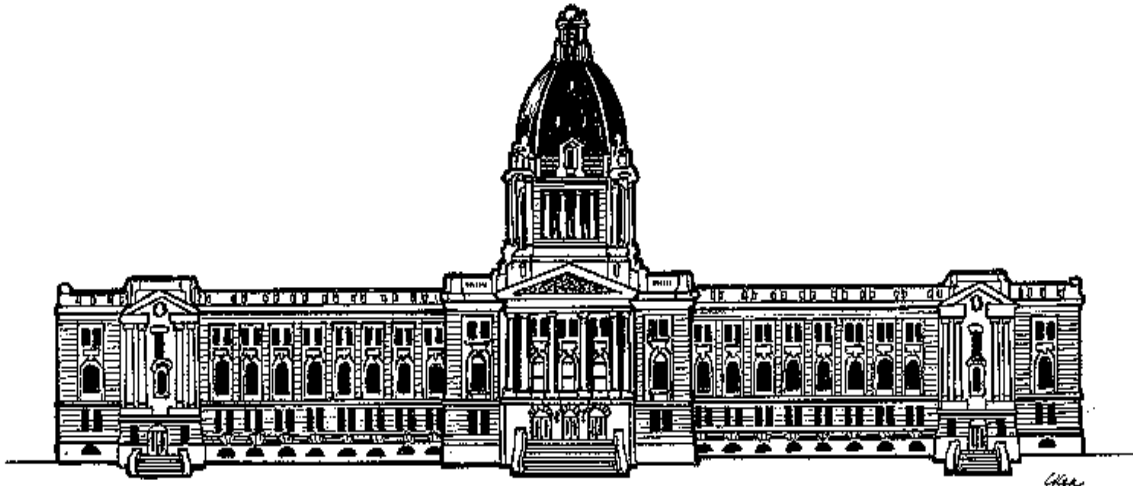




STANDING COMMITTEE ON HUMAN SERVICES

Hansard Verbatim Report

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**STANDING COMMITTEE ON HUMAN SERVICES
2004**

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Saskatoon Eastview

Mr. Ken Cheveldayoff, Deputy Chair
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Saskatchewan Rivers

Hon. Joanne Crofford
Regina Rosemont

Mr. Glenn Hagel
Moose Jaw North

Mr. Don Morgan
Saskatoon Southeast

The committee met at 19:00.

The Chair: — The Standing Committee on Human Services is now called to order. The business before the committee tonight is the supplementary estimates for the Department of Learning. And the supplementary estimates for Learning are vote 5 found on page 14 of the Supplementary Estimates.

Before I ask the minister to introduce his officials, I'll just remind the members that all questions must be relevant to the subvote program or policy being funded. And I'll turn it over to the minister to introduce his officials and make any opening remarks that he wishes.

**General Revenue Fund
Supplementary Estimates
Learning
Vote 5**

Subvotes (LR11), (LR03), and (LR09)

Hon. Mr. Thomson: — Good evening, Madam Chair. I have a number of officials joining me tonight. And perhaps what I'll do is introduce them as they join us at the table. At this point I'm joined by the deputy minister, Bonnie Durnford.

The Chair: — You want to go straight into questions?

Hon. Mr. Thomson: — I have no opening statement at this point.

The Chair: — Okay. Mr. Wakefield.

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

I had a chance in an earlier committee work to monitor some of the questions, some of the responses, so I would like to, if I can, I would like to address some of the concerns with the supplementary estimates as it pertains to the area of the Northwest. That may or may not be a surprise.

There is considerable feeling in the Northwest, and I'm thinking primarily of Pierceland and in that area, that they do in fact feel rather separated from the rest of the province. They deal mainly with, I guess, the division between Cold Lake and Meadow Lake. And Cold Lake, being 20 minutes down the road, is very much influencing their trading patterns. And because of the trading pattern that normally allows the people to kind of associate with that direction, which isolates them even further. And with that isolated feeling they tell me that the amalgamation of the Meadow Lake School Division, which they're part of, with a larger division, you know, going right down through Lloydminster, Neilburg and so on, they don't understand how they're going to maintain their local autonomous feeling and feel for part of the bigger picture.

Can you help me with some of these concerns so I can address it with the school boards there?

Hon. Mr. Thomson: — Thank you very much. I've been

joined at the table tonight by Don Sangster, who's the executive director of school finance.

This issue that the member identifies is one that I've heard a fair amount also as I have travelled the province and talked to people about the education reform. And I think that it's largely based on a . . . it is obviously based on a concern about how it is that the school board amalgamation will affect them at a local community level, especially where those communities have schools.

Traditionally of course the system's been set up that every school within a rural area traditionally has a representative on the school board. This will change now as subdivisions will end up with two or three schools in those areas, and trustees will end up representing those. I think the challenge for us as we move forward with reform is to make sure we've got in place a good local accountability mechanism that ensures that representatives from the local community — ratepayers, parents, teachers — have an ability to have input and say in their schools.

This is an issue which is under discussion now within the restructuring coordinating committee, and is, I think, one of the real opportunities we have to change the system and reform the system while at the same time making sure that, making sure that we have . . . Yes, I was going to say I feel like I should wrap myself in the flag with that. It was very timely. I would like to thank Mr. Bjornerud for that.

Anyway I think that the challenge for us here is how we develop that local accountability mechanism that still allows people to have input. And there are a number of different models that are being looked at.

Mr. Wakefield: — Thank you, Mr. Minister. I really think it's quite important, particularly in an area such as that. With the larger division proposed there's going to be a considerable amount of travel for any of the people that will be on the board, more so than before when one representative from Pierceland would attend a meeting in Meadow Lake. It could very well require much more time, much more travel.

And their concern is that they will have difficulty finding somebody that wants to take on that role. Because generally now the way it works is that . . . And I'm not sure if you've been on a school division board. I have. You try to do the best you can for the local people that you're representing. And if you have to sacrifice a considerable amount of time both driving and at daylong meetings, it's going to be difficult for people to say, yes I think I can achieve what I want to achieve in consideration of all that time. And I'm not sure there's an answer but it's a concern that was expressed from that particular point. I can add another point if you don't wish to comment.

