then we have a representative of what I'll call the social economy, and then we have the department.

If you look at the model that we base this on — and that's the Quebec model — they have an overall Labour Market Commission, but they also have regional labour market commissions or advisory committees, and they have sectoral advisory committees. My hope is that when the Labour Market Commission is fully operationalized, we will certainly have a regional approach to labour market planning, and we will have a sectoral approach and with the institutions there at the table with the players. When I say the players, I'm talking about industry, business, and labour. I'm hoping that that is . . . we're going to be more nimble in terms of knowing exactly where the market is moving, the economy's moving, and we'll be able to respond.

Now this is not exactly a great science; I think people have been trying to predict what's going to happen to the economy for many, many years. But I'm hoping that with the overall provincial approach and then a regional approach that's feeding into the provincial commission, that we will be able to have a planning model, a planning tool that will allow those institutions to respond very quickly to changes in the labour market.

Mr. Elhard: — The issue of SIAST and its ability to respond reasonably quickly by comparison to the post-secondary universities is something I think that we need to discuss a bit here tonight and, I guess, the relationship of regional colleges to SIAST and how they might play a role in that quick response that you have alluded to.

The issue, I suppose, is related to the type of market they serve and the programs that they offer primarily. But if you had to identify specifically your government's view of the role of SIAST, the nature of SIAST, and maybe the nature of regional colleges — although you may have a different view of them — could you tell us what that is versus what the view would be of the post-secondary universities?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Well I think if you look at university education, obviously it's becoming more technical as well. We used to think of university as rather a liberal arts approach to education, but we're becoming more specialized at the universities — engineering schools, business schools, kinesiology, education, pharmacy, nursing, and so on.

So they're becoming more professional colleges, training people for the professions. And then, of course, I would say if you're getting an Arts degree and, you know, something about the social sciences or humanities. But we tend to have schools of journalism, schools of social work, education schools, pharmacy schools, physiotherapy schools. And they are trained for, quote, the professional occupations.

And they also spend a lot of time engaged in research as well as teaching, so it's not just a teaching institution. But there's a lot of effort that's now going into the pursuit of research and I think the University of Saskatchewan and the University of Regina are — because of some significant investments in research — are now able to compete quite nicely in the national competitions to get research dollars into the province. And this provides grad students an opportunity to be involved in research and academics to hone their skills. So that's the university.

In terms of SIAST, I would say if you look at SIAST, there are four institutions — Saskatoon, Regina, P.A. [Prince Albert], and Moose Jaw. They tend to have some specialties in each of the campuses. They tend to have industrial advisory committees or if we're in the trades or the technical part in terms of what I would call nursing, licensed practical nursing, and so on, they also will have some professional advisory committees.

Depending on what's happening, what industry needs, they might move out of one program and move into another program, depending. I note that an example would be that we now have some people that are learning how to become undertakers, because I understand we have a shortage of people in the funeral industry. Well we may be able to train and

educate people and have enough people in that industry that we can move out of that core, you know, program into something else. Physiotherapy, or pharmacy technicians — they might get enough people and then they can move into something else. They tend to have programs that are ongoing, however.

I will say this about regional colleges. Regional colleges might offer a program at a particular part of their region, meet the needs of the labour market, and then move to some other part, maybe offer a different program. I think regional colleges probably, in terms of the training sector, are the most nimble and the most flexible in terms of responding at the moment because they tend not to have long-term faculty. They have some, but they don't quite have the human infrastructure and the capital infrastructure that say a SIAST would have.

Mr. Elhard: — In conversations previously, Madam Minister, we've talked about the autonomy afforded the universities in this province and kind of compared that to the situation facing SIAST. And I know that the governance of SIAST is not nearly as autonomous as the universities enjoy. But I'm wondering if the minister could describe for us how she views SIAST and its operational autonomy. And I'll use that word in quotation marks.

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Well I think if you look at the legislation, the SIAST legislation is quite different than the university legislation. And so there is an interest on the part of the Minister of Advanced Education and Employment in terms of what SIAST is doing. It has quite a different history than the universities. And I think if you were looking at technical institutions across the country, their legislation I think would be similar to our SIAST legislation; their university legislation would be similar to ours. So I think there's a different history and a different model of governance.

Now that's not to say that . . . I have tried in the last year since I've become the minister to get people on the board of SIAST that have some relationship to the sectors. I have made that attempt. For instance, we have what I would call someone who has the kind of, or the skills that we need for a board who represents the potash mining sector. We have someone who represents the, what I would call the housing or the construction sector. We have someone on the board who comes from the apprenticeship commission and has that connection.

We have now ensured that we do have some student representation on the board. We have people that have a familiarity to the regional colleges because there is a relationship between SIAST and the regional colleges. We have someone who's spent a lot of time working with REDAs [regional economic development authority] on the board. And there are others. So we are trying to get people who are connected to the community on the board but have the skill sets that we require.

We also have someone from a health region who has some HR [human resources], some significant HR experience. So we've tried to get some people on to the board, certainly since I've been the minister, that have some specific skill sets that are very helpful in terms of board, of governance.

The other thing I want to share with you is that we've made a

real effort with our regional colleges, SIAST, and SIIT and DTI to have governance, corporate governance sessions so that people understand what does it mean to be a member of a board and what are their duties. And that I think has been very helpful in terms of board members understanding what their role and responsibility is and how they're accountable.

We also now have a CEO [chief executive officer] forum where we have people from the various training sectors, CEOs from the various training sectors, that sit down and develop relationships. Because we need to have a training system; it needs to be an overall system. And we have a board Chairs forum as well where the board Chairs often can move things along if there are, you know, some impediments structurally.

Mr. Elhard: — Madam Minister, in view of the minister's interest in SIAST through legislation, would it be safe to describe SIAST as — theoretically at least and maybe practically — an extension of your department as opposed to an independent institution?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Oh I think at one time SIAST — I'm just going from memory — was basically part of the department, if I recall correctly. Oh I'm getting some head shaking. Yes, SIAST at one time was part of the department and then it was removed from the department. But I think historically SIAST has had a close relationship to the department and I think probably if you have come from a university institution you would find this hard to understand. But there is a historical relationship between SIAST and the department and the legislation is clear that there is a relationship between SIAST and the department as there is with the regional colleges as well.

Mr. Elhard: — Do you think that ongoing relationship is to the advantage or the benefit of the institution however?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — I do, actually. I think it's important in terms of the whole budgeting process where officials go before Treasury Board and they make their case for an increase in the budget. If you have a close relationship you can answer Finance's questions.

When it comes to the university, I would say that we do not have the type, the kind of knowledge about the university as we do about SIAST, because of the relationship that has been there for many, many years. And I think, from a budgeting point of view I think it's important, particularly now when there is so much focus on the economy when it comes to tradespeople and people who are technically educated.

Mr. Elhard: — Madam Minister, a little earlier you had talked about the involvement of young people on the board of SIAST. Through legislation we dealt with that earlier in the session and I think it was a move that was long awaited and maybe even best described as overdue in this day and age.

But having mentioned that, I have a couple of questions that are directly related to SIAST, and one of them revolves around SIAST business plan for the five-year period 2006 to 2012, where it specially references, on page 9, increasing student participation, emphasis on the increasing — emphasis mine, maybe I should say — student participation in the ongoing and

future development of operations at SIAST. So I guess the question becomes, to the minister or her officials, how is this increasing participation going to be facilitated? Is it simply this one individual that has been placed on the board, or does the minister have additional ways of facilitating student participation in the day-to-day and overall governance of SIAST?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Well the business plan is SIAST's business plan, and it no doubt has been approved by the board, and the board had, no doubt, some input into the business plan. So I would suggest that, from what I understand, the president has met with students, president and CEO, Dr. McCulloch. The Chair, Mr. Olive, has met with students. The deans have ongoing engagement with students. I understand that there are some committees that will have input into the programs from students.

I think though I would make this observation, that in this day and age young people are very knowledgeable and very sophisticated and they aren't particularly interested in being passive observers. They have some interest in providing feedback to institutions. So I think that the business plan makes some sense in terms of engaging students because young people want to be engaged. And obviously I think it's part of their development as well that we, as people who are institutions, need to ensure that young people do have access to institutional leaders in order that those institutional leaders have knowledge about what young people are demanding and wanting.

Mr. Elhard: — So from your relationship as minister to SIAST — the close relationship we've been talking about previously — and knowing the interest of the president and the Chair of the board on this, are you assuring me that there will be additional overtures to students to participate and that that's ongoing at this time?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — That would be my sense, that there is some significant effort being made to engage students at SIAST on all four campuses. And I've had the opportunity to meet with student leaders on the campuses and my sense is that they have quite a good relationship with Dr. McCulloch and they are aware of the board Chair and they've had some ongoing discussions with him particularly around how students are going to be represented on the board.

Mr. Elhard: — I understand that the, as I understand it, the one seat on the board of SIAST that is reserved for a student will be rotated among the four campuses. And I don't know that that's entirely satisfactory to the needs and the requirements of the students that have raised this issue with us.

You mentioned that you'd been on the campus of . . . Well I don't know if you specifically said Kelsey but I think you did say you were on some of the SIAST campuses and I think the issue is most prevalent at Kelsey, the issue I want to raise next.

I've had an opportunity to be at Kelsey in the past, not recently, but the Leader of the Opposition has been there, you've been there, and I think both of you have been lobbied about space for peer support programs. And this seems to be an issue that is of increasing concern on campuses nationwide, worldwide in fact, in view of particularly tragic recent events. And I think there's

some urgency being felt by student leadership particularly at the Kelsey campus to achieve that. Can the minister comment on that particular issue for us?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — I can. The students were very strategic when they invited me to SIAST. It was right before noon when everybody was in the hallways. And I thought it was a very good lobbying effort because you got a real sense of what the students were talking about. What I can say to you is that we have announced that it's our intention to have a facility at Mount Royal Collegiate in Saskatoon. I think that's going to alleviate some of the space pressures at the SIAST Kelsey Campus. As well there are discussions ongoing with, what we would say some real estate in the area, where we might be able to move some of the programs into that area.

As you know, the footprint of that campus is getting smaller and smaller. And so we are looking for off-campus facilities to provide training. And there is a huge need in the Saskatoon North area to train additional people. And with the new high school being built on the west side of Saskatoon, we think there will be an opportunity to have some significant space at Mount Royal Collegiate, which will then mean that SIAST has a presence in the community. And we think that's useful. And I think once all of this is put in place — and it's not going to be tomorrow or next year, but we're going to get there — I think that we will indeed be able to respond to what students are saying to us.

Mr. Elhard: — But if the timeline is a year, a year and a half, two years down the road, is that adequate to the needs of the students right now?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — I'm not sure how we can respond any faster than that. That campus is jam-packed. There has been construction taking place on that campus. We think that if we can move some of the programming from SIAST to Mount Royal, out into this other industrial space, that will alleviate some of the pressure.

On the other hand, there is pressure to increase the nursing education program at SIAST, the number of seats. It's a joint program with the U of S [University of Saskatchewan] and SIAST. That means that there will need to be more space for nurses at SIAST. And we now have a licensed practical nurse program at SIAST, responding to the needs of the labour market.

So I think if we were to engage in new construction on that campus, we would still have the same timelines, maybe even longer. I wouldn't say maybe even longer, but perhaps longer because we're going to be renovating existing space. And the students would be, I think, would be waiting longer.

Mr. Elhard: — I think they're feeling quite disadvantaged, disabused maybe even. The University of Regina and the University of Saskatchewan and I would dare say several of the schools, if not all of the schools in Alberta, are already offering this type of facility, this peer support facility that they're looking for for the Kelsey Campus. And I think if the minister could assure the students that more would be done sooner, they would be happier than hearing maybe later.

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Well I think it will be . . . I know it's going to be done. We just need to make sure . . . We need to move some programs out of SIAST. It'll free up some space. I know that the board and the president have been working with the students. I believe SPM [Saskatchewan Property Management] is trying to work with SIAST administrators to see how we might be able to free up space. But this of course requires some movement of people and program and obviously some redesign of space as well.