Hon. Mr. Thomson: — Certainly all I was going to say is that this is, I think, a fair observation that the role of trustees will change under this reorganization both in terms of the skill sets that we need within the boards, as trustees serve on much, much larger corporate entities. Forgetting for a second the geographic issues, but just thinking about the size of budgets that they're dealing with. They're going to need a new set of skills and

we're going to need to make sure that that's dealt with appropriately. So I think it's a fair observation the member makes.

The only issue that I might take is I have . . . As I have listened to what trustees have been telling me, there is a fair amount of interest in serving on these new boards. And actually the people that are expressing interest tend to be the most experienced of the trustees. So I think that bodes well for the reform in that we will, I think, see extremely competent people contesting these elections, or being elected or acclaimed to these boards.

Mr. Wakefield: — Mr. Minister, I hope you're right. It's only our future we're talking about. And to have the appropriate representative doing the best job possible is going to enhance how the future is going to play out for these young people.

I guess the concern that they also have leading past that a little bit — and this may not be new to you — but they're concerned that with a larger division, the local focus on the local school might change. I'm not sure that that's the case, but the school becomes a real community. The school is a function of the community. Sometimes it's an arena. Sometimes it's the curling rink. And in this case, it's very much a community centre. And I guess there's an area of uncertainty and that leads to all kinds of bogeymen suggesting that they're maybe going to lose something.

And I guess the next question that comes in their mind is if this goes ahead into forced amalgamation with the area that has been outlined, what's next? For efficiency reasons, are they the ones that's going to have to accept a school closure, for instance, and then that's part of the community? I think that's where all that's leading.

Hon. Mr. Thomson: — I think that's certainly underpinning the fear in some of these communities.

The reality of the situation is it should have no particular impact at the school level, either in terms of the way that the school interrelates with the community or in terms of the viability of the school. As the member knows and I think as all members know, the single biggest issue driving school closure, as it has been for the last 30 years, is depopulation and loss of school age children within these areas.

Schools, as I see, have . . . we've been roughly having about, what is it, 10?

A Member: — Seven to ten.

Hon. Mr. Thomson: — Seven to ten school closures a year. I don't anticipate that number will change significantly as a result of this. My hope is that it will make it easier for divisions to keep open schools in areas today that are under financial pressure. But I don't anticipate that this will have a significant pressure to close schools that are already in place.

And certainly, as I take a look at the ones in the northwest, I'm not aware of any imminent closures in the Pierceland area.

Mr. Wakefield: — Mr. Minister, the people there are very jealous of what they have accomplished in the feeling of

community co-operation and promoting the school as such, as I mentioned earlier. They're very proud of their community for having attracted a considerable number of new younger people, younger families, and so the school is actually increasing.

And maybe they have unjustified fears, but it certainly is a fear because it's never been explained to them. They tell me that the amalgamation from their point of view had never been presented to them with proper consultation. I think there was a consultation with the Meadow Lake School Division board. They weren't very happy with the level of information that has come out to dispel some of those kinds of fears.

I would implore you and your department to shine more light on where this is going. You can force amalgamation and you can make things happen. But if you want it to be successful, you've got to shine much more sunlight on to the fears that are being expressed; not only to me, but to other people.

And if I could maybe just add one more thing while I was talking about the area around Cold Lake attracting people into Pierceland, and I'm relaying this from their stories to me, but when the amalgamation occurred in Alberta, the experience they found was that the new divisions were of such a size that the supervision of that division had to be divided up into another layer of, kind of — I don't know what the right word is — deputy superintendents. And so, they really didn't achieve anything. The supervision was back at the local, at the smaller level again and they seemed to feel there was no proof that there was any cost savings in that scenario at all.

Those are comments that I have from the people in Pierceland and I would appreciate any comments that I could relay back to them.

Hon. Mr. Thomson: — Certainly as we take a look at the new proposal for the school division in the Meadow Lake, Lloydminster, rural Lloydminster, Turtleford area, as I take a look at the subdivision that Pierceland's in with Goodsoil and Dorintosh, I don't anticipate that there will be a significant push to see school closures just given geographic considerations there.

This issue around supervision of teachers is one that I hear regularly raised. I frankly am of the view that we need to rethink how it is we deal with teachers' supervision within the school system. I think there's a significant new opportunity for principals to exercise more of that role; for us to bring up the administrative skills at a local level; for us to think about how we put more focus on student services as opposed to simply administrative services. That's the challenge these new divisions will have as they move forward in designing their programs.

I have no doubt that we will see a reduction in the number of administrators both at, obviously, the director and superintendent level. And, that we will see a corresponding increase in the number of teachers and consultants, be they special ed or ed psych or otherwise. And that's been our experience where we've seen it.

Now part of that is driven by contractual arrangements with the STF that set guidelines and limits on the number of

out-of-scope staff that are permitted. So this in itself will require some administrative change.

But I think that the member's quite right that these are the challenges that the system will need to overcome. And over the next few years this is where we will need to be able to demonstrate exactly what the system . . . how the system is better off as a result of the reforms than it is today.

Mr. Wakefield: — Mr. Minister, I was told as well that particularly with the Meadow Lake School Division there has been considerable negotiation, considerable co-operation with Flying Dust Reserve, with Meadow Lake Tribal Council. Can you tell us how that will fit into the amalgamation proposal that you're putting forward? Will they be part of this?

Hon. Mr. Thomson: — Yes, the Flying Dust First Nation will have a seat on the board, a discrete seat on the board, as a result of their agreement. The agreement is one that will be migrated into the new division, and it'll be the responsibility of the new division to maintain it.

There are a number of issues however around that agreement that are difficult, and I have recently met with both the board and the Flying Dust First Nation about these. I'm not sure that we want to go into them tonight, but there are a number of issues that are complicating factors in terms of the success of this. I think in many ways it's a model agreement. I think it's a very positive one and is one that I hope will continue to succeed and remain in place. But I know that there are a number of issues both on the Flying Dust First Nation within their own internal political structure that is causing them to question the arrangement.

I have sent a letter of clarification to the Flying Dust First Nation. I don't think I have it here tonight, but I can endeavour to make it available to the member if he chooses, outlining some of the issues that they raised and how we see this being incorporated within the new arrangement. It's by no means a private letter; it's a letter of assurance. I'd be happy to share it with members of the Assembly.

Mr. Wakefield: — Do you feel confident that they will accept what is being offered and negotiated and work with you on this?

Hon. Mr. Thomson: — I am hopeful that this will remain in place. As I say, there are a number of issues outside of the amalgamation which are of concern to members of the council, and I have enumerated those in meeting with the Meadow Lake board. These are issues that . . . these kind of agreements, given their nature, take a lot of work to make sure that there's the trust and success and results built into them that are expected. These are difficult arrangements; these are new ground for a lot of divisions so I'm hopeful that this will continue. And that is both the advice and some of the assurance I provided to the Flying Dust First Nation, and some of the advice I offered to Meadow Lake in terms of what I thought needed to happen to see that continue.

The success — if I can just add one other thing — the success or failure of these boards will depend largely upon the type of directors that they choose. These directors are going to need to think about new approaches to dealing with these issues. It

cannot simply be business as usual. And this is going to be a significant new task that's going to have to be taken on by these new boards, is picking who these directors are. And maybe on that issue, enough said.

Mr. Wakefield: — Okay. Thank you, Mr. Minister. I just have one more comment, Madam Chair, and that is I found a quote — in fact I didn't find it; it was given to me — that states:

Elementary and secondary education in Saskatchewan (and I'm quoting) is funded through a foundation operating grant based on three vital principles: local autonomy and accountability, equality of opportunity, and efficiency.

When the people of the Pierceland area, and in that area they look at that, they feel that there's . . . they're not confident that all those things can be achieved. And the response, when we talked about it at a meeting, the response was, well we're going to do it; trust me; it's going to happen and it will work. And again I implore you to don't treat them as children and say, trust me, it's going to work; give them as much sunlight as you can in taking away those uncertainties so that it can create something beneficial that I'm sure we all hope it will.

Hon. Mr. Thomson: — I accept the member's advice on this.

The Chair: — Thank you. Mr. McMorris.

Mr. McMorris: — Madam Chair, I won't pursue any questions right now. There's a number of other members, not nearly as many as I had first anticipated so we may not be here quite as long as what we had agreed on. But I think it's important that we have on the record that we had talked about the property tax relief issue and how that relates to amalgamation and that amalgamation, according to you, needed to happen first before there could be property tax relief. I know the estimate is about property tax relief, but because amalgamation had to follow, or had to lead, that's why the questions are going down the amalgamation road.

And I think you and I have, the minister and I have already talked about that, but I just wanted to get that on the record as to the link between property tax relief and why we're asking questions on amalgamation. I'll turn it over to my colleague from . . .

Hon. Mr. Thomson: — Madam Chair, if I might say, certainly I accept that there is a linkage here. And I take it members will just accept that I preface every one of my questions that in order for the government to provide \$110 million worth of property tax relief over the next two years, we need to undertake significant change in our system. So that being said, if you just think about that as my answer as I start each of them, I'm sure we'll relate it back to the estimate.

A Member: — What did you say?

Hon. Mr. Thomson: — I was saying that in order to accomplish the \$110 million worth of property tax relief over the next two years . . . but I thank the member very much for allowing me to reiterate that.

The Chair: — Thank you. Ms. Draude.

Ms. Draude: — Thank you, Madam Chair, and Mr. Minister. I have a number of questions along the same line as my colleague from Lloydminster. I'm going to start with an Aboriginal school, two schools in my constituency. And they don't have the status of the Flying Dust Reserve, but they are nevertheless very important to the young people who are attaining higher levels of education because of this school in Fishing Lake and Yellow Quill.

When I've spoken to the principals at those schools, they are concerned that they're not going to have a seat on the board. And they are concerned about the agreements that they have been working with and through the different school divisions over time have come to a working relationship that it is something that benefits their students. And I'm really concerned that they weren't . . . the consultation wasn't there with them before the decision was made. And I would like to know what you would tell them if they were sitting here instead of me right now.

Hon. Mr. Thomson: — Well again, all agreements that are in place with any party — whether those are LINC (Local Implementation and Negotiation Committee) agreements with the STF, whether those are CUPE (Canadian Union of Public Employees) agreements for support staff, whether they are agreements with First Nations, or indeed personal services contracts — will all migrate over into the new divisions. Any contractual arrangement that is in place will have to be respected appropriately by the new divisions.

The concern that's raised about consultation — that there was indeed consultation with the FSIN (Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations) on Aboriginal education issues and the impact that these reforms may have on that. Certainly we're very interested in finding new ways to develop a seamless education system with the First Nations in this province. And from a school-to-school, school-by-school approach, we have been looking at how this is impacted. There have been a few changes to the map to try and make sure that where possible First Nation education issues were dealt with. And I'm trying to think if there were any in that area. Maybe I'll ask Don Sangster just to offer a comment.

Mr. Sangster: — Well the only thing I would add, Minister, is the task force also did meet in Saskatoon with a group of tribal councils and in Regina with a group of tribal councils. I'm not sure that the two schools you mentioned were represented or not, but the offer was out, you know, ahead of time. And whether or not they were involved, I don't know. But I do know that the task force had a special meeting in Saskatoon on, I think, October 22 and then in Regina the following week, to try to address it before they met with the FSIN (Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations).

Ms. Draude: — The tuition agreements that were in place between the different school divisions that are . . . of course they did vary between the school divisions. And one of the current concerns of course is: is that going to be varied? Even though the minister has acknowledged that the contracts or the agreements will be transferred over, it doesn't mean that next year when the agreement comes up because of the change in the

size of the constituency or the size of the school division, it won't necessitate changes again, and even some of the shared services.

And I know the minister understands that the agreements that have taken place have been hard fought to attain. It's taken years and years to build up relationships that people feel are benefiting both the Aboriginal students and the non-Aboriginal students. And anything that we would do that would be detrimental to this, I don't think as a society we should be even . . . like, we couldn't stand it if it's not going to be a benefit to anybody. So I'm really concerned that when the principals and the directors talk to me about these issues, that it's something that we've got to take really seriously.