Mr. Elhard: — Still with issues regarding and related to SIAST, Madam Minister, as you recall I had the opportunity several times a year, a year and a half ago to raise the issue of the extended waiting lists at SIAST for students seeking entry to various programs. And to their credit, the board and administration of SIAST has made some move to address that issue. There are some changes that have been made. But I noticed in some information from SIAST, both publicly and in letter form, that the changes for admission particularly to the six or so most sought-after programs were going to be designated special-selection criteria. Now that's academic speak for something. Would the minister please identify what special selection criteria is precisely.

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Our expert is not with us tonight; he's dealing with a family illness. But I will be able to say this to you: that what they have done is they have moved away from first qualified, first admitted to a process where it's based on merit. But they're also leaving room for interviews as well, and there may be some need in order to have a representative workforce to have some look at ensuring that certain people in our province are not left out. But we can get you the detail if that would be okay with you.

Mr. Elhard: — Just so that I'm clear, it would be primarily based on academic standing and an interview process in which . . .

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — I think it depends on the program, but it could be an interview. And they, I think it's fair to say the administration and the board wanted to make sure that we truly did have a representative workforce. So there may be, you know, older people might get into the program or people from a certain ethnic background, gender, that sort of thing. But we can get you that information. But primarily, it's based on academic standing.

Mr. Elhard: — Am I to assume from what you're saying, Madam Minister, that there are not already some limited number of spaces in these particular programs, these six specific programs that are not already reserved for certain groups?

Mr. Cunningham: — I have to pull an extra chair up here. As I understand it, within those six programs, there are already a variety of seats set aside, for instance for Aboriginal people and designated groups. And they would be able to access the program both through that route or through of course the merit-based approach which would allow both grades to be considered, possibly an interview or an essay process so . . .

Mr. Elhard: — So how many seats are we talking about in each of these six programs? My understanding at one time was

that there was roughly three or four. But if I'm not correct in that assumption, I'd like to know.

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — I think what we'll do is we'll get you that information.

Mr. Elhard: — We can move on; that's fine. If I understand the impact of the change of admission policy in these particular programs, the extensive waiting list will be whittled down to some extent, first of all, by selecting a contingent for this year's classes beginning in July of this year. And those who didn't make the cut for that selection process this year will be put on a waiting list for the following year. But after that, the individuals on the list will be told that there is no opportunity in the first two years.

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Okay so as I understand it, people who were on the wait list will be accepted in '07-08. And then starting in '08-09 academic year, it will be based for the most part on merit. So there won't be a wait list after that.

Mr. Elhard: — It will be a strictly competitive situation for those . . .

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Competitive process, yes.

Mr. Elhard: — For those particular programs.

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Yes.

Mr. Elhard: — All right. Well I know that it was difficult in some respects to make this decision to change because the previous system has worked fairly well for all concerned and has been, you know, widely accepted. But I think under the circumstances this was probably an appropriate change that needed to be made for very unique programs and very unique circumstances. So I don't have any argument with the change. I just wanted to know for sure how it was going to work and what it entailed.

I have some other questions related to SIAST that I think we would like to deal with. As I've been told just recently, SIAST sometimes has to expand its program offering by looking at other institutions and in some instances buying out the programs of other institutions. I understand this has happened just recently in Saskatoon where SIAST purchased the programming or maybe purchased the business of Career Development Institute, known as CDI. Is that something the minister or her officials can confirm?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — I don't believe that they have purchased CDI. I think SIAST is going to be using some space that CDI has, and it may be for the licensed practical nurse program that's starting in Saskatoon because of the space crunch at Kelsey Campus. So they have not purchased CDI. They're just going to be using some space in that facility.

Mr. Elhard: — It's really a question of facilities, not programming.

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — That's right.

Mr. Elhard: — Okay. So any loss of employment opportunities

with CDI would have nothing to do with this arrangement to your knowledge.

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Not that I'm aware of. The people who will be teaching the licensed practical nurse program are SIAST employees.

Mr. Elhard: — I want to talk a little bit about other issues related to SIAST. We'll move to a different campus this time though. The Palliser Campus earlier this year had some layoffs. And I don't dispute the right of the administration to make decisions in that regard. When programs are undersubscribed, I think it's important that they have that flexibility.

But one of the things I found quite interesting, Madam Minister — especially in light of, sort of, the growth in the economy and the added business activity — that six of the eight people who were let go were business instructors. And does that not strike the minister as kind of strange in this environment?

Mr. Cunningham: — I think I can speak to that. If I understand it correctly, those six instructors who were affected — and I don't have the numbers in front of me — were involved in a program that is joint with a computer information technology program which has a common first year, business year, and then a second year related specifically to IT [information technology]. And I believe that SIAST had seen the enrolment in that program going down for sometime, which has led them down another path, around the need to redevelop and redesign that program to be more responsive to industry and labour market needs. And so there is some peculiarities around that particular situation.

At the same time, I think one of the things that the minister had alluded to earlier that with the labour market as it is, you can see I think some decreases in enrolments in some areas that might seem counterintuitive, maybe because people are taking opportunities directly into the labour market.

Mr. Elhard: — Now that you have indicated your understanding of where those six individuals came from, I believe I'm aware of that, because it was identified in the news reports as business instructors. But that's not necessarily the case. There was computer information programming. There were concerns raised by the CIPS [Canadian Information Processing Society] organization in this province about the impact of the loss of this program. I think the SIAST people and CIPS were able to resolve some of that. So my question arose out of the report here. And you've satisfactorily answered that. Thank you.

The next question I wanted to ask is about the SIAST Palliser Campus again. I understand that SIAST overall enrolment is growing, but the enrolment at the Palliser Campus is dwindling. It's down 5.8 per cent again this past year. And some of the numbers that I have noticed suggest there's been a fairly significant drop in the population at Palliser over the last number of years. What would that particular issue reflect? Is there a problem with the quality of the facilities? Is it again a case of overcrowding? Are people going to other campuses because of that? Does the minister have any explanation for that?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Well I have been to the Palliser Campus, and I don't feel quite the space crunch at the Palliser Campus as I feel at the Kelsey SIAST Campus in Saskatoon.