So I understand that you've had specific meetings with them, but I don't . . . I know that they weren't at those meetings. And maybe there was good reasons — maybe they weren't aware of them, whatever it might be.

But I guess the next point is, the minister had made the statement that it was not going to affect services. So then we have to measure that. How are we going to measure it and how quickly are we going to measure it? Because it's not going to be good enough to say three years from now we see that there's a problem because in those three years we've got students that are going to be affected by it.

So when we say there's going . . . the minister said there's going to be a decrease in the number of directors and an increase in the number of teachers. How quickly are we going to know that? And how do you measure people until they've gone through a graduation or through some kind of a standardized testing? I'm speaking about Aboriginal students, but of course I mean all of them because we can't just wait and say, you know, I think this didn't work.

So I guess my question to the minister is: how are you going to measure it and how quickly are you going to measure that what your government is doing here is having a positive effect on the students in our province? I'm not talking about dollars; I'm not talking about any of the rest of it. I'm talking about the outcomes of the students.

Hon. Mr. Thomson: — Well first of all, I should say that our government does not support the type of standardized testing that we have seen in other provinces like Alberta. That is not our approach to dealing with student assessment. And in that regard, of course, we're supported by the STF who share grave concerns about that type of an approach which, unfortunately, in many provinces serves only to ghettoize those students from areas with fewer resources to draw upon.

This exercise is largely aimed at attempting to level up the type of services that are available within divisions. Certainly there are a number of issues we're going to have to work through on a division-by-division basis. There are a number of issues that we're going to have to work through across the province. That's why we're got a restructuring coordinating committee in place to do that.

I would certainly say to the member, and to all members, that the ability to measure this at the . . . And I would set a rather

ambitious target of saying we should see demonstrable change, true change, during this three-year transition period. We should see that. And in some cases, it'll be very quick. In other cases, as we think about graduation levels and others, that will take time for us to work through. But the baseline is there today, and what we need to now see is how we can move it forward and see change.

There is no doubt that this is not incremental change. This is exponential change. And one of the reasons for it is because the current system to date is not moving as forward quickly enough to deal with these issues, and changing demographics is one of them.

Ms. Draude: — So to clarify, Mr. Minister, tell me what your ambitious goal is. What do you, what does your department hope to achieve in the next two or three years so that we can say that yes, this is working?

Hon. Mr. Thomson: — What we expect to see are the type of results that we saw with the Sask Rivers amalgamation or the Qu'Appelle Valley amalgamation, where we saw a redirection of money from administrative support into instructional support, where we saw greater program offerings. We saw better program offerings in rural areas for students where we were able to see better student support services in place.

There are a number of other things we need to do along with this. Implementing School^{PLUS} is a significant part of that as we move forward to make sure we've got a more student-centred, teacher-focused type of arrangement. We need to push those issues forward at the same time.

But the type of inertia that we've had within the system over the last several years, in terms of moving forward with administrative change, has unfortunately, in many areas, precluded that from happening. Not in all areas, but in many areas it has. And that is now what we're attempting to fix, is we're attempting to bring in a higher standard that all students can hopefully see access to. And that's our objective.

Ms. Draude: — Mr. Minister, I would think that there's a lot of school divisions out there and a lot of trustees that are afraid it isn't going to happen. So since it's quite obvious that it's going to, through your department, we have to give them confidence that there are goals that are going to be . . . that you're watching for.

And for example the School^{PLUS}. I know the initiative is something that we supported and yet I haven't seen again any report of how you can actually measure that it's made a difference in the students' lives. So again I'm hoping it's something that we're going to be able to see as a province, a real difference and the people that . . . the trustees that I represent are saying that at the end of the day this is what it's all about.

Every one of those trustees works for basically peanuts. And they do it . . . it's volunteer work. They get a pittance usually just to go to convention but they're there because of the students. And when they, when we change the system so that we're down to two or three schools represented by one trustee, that puts fear in the hearts of a lot of people, thinking there's

nobody that's really going to be worried about my student. They don't have time to worry about time or I'm . . . maybe that's not exactly the right word. But when you have a community that's been part of your life and now you're going to be representing two or three communities, unless you've lived out there you don't understand what the fear is. So at the end of the day we're just worrying about our students.

Can you tell me . . . You talked about the skill sets for trustees will change. What do you mean by that?

Hon. Mr. Thomson: — Well one of the things that we are going to see is that trustees are now serving on much larger corporate entities. They are going to need to develop their skills as corporate directors. We're going to need to make sure that they are able to deal with significantly larger budgets and make sure the oversight is there.

We're going to need to make sure that there is more professional development work done with them to serve on these types of organizations. It will require some renewed focus on those issues moving beyond simply the skill set today which is I think prevalent if not predominant throughout the system, which is largely focused on the representative role of the school at the board.

This will require some new focus in terms of making sure that they're dealing with the corporate objectives that are there also. In the same way that Public Accounts functions here at the legislature, audit committees of boards are going to need to function. Trustees are going to have to serve that role the same way that you or I do as we serve in these committees.

Ms. Draude: — Is government going to determine . . . first of all, either appoint who's going to be on this board or are they going to set a certain range of skill sets that people are going to have to have before they can be a representative on the board?

Hon. Mr. Thomson: — No, these boards will be fully democratically elected. And what will need to happen, in fact what we are working with the school board association on now, is starting to work through what kind of additional assistance or training trustees may need or feel that they need in order to perform these duties.

And so this will provide, I think, a new opportunity across the province to make sure we actually spend some time doing professional development work with trustees. In that regard I think this will be a very successful endeavour.

Ms. Draude: — Mr. Minister, I have one specific question. And I guess this is more to do with funding because it's a question I've had from the Theodore Catholic School Board. And there was a decision to remove the isolated school factors from the Theodore operating grant for 2003. And it appears it is basically an arbitrary decision and it hasn't been justified to the . . . for the board in a way that they can understand. And I'm wondering if you can tell us why the sum of \$32,000 was removed from that school . . . from the grant?

Hon. Mr. Thomson: — I'll ask Don Sangster to explain this.

Mr. Sangster: — It wasn't a case of anything being removed.

Theodore catholic school was created over the summer of 2003. And in fact, normally there is no funding mechanism to fund a new school board until the next budget year. In practice however, and the history has been . . . it's been more with associate schools that have come in from being a private school and come into a public system, in practice we had over about the last five years determined that we would provide a basic grant to them to carry them through to the next budget year, the first full budget year that they . . . where their kids are counted and then they're part of the system.

And so we followed the same procedure we followed in any other one, we gave the basic rate and the increments. But we didn't include . . . we didn't expand to the other parts of the grant which includes the isolated school factor. And so it wasn't a matter of not including it or taking it away, it was a matter of following the procedures that we had used in any other case in the last half a dozen to 10 years and follow that procedure the same way.

So they did qualify come April 1, which was the first time that they actually . . . where we had a new budget in place so that we could in fact fund them. Of course those students were funded to the other school division that they had attended before that, and that's where the isolated school funding went. And so it was simply determined by the deputy minister of the day that that was the procedure to follow as we had in previous procedures.

Now that has been explained to the Theodore Catholic Board at least a couple of times. And although I have a letter . . . another letter just written to me recently to ask me to respond again. And the deputy minister has asked me to write a letter and work with her to solve it.

But that's the procedure we've done. And it really isn't any different than we've done . . . I mean another example is we've just had some students return from Flin Flon to the Creighton School Division and so what we did is give them the basic rate. We didn't calculate . . . we didn't include them in any of the other calculations, but we used them until this next budget year, then they'll get the full . . . then they're treated under the new budget basically.

Ms. Draude: — Just to clarify then for the next budget year, that won't be missing then.

Mr. Sangster: — They already have received it.

Ms. Draude: — Okay. Thank you.

The Chair: — Mr. Bjornerud.

Mr. Bjornerud: — Thank you, Madam Chair. First I should apologize for someone's phone ringing while we're in committee. It so seldom ever rings. No one ever calls me. I was so surprised it rang. I apologize for that.

Madam Chair, Mr. Minister, as you know I represent Deer Park, Potashville, York and those areas. And I think you know some of the concerns that I would like you to comment on tonight, but I'll bring them up and, you know, I think for the sake of time I'll bring a number of them up and then if you could

respond to them, that would be great.

I think, and I know you actually have been out and met with the Deer Park at Melville here a while ago, but I'm going to bring some of these concerns to you again. One of their first concerns is that they feel that further amalgamation — by the way, I might as well have it on the record that they are very, very much against forced amalgamation as I know they've passed on to you and we're doing again tonight — but they believe that further amalgamation will actually see an increase to the local taxpayer in the cost.

I know their concerns. They've worked hard out there to keep their mill rate down. I believe they're about 19 mills now and I think there's been some word that the average might be around 21 mills, and I guess their concern is that actually their taxes probably will go up after the larger school divisions are in place. And I guess they were very unhappy with that after the work they've done.

They also talk about further amalgamations will not result in an improvement of quality of education for their students. They believe that that's not in the works because of bigger school divisions. The Melville Comprehensive School agreement as we see it today is in jeopardy and I think you may understand that they may have brought that to your attention with St. Henry's and Melville Comprehensive had a very good situation going there, where they shared office space and shared space in school and so on and it was good for both sides and I think it saved dollars in the long run.

I think they're also concerned that they're in jeopardy of losing the Melville area administration office, and that may be down the road. We may not know where that will end up, but I think that's another of their concerns.

And then another one of their biggest concerns — and some of the other members I think have mentioned it — that the loss of local autonomy by such large school divisions, they feel that the local input will be very minimal at most, and they're very concerned about that. And I know that there's a number of things here on the plate but if the minister would care to respond to them if he would.

Hon. Mr. Thomson: — Well certainly. Let me try working my way through these. With regard to the comprehensive school agreement, this is an issue that has been raised both by Melville-Deer Park and by the Catholic section. Again this is an area that I don't foresee how amalgamation should threaten the co-operation that is in place, and this is one of the issues that we're working through on a local perspective to make sure is maintained because I do agree that it is a positive arrangement.

The question of mill rates is an interesting one in that Melville-Deer Park . . . And indeed as we look at the divisions within that proposed area, there is relative uniformity today within the various divisions. I think we've got a . . . it looks like a low of 18.8 and a high of 22. That's about the right range that we anticipate will be dealt with. I'm not sure how this will work itself out, but we're talking about them having a mill rate somewhere in the 19, 19.5 range, that to me just . . . quick back of the envelope kind of calculation seems about right.

One of the complicating factors in the east side will be how reassessment affects, how reassessment is going to affect the valuation of land. And certainly, as we know, along the east side of the province there is going to be seeing significant pressure as a result of that. I don't know at this point what the specific impact is on these boards, and it will take us a bit of time to work that through.

The issue of the administrative offices is one that the new boards will need to sort through. Certainly this division has two significant population centres, both being Yorkton and Melville. There's no doubt we understand the traditional rivalry between the two centres, for not only services but for commercial ventures. And this is one of the issues that the new board will need to look at. I don't think there's anything that would preclude the boards from looking at some . . . one having a head office and the other having a satellite instruction office.

Indeed as we think about some of the larger geographic areas, I think that that will be a necessity for them to make sure there is some kind of instructional offices or satellite offices available. I think that hopefully covers off . . . there was one other issue the member had raised but I . . .

Mr. Bjornerud: — Local autonomy.

Hon. Mr. Thomson: — The local autonomy issue is very much as we've talked about elsewhere. It will depend on the strength of local trustees in representing that area. This is an issue that obviously they are going to need to work through. Right now Melville-Deer Park, as I understand it, has on it trustees that don't represent any schools at all. And so this will be a change in terms of their approach and that so they will need to . . . whoever sits on the new board will represent a number of schools.

But again, I really do believe that the trustees who are going to be elected will come into the job with a sense of purpose and an earnestness that they're anxious to represent it. And that was one of the reasons we asked the task force to bring forward subdivision boundaries is to, while people who are interested in seeking positions on these school boards, today to begin making those contacts in other communities.