I actually think that if you look at the technologies — engineering technology, architectural technology — they have a number of programs that are very technical in nature. I just have a feeling that people are making their way into the labour market and not going on to post-secondary education. And if you look at the two universities, we have the same problem. You know, enrolment is not quite where it was in the past. Now obviously we had boomers that were there, the echo generation. And now the young people going in, instead of coming from a family of five, you might have two kids in a family.

So we have the two campuses, Regina and Saskatoon, looking to replace Saskatchewan citizens with international grad students, not totally, but some of that enrolment. And I just think because of the labour market as well, there is a huge incentive to get in to the labour market with those wages and benefits at the expense of further education and training. And that's why I think we need to do some significant work, particularly in our K to 12 system, but also encouraging young people that maybe have been in the labour market for a couple years to think about going to school and getting that further learning.

But this is not unlike was experienced in the '70s where people left high school, went directly into the labour market, and then when things went, you know, bust as they say, we saw an increase in enrolment as people made their way to further learning.

Mr. Elhard: — I suppose the minister could be right. It's pretty hard to convince young people to go school if they can get a 60, \$70,000-a-year job right out of high school, which is not uncommon right now.

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Absolutely. Driving a truck can make very good money. In the oil patch, you can make very good money.

Mr. Elhard: — So that's the minister's sense that the difficulties with the programs at SIAST is not anything related to the programs or the facilities, but really just a unwillingness on the part of the students to forego that opportunity to make a big buck.

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — My sense is at the moment we have the people that are going into the labour market, and they're not pursuing post-secondary as they leave high school. And I mean that may change if the economy changes. But at the moment that's my sense.

Mr. Elhard: — I want to switch gears just a wee bit to raise a specific issue on behalf of one individual. I was contacted . . . and, Madam Minister, I believe you were also contacted by this individual who enrolled in a program at Heinze Institute back in September of 2004. And partway through his training program, early in fact in January 2005 which was about four months later, he realized that he'd made an error in his choice of institutions and wanted to get his money back. But somewhere along the road there, the company closed its doors. And not

only did he not get his money back; he hasn't been able to get it back yet.

And I need to know from the minister, what is the assurance for students like this individual who enrol in the private schools, who face these kinds of circumstances and are looking for some money back and seem to be completely short shifted?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Right. Well at the moment under our legislation, private vocational schools that are licensed by the province have to put up a \$10,000 bond.

In fact I've had this very discussion this day with our officials in my briefing that I have each week about the need to take another look at the private vocational school legislation to see whether in fact we need to increase the size of the bond because you may have, you know, 40 students that are in the position that you're speaking of and basically the person that owned the school is now bankrupt or out of business, and there's very little in the way of assets to pursue.

So one of — and this will not help the person that you're speaking of — but one of the things that we are certainly looking at in terms of legislative change is the need to change the size of the bond, given the size of the tuition that is being charged by the private vocational school companies.

But basically the reality is in the province, we license private vocational schools. And I understand that not all private vocational schools are licensed, but we license them. They put up a bond of \$10,000 and if that school goes out of business and tuition is owing, then it's up to the individual — because they are private companies — to pursue, through a civil action, the return of their tuition. And we have the \$10,000 bond. We may become in possession of that. And then it's divided according to the outstanding, or the individuals who have outstanding, I guess, need to get part of their tuition back.

Mr. Elhard: — I think maybe we should talk about where the department is thinking of going in terms of this type of situation for the future. But before we do that, let's go back to this particular individual's case.

So what you're saying is that if there were 25 or 30 students at that institution at the time, they are going to get back a fraction of that \$10,000 based on the number of students that were enrolled.

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Yes. They would get a fraction of their tuition. But they also could go through the Training Completions Fund and get a train-out, meaning going to another school or another program to complete their training. And that has happened in the past where private vocational schools have gone under and arrangements have been made for the person to get a train-out in some other school.

Mr. Elhard: — How is that made possible financially? Does the department pick up some of the cost of that train-out program or is there some fund that is available to students in that situation?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Yes. The fund is funded through revenues from the private vocational schools and so, I mean

there are some very fine private vocational schools in the province and arrangements have been made in the past for people to be trained out in either private vocational schools or other programs.

Mr. Elhard: — In the case of this individual who I won't name, but in this instance if his concern was brought to your office, would your office be obligated or would the office take the initiative to inform this individual of the alternatives available to him?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Well I'm going from memory. I don't have the file in front of me but I understand that, if I recall, he had decided he didn't want to pursue his education at this particular school. He left the school and then the school went under and he was entitled to some tuition back because he didn't complete his program. And in the meantime, the school went under and he's in a position where he is sitting there with money that is owing to him from the private vocational person that went under. He wasn't asking for a train-out. He's simply asking to have some of his money returned to him.

We have the bond and the bond will be available for some of the people who are owed money, legitimately owed money. And had he asked for a train-out, had he been in the program and the place went under, he could have been trained out in another facility.

Mr. Elhard: — Would that option still be available to him if he decided to take it?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — This was a few years ago, was it not?

Mr. Elhard: — 2005 I believe.

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — I'm not sure. We don't have our private vocational school expert here, but we can see whether that is an alternative for him.

Mr. Elhard: — So let's move to the future then. The minister has indicated that there's some discussion about changing the bonding requirements. Are there other issues around this type of situation that the department is considering making alterations to?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — I think that it's not a matter of the department so much, it's myself thinking that we have, you know, we've had some situations where private vocational schools have gone under, students have been left holding the bag, we have a \$10,000 bond. We may, given that the cost of tuition in private vocational schools, we may . . . I think we need to consider whether or not that bond, the amount that private vocational schools have to place, needs to be significantly increased. If you're talking about 60 students who've paid 7 or \$8,000 for a tuition and they can't complete their program — other than if they're trained out — this provides some difficulty. And so there's very, you know, \$10,000 is minimal when it comes to people trying to get access to that, to rebate of their tuition. So we're looking at a larger bond.