And I think as they've drawn these boundaries, they have attempted as much as possible to make sure communities of interest are represented. So as I look at Melville in particular, I notice it's Melville and Grayson that are in one subdivision together. We've got Willowbrook, Springside, Yorkton, and Calder in another, and so on. And I think these are fairly close to what would be hopefully trading patterns or at least communities of common interest. And I hope that that'll help bridge some of those issues, some of those fears the members have about accountability.

Mr. Bjornerud: — Thank you, Mr. Minister. One concern and it's from St. Henry's Roman Catholic board, and I want to bring it to your attention; I've had a number of calls on it. And it's to do with busing. And I'm just going to read one of their concerns. And this is their words in a newsletter to their parents. And it states, and I quote:

Currently the rural public boards have sole jurisdiction

over bus transportation of students living outside our city limits, the legal boundary of existing Catholic school division. Consequently, St. Henry's cannot transport any student outside its legal boundaries. Relying on the goodwill of the large public division to continue operating under the conditions of the current agreement we have with the local public division should create significant concern to all.

So I think they're worried that this agreement may disappear now and they're not sure where that will leave them. And as I said before that they've worked hard — St. Henry's and Melville Comprehensive and the Deer Park board — to share services, share buildings and stuff there, and I think it's worked very well and it's saved them a great number of dollars. And I guess their concern is what happens to us now.

Hon. Mr. Thomson: — With respect to those Catholic divisions and minority faith divisions, it's hard to say specifically how this will work through as they are looking at undertaking amalgamation themselves, which will have some potential impact. I know the Catholic section is attempting to work through this today.

With respect to the relationship with the public divisions, there's no doubt that both sides will need to — both sets of boards, minority faith and the public boards — will need to make sure that they continue to put the interest of students at the forefront. I believe that's what's guided them in the past in coming to these arrangements and I have no doubt will do so again.

That's not to be Pollyanna about them. I mean, there's always issues between the public and the separate divisions and we will need to continue to work with them on specific issues.

Mr. Bjornerud: — Okay, thank you, Mr. Minister. One other issue that was brought to my attention on the weekend and was a contract that a private firm has for busing kids; I believe it's in Potashville, if I'm right. And he has a five-year contract and just started into that five-year contract. And I guess his concern is what happens when these new entities come into place as they will in 2006. Is his contract totally, you know, out the window?

And I didn't know how to answer him. I wasn't sure what . . . where that would go. Can you respond to someone like him?

Hon. Mr. Thomson: — Well in this case whether it's private contract or anybody else with a contract with an existing division, those will migrate into the new division. Those responsibilities will continue.

Whether they decide to reconfigure, it will be up to them. But obviously they will need to deal with that within the contractual arrangements in place. I don't know enough about that specific contract to know what buyout clauses might look like or otherwise, or for that matter, without knowing who the trustees are at this point, what their philosophy is on that.

If the agreement has been working for Potashville and they've recently renewed it, I would anticipate that within that area it would be looked at favourably by the existing board.

Mr. Bjornerud: — Yes, I kind of hope that because I think his problem is that they . . . And I'm sure as part of the contract it's X number of dollars, so much a kilometre or whatever. And I think for a five-year program, he's kind of stuck his neck out and, you know, I've got this contract for five years. And now he's very concerned that that may not be there.

So hopefully that can be worked into the new divisions, and someone like that businessperson that's providing that service can continue.

Some of the administrative concerns have been brought to our attention, and it's a lot to do with the timelines that we're being put under or they're being asked to put under. And I'll just go through some of them. There's about four of them. I'll read you each one as they brought them to our attention.

They talk about decisions on central office staff for each new entity out there:

Hiring Directors, Assistant Directors are best done prior to April (teachers contracts are effective May 31 — after May 31 it is difficult to release people from contract). Bringing 3 to 5 existing School Divisions office staffs into 1 upsets many lives — determining how many staff are required, who, are we eliminating positions — (And are all stressful) and are all stressful to (the) existing office staff — but these decisions are very important. Currently all Boards have their own administration staff with Directors, Assistant Directors, Secretary-Treasurers, payroll, accounts, clerical, (and) etc.

And other decisions they're concerned about is the location of the new school division offices — we've talked before:

existing office space that can accommodate staff
travel distance for central office staff
required renovations
(and) sufficient space to meet the long-term needs

Now I know there's quite a few things in there, but can you kind of respond to them to try and address some of these concerns that they have?

Hon. Mr. Thomson: — Well certainly for front and back office staff, for secretary-treasurers and directors, this is going to be a time of upheaval. There are no doubt that there will be fewer positions than there are people currently filling them. This is part of where the administrative savings will come that'll be allowed to . . . and direct, redirected back into instructional services.

One of the reasons that we have asked that, and are directing now that school board elections in the restructured boards will occur in early '05, is to allow those new boards the opportunity to work constructively together as they sort through some of these issues.

Certainly as we've been dealing with LEADS (League of Educational Administrators, Directors and Superintendents) and SASBO (Saskatchewan Association of School Business Officials) in terms of seeking their advice, these are top concerns for them in terms of how their members are treated.

And they've been very helpful in terms of offering advice on how we can move forward to undertake those changes in as least disruptive a way as possible.

For school boards, senior school board officials, there however will obviously be some displacement, and what then needs to be sorted through are what are the appropriate terms of a disengagement and termination. And that is something that we'll have to continue to work on.

But I do think that in terms of the question about the timeline, that because the system will go through this pretty much all at the same time, it gives us the opportunity to make sure that there is less — I wouldn't say less competition — but that there will be less opportunity for people to slip through the cracks. I think that there will be a much more strategic approach to this. And that's part of what we're working on with LEADS, SASBO, and the Restructuring Co-ordinating Committee.

Mr. Bjornerud: — Okay. Thank you, Mr. Minister. I'll just go on here and pass on some more of the concerns that they have out there and ask you to address them. They even talk about naming the school division, the new school division, and they talk about the decision needs to be made prior to amalgamation to satisfy and meet the legal obligation. And they go on to talk about the essential service decisions — all of these decisions need to be made prior to amalgamation — and they're going on to talk about such things as banking services for the new entity. Purchasing, how will it be done, and present boards all do it differently I think is one of their concerns. Integrating present accounting methods — is there a standard method that's going to be used now across the province. Payroll, questions on payroll; arrangements for transfer of assets and liabilities. Can the minister comment on some of those concerns.

Hon. Mr. Thomson: — Certainly the new boards will have the opportunity to pick the names of their divisions. We have not done that and indeed we have not even picked numbers for them. There's not much need for us to number them but boards will in time pick appropriate names. I would anticipate for the most part that they will be inclusive names, that we won't see Yorkton-Melville called Yorkton-Melville, it will be something more inclusive just as we saw Prince Albert go to Sask Rivers or Qu'Appelle Valley, picking those kind of names.

Purchasing, accounting, payroll — all of these administrative issues — banking, will need to be sorted through by the new division, but there is a significant opportunity here for streamlining and for efficiency. Certainly the ability to have a more efficient purchasing policy to take advantage of economies of scale, but also having local purchasing power, I think are significant. And that's one of the areas of potential saving.

Accounting standards definitely will need to be changed. They'll need to be brought in line with what is generally seen to be the public sector accounting standards, that certainly we as legislators would expect public money to be spent accordingly. And this, more importantly, I think will give them the capacity to meet those demands. A lot of these small boards had difficulty in terms of meeting those somewhat onerous demands, but as they deal with more money and have those resources available to them, I anticipate they'll do that. Payroll

obviously is an issue that will need to be streamlined.

But I want to emphasize again that these boards will have some opportunity to do this over time. We should not expect that on January 1, '06 that every one of these issues will be automatically resolved. It will take time to migrate through contracts, to make sure that they've been able to go through RFPs (request for proposal) for services, to make sure that they've taken into account the capacity building that they need to do in order to deliver these services, and also, obviously, to deal with the new instructional support resources that may be available to them.

So this is a process that . . . Going back to the question that Ms. Draude asked me, this is an issue that over the coming years will . . . they'll move towards.

Mr. Bjornerud: — Thank you, Mr. Minister. And I guess you touched on some of the things that . . . well, all of the things, I guess, that they are concerned about here. But I think their timeline, again when they were talking about a number of these issues, felt that they had to be done up front because it's a necessity — such as banking and things like that — have to be set up before the new entity gets rolling because of payroll and things like that.

Another of their concerns is the new board's roles. And again they're talking about, these decisions cannot be made quickly, in fact often take months, sometimes years. And they're talking about employees' contracts and agreements, clarification of roles with personnel, policy development for both board and staff, and developing policy and structure to enhance parent and community involvement. How would you try and reassure them that how these things are going to be done so quickly? And then you know, I think their concern is that this is going to take a while, and they don't . . . I don't think they feel that they can fit the timelines before 2006.

Hon. Mr. Thomson: — Well this is going to take a while, there's no doubt about that. And I don't think that we should expect that on January 1, 2006 we're going to have a brand new system with all of these issues addressed. This is going to take some time to work through. What we are attempting to do through the Restructuring Co-ordinating Committee is to sequence what has to happen, in what order, and how we can assist boards in doing this.

One of the big opportunities that is here is for the School Boards Association to take more of a leadership role in terms of setting, I don't know if you'd say standards, but certainly setting guidelines and best practices, and I think that that is one of the opportunities. I am anxious for us to make sure that we continue to maintain the type of local autonomy that we have within Saskatchewan system that is not evident in other jurisdictions like Alberta, and that we are able to have that in place and the trustees are able to make that decision.

So if it sounds like the answers I'm giving tonight are somewhat soft, in part it is. They are because the trustees themselves will need to make some of these decisions about how they do this. What we're attempting to do through the structure today is a system in sequencing what decisions need to be made and how they might go about that.

Mr. Bjornerud: — Thank you.

The Chair: — Mr. Hart.

Mr. Hart: — Thank you, Madam Chair. Minister, you've just told my colleague that you feel there'll be a lot of unresolved issues after the amalgamation takes place. And I certainly agree with you. I look back on a recent experience, and the one I'm most familiar with is the amalgamation of Buffalo Plains, Indian Head, and the Cupar School Division.

And those three boards, they worked at amalgamation over a period of at least three years, if not longer. They tell me that they had anywhere up to 25 to 30 committees, various . . . dealing with various issues of amalgamation. And I think that amalgamation worked very well. I certainly haven't heard very few if any complaints and so on. But the key was they took their time and they dealt with all of the issues they felt they needed to deal with.

And I guess the one overarching concern that I have heard from school boards and directors and staff is that with the short time frame there's a real serious concern that the students in the classroom may suffer because of the short time frame.

And I guess the question is, what's the rush? Why don't we take another year and allow this amalgamation process — if this is what your government has decided to do — why not give the people in the education field some time to work through this so that students in the classroom aren't put at risk?

Hon. Mr. Thomson: — I have yet to hear any trustee or for that matter any politician articulate how it is that students will suffer through amalgamation. I think that that is simply an unfounded fear.

If the member tonight has some advice on why that would be, or can shed some light on that, I'd welcome hearing it. But I think frankly what we are trying to deal with here is to move forward these amalgamations in as strategic and concerted way as possible.

The approach that we have taken up to now with the voluntary amalgamations has been somewhat successful, but frankly has been limited in its success as it has left out a number of divisions that today just do not have the financial resources necessary. That is straining their ability to provide student services. We cannot continue to have a system of education in our province today where a school division has financial resources as high as \$16,000 per student to spend while others have less than eight. That's just not workable. That disadvantages those students in those poor divisions and we cannot continue to allow that to happen. That's why we need to do amalgamation, why we need to have a model of regional pooling, why we need to be able to share the wealth within the regions of this province. And that's what we're attempting to do. The time frames are there to assist in moving us forward. But there is not a need by January 1, 2006 to have every single decision made.

Mr. Hart: — Well what I'm being told is that there are . . . And experience, as I'm sure you'll agree, by those boards who have undertaken extensive amalgamation has shown that they've

taken their time. There's a lot of issues that need to be resolved, a number of agreements that need to be worked out with, provision of specialized services to students and how that will be provided — all those issues need to be worked out. And this is where the concern of those people are coming from, where students with special needs . . . And because the working agreements haven't been worked out between the various sections that make up this new school division, some students may fall through the cracks, and so on. And I believe there is some real concerns in that area that are valid.