Mr. Elhard: — But it might also be advantageous if the bond level was flexible, depending on the cost of the program. Are

you thinking in those terms at all?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — The thinking is very preliminary. It could be the size of the operation, it could be the cost of the tuition. And some tuition is very dear, other tuition is less costly. So I think at this stage we would need to look at all of the options.

Mr. Elhard: — Thank you, Madam Minister. I want to move on to a few other topics. There's, as I indicated at the outset, a lot of different areas we could go tonight. But I do want to talk a little bit about tuition in the province, especially tuition at the universities of both Saskatchewan and Regina, and the government's ongoing tuition freeze, and some of the other attendant topics regarding that, that particular issue.

And I know that we've had a tuition freeze in place now, we're into the third year, and the government through their post-secondary or Advanced Education budgets have pretty much backfilled most of the cost of that tuition freeze to the institutions. But I understand, according to Stats Canada and some other sources, that even after that length of time the Saskatchewan average tuition level still remains in the top four or five of the country. So I guess the question becomes, what's the long-term plan? What's the game plan, Madam Minister?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Well I think we've got an interim report from Mr. McCall. As you know, he was appointed by the Premier to look at affordability and accessibility of post-secondary education, not only at the two universities but also at SIAST and the regional colleges. We've had his interim report. He is now, that report is now being taken back out for consultation with various stakeholders in post-secondary education.

I will speak for myself, and I think the last time I was before this committee I indicated that I thought at the very least we needed to be in the middle of the pack, and we're not there yet. The reality is that, you know, here we were in the province of Saskatchewan with the second highest tuition in the country because the two universities wanted to go to the national average, but for us, for citizens here, for people who are trying to educate their kids, we had the second highest tuition in the country. At the same time we had an agricultural crisis in terms of farm income. At the same time if you looked at our wages relative to the rest of the country, we were at, you know, the bottom part of the pack. So I think for the government, when we made the decision to freeze tuition, particularly at the two universities, it was within that context.

Now the economy is moving. It's changing. The average industrial wage has risen a bit since that time but, you know, I will make this point and I have made this point to some of my colleagues in the two universities. I come from a farm background. My grandfather, our farm celebrated its 100th anniversary last year. That farm has always been able to educate people — always. That farm in the last several years, it's been difficult, very difficult, and I think that's the context.

You know, you look at your enterprise. It can educate people, the children of the farm family. That's been difficult. And in the midst of that here we were with rising tuition that did not really reflect the capacity of our citizens to pay for it, and so that's

why we froze it. And this is the third year. We're moving down a bit in terms of the scheme of things relative to other provinces but we're not there yet. And that's why the Premier appointed Mr. McCall to look at accessibility and affordability.

You know, when farm families can't afford to send their kids to university and it's not, and of course it's not just tuition but tuition is large — \$5,000, \$6,000, \$8,000. And then you have to pay for, you know, room and board. That gets pretty prohibitive. And does that, you know, does that then start preventing people from accessing a university education? And I think it does.

Mr. Elhard: — Relative to the . . .

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — I feel quite strongly about this, as you can see.

Mr. Elhard: — I don't mind that. That's not a problem. In fact it's good to see a politician with some passion, I guess. But relative to the national average we've got a ways to go. So how many more years do you anticipate having to freeze the tuition in order to reach the national average? I think there's a \$700 gap right now.

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Right. Well I think it's going to, you know, frankly I think it's going to be a bit longer. You know we're not Alberta; we're not British Columbia; we're not Ontario. We're Saskatchewan. You know next door is Manitoba where their tuition is quite, you know, reasonable.

I mean the beauty of our tuition freeze is we've backfilled every dollar. Where provinces have gone and frozen tuition, they have not necessarily backfilled all of the money. We have. And so I don't think the university should have much difficulty with our position that we need to get, you know, at least to the middle of the pack. We're backfilling every dollar.

And the reality is that not all of us come from families that earn, you know, 150 or \$160,000 a year. Some of us come from families that don't have that capacity. And so if we want the university to become an elite place for people who have high incomes, I guess that's one vision. That's not the vision of the New Democratic Party. We think that ordinary people should be able to send their children to university and ordinary people should be able to go to university if that's what they want to do.

Mr. Elhard: — I don't think I've heard any complaints from either of the universities' senior administrators about the tuition freeze, especially since the effort has been made to backfill the costs. And in fact I guess that's probably why you haven't heard the official opposition complain particularly about it either. In principle I don't think we like the idea of tuition freezes. I think in principle it's probably not good long-term public policy. So I guess the question becomes, is there an exit strategy? How do you plan to get out of the tuition freeze game?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Right. Well I think we need to see where we're moving to in terms of where we stand relative to the rest of the country. And then we need to wait for Mr. McCall's report. But my view is we're not there yet.

University education should be affordable and accessible to ordinary families. And if we had of kept on our way, you know, a lot of tuition would have become, you know, \$12,000. That's a lot of money for people to be able to come up with to send their kid off to law school.

Mr. Elhard: — As you will know as well as anybody, that the president of the University of Saskatchewan has made the argument that the affordability question as part of accessibility is really only part of the equation. The other issues are quality of education and ability to access the programming that you need. I mean there's a variety of elements that come into that whole question. I'm just wondering, Madam Minister, how those other parts of the equation are being addressed, in your estimation, when tuitions are frozen.

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Well I think you know, we're backfilling. So I don't think there should be any excuse about quality. And I have never, having been a student on that university campus, I never felt that the quality of my education was low relative to my tuition that was quite reasonable when I went to the university in the 1970s. Just because we, you know, pay \$12,000 to go to law school, does that mean we have the best law school in the county? I'm not sure about that. If we paid \$13,000 to go into the College of Commerce, does that mean we have the best college of commerce college in the country? I'm not sure about that.

I think what people need to understand is that ordinary people, farm families, working-class families, should be able to send their kid off to university and it shouldn't just be the domain for people who earn \$150,000, \$200,000 a year. And that, I guess that's a philosophy, and maybe other people have a different philosophy.

Mr. Elhard: — As you know, Madam Minister, the universities in this province and universities across the nation are going to be facing a real challenge in terms of enrolment. And so if enrolment becomes an issue and costs continue to escalate, that's going to put even more pressure on tuitions, I would suggest. So does this minister and her government have a contingency plan in view of that prospect?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Well we have an infrastructure that's been built up at the two universities for a specific number of students. The reality is that if you look across the country, enrolments are declining. And it's because at one stage a family might have sent four kids off to university. There might be two kids in a family now and so you're in a position where the boomers really haven't replaced themselves and so universities are looking for alternatives.

The two universities here certainly have made a real effort to attract students internationally into their graduate programs whether at the master's level or the Ph.D [Doctor of Philosophy] level. But I also think there's another group of people that need to be recruited on to university campuses, and that's First Nations people where we have a growing population of young people.

We have the youngest population in the country, which means that the university has to be accessible — not only affordable, accessible. And I'm really pleased with what the U of S has

done in Saskatoon where they have Royal West College, which is located on the west side of Saskatoon, where students can attend in small classrooms and start their university education and then make the leap across the river to the University of Saskatchewan, the big campus in second or third year.

But I think that universities are going to have to be more engaged with our First Nations community and look at other ways of allowing people to access university education. Now we've done some of that through the regional colleges and you'll know that we have joint-use facilities where regional colleges are now in Estevan in the comprehensive school, in North Battleford, Melfort, Yorkton, and elsewhere where the first two years of university education can be completed in those regions of the province. And I think that makes university education more accessible from a distance point of view and not having to go into Saskatoon or Regina and paying rent and board and room and that sort of thing.

But I think that we need to take a different look at how we engage First Nations and Métis people in terms of a university education. And certainly the U of S has made a good start as has the U of R [University of Regina].

Mr. Elhard: — That could lead us into a whole, another discussion in terms of the University of the Arctic and Northlands College and the programs that are being offered much closer to home for much of our First Nation population.

And, you know, I think last year in estimates we asked if the government was going to provide funding, some seed money at least for the University of the Arctic. And I'm pleased to see that that has actually been accomplished, that there's some money being directed to that initiative and that they're going to be offering programs specifically designed for First Nations participation. That can't help but be a very positive thing. And delivering the program as close to home as we will be doing through that initiative is also advantageous, I think, and helpful in the long run.

I think that the minister deserves commendation when it's appropriate, so thank you for doing that.

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Thank you.

Mr. Elhard: — And we'll continue, I think, to deal with some university issues at this point. I know the demographics play a big part in the pool of people available to a post-secondary institution. And if I read it right, we don't do quite as good a job in Canada as the Europeans are doing, for instance.

I think we have roughly I think it's about 31 per cent of our population has post-secondary training, university level, post-secondary training. Europe I think is about a 49 per cent saturation rate, which is significantly better than us, which really surprises me in some regards. Because post-secondary education from university is really quite important I think to Canadians generally.

But if we have a problem from a demographic point of view, getting enough people to keep our numbers up at universities, are we looking now at maybe expanding university opportunities to people who might want to go back to school,

who as middle-aged learners decide that it might be an appropriate time to get a university degree that they forwent when they were young and foolish? Those kinds of circumstances. What's the minister's view of saturation or penetration into that adult learners market?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Well I attended the Saskatchewan religious graduation on Friday night in Saskatoon. So it was the Lutherans, the Anglicans, and the United Church. They had a graduation exercise for people who had received a degree in divinity or a master's of divinity or a Ph.D. All, most, of the graduates were older. They were in their '40s, '50s, even some in their '60s. My sense is that there is a bit of a renaissance going on with the boomers, who maybe are retiring but they're pursuing a master's or a Ph.D. or a degree for the first time. So I think there is also a place for the universities to do some strategic focusing on trying to recruit people who are retired into the institutions to further their education. If learning really is lifelong, then I think there's an opportunity there as well.

I agree with you that, in terms of university education, Europe has a much, you know, a much higher rate of university education, but it seems to me that many of those countries have dozens and dozens of universities that are very close by. If you look at Bulgaria, I think Bulgaria has 189 universities. Russia, France has many universities, the UK, Ireland. So in a place like Saskatchewan, we have two and what the two universities have been able to do through the regional college system is to try and provide some courses outside of Saskatoon and Regina. But I think accessibility also means closeness to where you are.

Mr. Elhard: — Madam Minister, you've taken us to maybe what's one of my favourite topics and that is the availability of university-level education around the province. You mentioned that you were at the graduation, the religious graduation, the other night. And I guess what I'd like to know, Madam Minister, have you ever been approached as minister by any of those institutions about the possibility of their offering degrees other than divinity or religious degrees?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Not since I have come back to Advanced Education and Employment but prior — so this would have been in the '90s — I was approached about the possibility of an institution in the province being able to offer degrees. And they were having discussions with the U of R and the U of S to make sure that the programs that they were providing would be recognized by the universities. But not recently.

Mr. Elhard: — How would your government look on a request of that type from an existing institution if they were interested in expanding their degree-granting opportunity? The assumption, of course, is that they would be able to meet all requirements, all standards that would be expected of an institution of that stature. They would probably be expected to hold membership in the Association of Universities and Colleges, the AUCC [Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada]. But having met all of those standards, if that was accomplished, would your government entertain that prospect, that notion?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Oh, I think that that's not something that we would be disinterested in. Standards are important and

portability and mobility is important that if you were to receive a degree from an institution that it would be recognized if you wanted to take what you had learned there and maybe do a master's at the University of Toronto for instance or UBC [University of British Columbia] or whatever. I think what I would want to be assured as the minister of Education that the degree was real, it meant something, and it could be used for further learning — that it wasn't simply something that wasn't acceptable elsewhere.

Mr. Elhard: — Oh, I agree. I mean I think that's sort of the bottom line with a lot of this type of discussion. If they can meet those kind of standards and those rigorous rules that are applied to institutions that are looking to achieve respectability, then I think from my perspective, they ought to be given that opportunity.

But you know, I know at one point there was a request made of a previous minister in your government to achieve that and they weren't nearly as warmly welcomed. The idea wasn't even broached with them, and we lost that institution to this province. They moved out of province when they weren't granted that opportunity. And I just don't think that that's good for the province. I don't think it's good for our communities where these institutions might be located. I don't think it's good for the social, moral, or economic community.

And so I think what I'm hearing from you tonight is a rather refreshing change in policy, if not perspective, and I'm glad to hear that the minister is reasonably comfortable at least in discussing the idea. Because I think we need that kind of open-mindedness towards these kinds of initiatives. There's not many institutions in this province right now that would even dare move in that direction, but there might be one or two over the next few years and I think they should be encouraged as opposed as to discouraged.

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — You know, I'm going from memory, but I believe it was at Briercrest that I had the discussion with in the 1990s, and certainly, you know, they have people they're drawing from all over the country and really all over the globe. For me it would be important that their standards would mean that they could transfer that degree to other institutions and that it'd be recognized.

It's not unlike, you know, Christian schools. When I was the minister of K to 12, they wanted funding from the province and I said, well you know, look at becoming an associate school under the auspices of the school boards so that we have the provincial curriculum, provincially certified teachers, and so on. And I believe Saskatoon and Regina both pursued that. They are now associate schools and do receive some funding. For me the most important thing is the quality of the education and that the education is recognized by other institutions.

Mr. Elhard: — I'm familiar with a K to 12 associate school of that nature right here in the city. But I think the interests of Briercrest are to pursue that, you know, rigorous standard so that they can eventually, if the opportunity avails itself, offer their own degrees. If they aren't able to do that yet, I think they're looking at an opportunity to provide maybe a joint degree with the U of S or the U of R. I think those are the types of discussions that might be going on now between the

institutions.

But I referred previously to Canadian Bible College, which is part of a new university college in Calgary right now. They were situated right here in the city of Regina, had one of the country's foremost seminaries. So they were doing good work in the area of their expertise. But they wanted to broaden their academic offerings to include non-religious degrees, something different than an M.Div. [Master of Divinity] or a Bachelor of Religious Education or that type of thing, a regular B.A. [Bachelor of Arts] or maybe B.Ed. [Bachelor of Education]. I'm not sure what their goals were exactly. But they weren't welcomed with open arms. And they're located in Calgary and they've teamed up with two or three other similar schools. And now our university college is operating under the Alberta system.

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Do you know, are they affiliated with AUCC?

Mr. Elhard: — I'm not sure if they are at this point or not. I'm assuming that they're making every effort to do that.

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Right. I know Briercrest is affiliated with the U of S and they're now making, they're trying to engage the University of Regina to become affiliated with them. So that's what I know.

Mr. Elhard: — Well, Madam Minister, you know, some of this discussion is informed by my own experience, having been educated in the States. You know, having taken university training at what was a religious school at one time, grew into becoming one of the very best medical doctoral programs in the United States, highly regarded for its academics, and has graduates all around the world in very prestigious places, not to mention this committee room.

And so, you know, I think if these institutions are given the opportunity to grow, they can mature, they can develop. And in fact most of Canada's oldest schools and most of the Ivy League schools in the United States grew out of religious traditions. And so I don't know that we should be discouraging that if there's an interest or an attempt to do that in the future here in the province so . . .

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — I don't think it's a matter of discouraging. It's a matter of making sure that whatever a person gets in the way of a credential is able to be recognized elsewhere. And, you know, we've got federated colleges. We have Campion, St. Thomas More, St. Andrew's, we have Luther College — these are affiliated or federated colleges, I believe, to the two universities. And I don't know why . . . You know, that's one way to go as you make your way to a university status.

Mr. Elhard: — We're going to have to change the topic because the Chair tells me that we're supposed to be wrapping up at 10 o'clock, I thought it was 10:30. So we have a Bill to deal with yet tonight. And I do want to move just quickly to a discussion around the Bill, if I may.

Madam Minister, I was looking through the *Hansard* of your previous attendance here. I want to bring this to your attention

because I think you probably want to correct this. But in your opening statement, you were talking about the new tax credit program for post-secondary graduates and part way through here, you say:

This new initiative increases to \$20,000 per year the amount of income earned by a graduate that will be exempt from provincial income tax. That is, over a five-year period, \$100 dollars in tax-free income following graduation.

Well I just picked it up out of *Hansard*, and I thought you'd probably want to correct that because I think it's not that generous a program, but it's more so than 100 bucks.

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — I do notice that sometimes *Hansard* is absolutely wrong. It's hard to believe but it's true.

Mr. Elhard: — Just for the record.

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Yes. I've noticed that when I've looked at the transcript and then listened to the auditory, it's just incorrect. So it's \$100,000, yes.

Mr. Elhard: — I want to talk a little bit about this program, Madam Minister, because I guess I want to know from you — and this is preparatory to the consideration of the Bill — I want to know from you what was the thinking of your government when you decided to bring this piece of legislation forward as part of this spring's budget.

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — The thinking behind the program was to have an incentive, really, for young people that are graduating from our institutions, that they would want to have this as one tool that would be an incentive for them to stay in the province. As you know, we have more jobs than people, and this was a way to provide some tax relief to young people — or not necessarily young people — anyone that's graduating with a certificate, diploma, or degree in excess of six months in duration. It's an incentive for them to stay here or to come here from other provinces.

Mr. Elhard: — Madam Minister, you were quoted in the March 23 edition of the *Leader-Post* as saying that about 86 per cent . . . I'm sorry, you weren't quoted; this is just a figure that it was attributed to the government:

. . . the government estimates [that] about 86 per cent of post-secondary graduates stay in the province; the new strategy is aimed to increase that figure.

If we're successful to a rate of 86 per cent, how much more success does the minister anticipate this program will generate? What level of response does the government anticipate achieving?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Right. Well that number did not come from me. That number came from the national grad survey, so the 86 per cent . . . But if you look at our experience under the graduate tax credit, we believe that 73.4 per cent of graduates stay in the province. And we're hoping to increase that to at least an 80 per cent retention rate with the new graduate tax incentive.

Mr. Elhard: — So the lion's share of this money will go to people who are going to stay here anyway.

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — I guess that would be one way to look at it. On the other hand, we think that it's important to have incentives for people to stay, given the red-hot economy and labour market. We want to keep people. And the reality for us is that we have some professions in particular that we need to do a much better job of retaining.

Mr. Elhard: — This amount of credit, basically we're talking about \$10,000 over and above the existing basic exemption. So if most people would be in the, sort of the minimum tax bracket, we're talking about an \$1,100 net figure in the pockets of the individuals. Does the minister and her government seriously believe that \$1,100 a year is enough to bring and/or keep additional people in the province?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Well I think if you look at other jurisdictions, we're certainly in the ballpark in terms of being competitive with other jurisdictions when it comes to retention efforts. And this is a retention effort to keep people, or to at least have them consider the possibility of coming to the province or remaining in the province after they graduate.

Mr. Elhard: — When the minister characterizes this as a retention effort, it's clear that your first and foremost response was not directed towards tuition issues that has been sort of the primary cause of the student union leadership in this province.

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — I think . . . you know, we listened to what young people were saying and have said certainly at the youth summit. Young people were saying, you know, you need to think about an incentive after we graduate. Student leaders have been talking about the tuition, but we're in the third year, and we have a process for looking at how we make university education or post-secondary education more affordable and more accessible, and Mr. McCall will report out in the fall.

But this was a retention method or mechanism. And we thought that all post-secondary graduates in the province, regardless of which program they were in and regardless of the cost or type of education that they'd earned, could benefit equally from the graduate tax exemption.

Mr. Elhard: — Madam Minister, is the cost of this program reflected in your budget, your department's budget, or is it elsewhere?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — I believe it's in the Department of Finance because it's a graduate tax credit so for the purposes of having it reflected it would be a change in revenues from personal income tax.

Mr. Elhard: — And was it broken down, to your knowledge, in the Minister of Finance estimates for revenue? Was it a line item identified as such?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — I think revenue . . . It would be a change in revenue, reduction in revenue.

Mr. Elhard: — Right.

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — When it comes to what we're estimating personal income taxes to be in the budget.

Mr. Elhard: — Okay do you know from your involvement in this program what the anticipated cost is?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Okay so we anticipate that for the 2007 grads it will mean about \$5.8 million in income tax savings. So that would be for Saskatchewan grads in 2007, and then annual tax savings are expected to increase each year for the first five years of the program as the full cycle of the tax exemption certificates are issued. Once fully engaged, we believe that there will be income tax savings to approximately 40,000 graduates a year with an annual cost of about \$40 million.

Mr. Elhard: — Thank you. So we have that loss of revenue to the provincial treasury totalled up over the next number of years, and your government is still considering putting a cap or reducing or somehow freezing tuition costs on top of that?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Well that will be up to . . . We're waiting for Mr. McCall's recommendations. I've just given you my personal opinion that we need to be somewhere in the middle of the pack, and we're not quite there yet.

Mr. Elhard: — Madam Minister, you can be coy with me, but I've read between the lines. Okay I guess as long as you've characterized this as a retention program, I don't have much to dispute. But I do know that there are other people who have disputed the value of this compared to the very real issues surrounding tuition costs.

Kathleen Wilson, which is a name I'm sure you're familiar, said that the budget does nothing to address accessibility and affordability of post-secondary education and training opportunities. Kathleen Wilson is vice-president of external affairs at the University of Regina students' union. And even your Finance minister made a comment that Saskatchewan has an imperfect match between the type of people turned out by post-secondary institutions and the jobs that exist here. We're still largely educating a white-collar workforce in what is a largely a blue-collar economy.

So I guess I'm wondering about you know the value of the program. Maybe it's too generic. Maybe it's too general. Maybe it's not specific or targeted enough given the realities facing us.

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Well I think what I would say is that I anticipate — given that we have some significant outside interests to our province coming here, they're intent on making a good dollar for their shareholder — I anticipate that, along with their interest in extracting our resources, that they will want to ensure that we have white-collar people in the province so that not all of the legal jobs are in Alberta, not all of the accounting jobs are in Alberta, not all of the engineering jobs are in Alberta, so that there is a . . . I suspect as more companies have a presence here, it's not just about extracting resources. It's also about ensuring that we have access to what would be university-type jobs and not just the technically trained jobs.

But I know that you know these folks, so maybe you could encourage them . . . I had to think about that. I think you have dinners with them regularly.

Mr. Elhard: — Well not regularly, once in a while. Madam Chair, I have no further questions.

Bill No. 64 — The Graduate Tax Exemption Act

The Chair: — All right. We hadn't actually moved into consideration of the Bill. But now we will, and you don't have, so we can say no further questions. The Bill is The Graduate Tax Exemption Act, Bill No. 64. Short title. Is that agreed? Clause 1?

Some Hon. Members: — Agreed.

[Clauses 1 to 10 inclusive agreed to.]

The Chair: — Her Majesty, by and with the advice and consent of the Legislative Assembly of Saskatchewan, enacts as follows: The Graduate Tax Exemption Act. Can I have a member move that we accept this Bill as we have just decided?

Mr. Prebble: — Madam Chair, I am very happy to move that we accept the Bill.

The Chair: — Thank you, Mr. Prebble. Agreed? All agreed?

Some Hon. Members: — Agreed.

The Chair: — Now we need a member to move that we report it to the House without amendment.

Mr. Prebble: — I so move, Madam Chair.

The Chair: — Mr. Prebble does that as well. And all agreed? All in favour?

Some Hon. Members: — Agreed.

The Chair: — Thank you. That is passed. It is now past the time that we've agreed to adjourn, so we will adjourn until the next time, call of the Chair. Thank you. Thank you to the minister and her officials.

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Can I thank my officials?

The Chair: — You can.

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — I would like to thank my officials for attending tonight and assisting me in answering the members' questions. So thank you.

[The committee adjourned at 22:10.]