And so I guess . . . And everyone is asking, well why not take a little bit more time, another year, so that we can get all those things into place? I mean are you saying that the current system of education that we have in this province today, there are a number of students who aren't receiving the type of education that they should have? So that everything from January 1, '06, backwards, do I hear you saying that we presently have an inferior system, education system in our province? Is it that bad that we have to all of a sudden take the big stick because students aren't being educated properly? Is that what you're saying?

Hon. Mr. Thomson: — We have a huge disparity in this province between the rich and the poor boards — a huge disparity. And there is very . . . I would find it very hard to hear anyone articulate why it is that we should allow that disparity to continue. Clearly students that are in the poorest divisions have less access to educational resources than those in the richest divisions.

When you have some divisions able to spend twice as much money per student as the poor divisions you've got to ask whether that's fair. And we have to assume that that comes at some cost. This will help to rectify that. That's why we've undertaken the reform.

No, it's not all going to happen by January 1, '06. This is something that is going to take some time to work through. We cannot simply believe that every contractual arrangement will be able to be negotiated and consolidated by January 1, '06. But we need to start at some point and that's what we're doing. The legislation I have before the House today allows these boards, once elected in spring of '05, to be able to continue through to '09 in order to get this done. But by '09 there's absolutely no doubt that this system will be administratively far superior to what we have today. There's absolutely no doubt about that.

Mr. Hart: — A couple of things, Minister, from what you've just said. First of all, are you saying that the current system of education is that bad that if we don't go through this amalgamation by January 1, 2006 that the whole system is going to fall apart?

And if so, your government has been boasting over the last five years, since I've been part of this legislature, that you've continually put more money into the system and that we have a great education system and all those sorts of things. And I think anyone who's cared to listen have heard you and your government boast.

Now are you changing your message and saying that we have such a terrible system that if we don't go forward with this

amalgamation and get it done by January 1, 2006 the whole thing is going to fall apart, when experience shows by those boards who have done an excellent job of amalgamating have taken their time, and they've worked through this process over two, three, and four years. And the question I have is, what's the big rush? Why not give those people that are on the ground dealing with this issue, give them another year so that they can do it properly?

Hon. Mr. Thomson: — I guess the question that I have is, what leads me to believe that another year from now we wouldn't be sitting in this room having exactly the same debate and you asking me to push this off to '07 or '08 or '09 as we have for the last decade?

The system today is not sustainable. Period. It is not sustainable. We have overbuilt infrastructure. We have infrastructure which is putting huge demands on the rural property tax base. We have a system today that we see an infusion of new cash not being able to be clearly identified as to how it's either reducing that burden on taxpayers at a local level or being able to clearly identify where it's going into students' support services.

When the province commits an additional \$125 million over the last five years to education, when we see that amount of money going into the system, and mill rates continue to rise, you have to ask how it is that we fix the system.

And that's part of what we need to tackle. And it is. It's a multi-faceted problem. It's going to require more provincial resources. It's going to require an agreement on how we handle property tax reduction. And it's going to require us to restructure a system. Unfortunately that is where we're at today. It doesn't comment on the strength or weakness of the trustees in the system or the teachers in the system. In fact I would argue that they've done remarkably well.

But we have today a number of boards that have no desire whatsoever to amalgamate. We could set 10 years out and we would still have boards that refuse to amalgamate — in many cases the most wealthy boards.

On the other hand we have boards that have expressed to me an interest to amalgamate, but have not yet been able to find their way to do it. There's a system in doing that. These changes are disruptive but they're necessary. And I know that that's a tough reality for us as politicians to deal with, but it's what this government, and this cabinet, and this caucus believe needs to happen. And indeed I think — as you see from the response of the school board association, of the STF, and others — there's an acceptance, that although they may not be enamoured with the approach, accept the rationale and share a common vision of the outcome.

Mr. Hart: — Well I would have to disagree with your acceptance belief. I'm looking at some information that was provided to me by the concerned trustees association. They presented . . . or we presented on their behalf, petitions that were signed by some nearly 2,500 citizens of this province. We've got school boards who have passed resolutions opposing this forced amalgamation, in particularly the short time frame that it's framed in. Quite a number of them — particularly a lot

of the boards that are being directly affected by the amalgamation.

We have SARM (Saskatchewan Association of Rural Municipalities), at a recent convention, has passed two resolutions at that convention opposing the forced amalgamation.

We have some . . . I've got a list here of some 69 local governments in rural Saskatchewan, including RMs (rural municipality) and towns who have passed resolutions. And I believe I have sent you copies . . . a number of them I've sent copies to your office of their resolutions that they've passed. So I think there is a fair bit of opposition out there.

And again, once again, I believe a lot of it stems from the hastiness of this decision. So are you saying that in order to . . . like what is the reason? Is it to achieve some . . . or enable you to address the property tax issue? That the amalgamation . . . I mean you've used the Boughen report as one of the reasons for doing this, yet as far as the recommendations in the Boughen report, I believe it was number five or six in the Boughen report that dealt with some amalgamation. So I still haven't heard a legitimate answer as to why we can't wait another year and allow the people on the ground to do the job they need to do to make this thing go as smoothly as possible.

Hon. Mr. Thomson: — I think in my earlier answer I had said that there's no doubt that there are those who currently work within the system today that would have preferred a different process. But I also hear very few voices who argue that it's either not necessary or not going to result in a better outcome.

The fact that 91 per cent of school boards at their local . . . at their recent meeting voted to work with the Department of Learning to move forward with this I think speaks to the fact that there is an understanding that what will result from this is better than what we have today, whether they like the process or not. And it's hard to find a perfect process. It's easy to be in opposition and find the perfect argument. It's hard to be in government and find the perfect process.

Mr. Hart: — How many of the organizations and professionals . . . professional organizations in the K to 12 (kindergarten to grade 12) system did you and your officials consult with before you came up with this plan? And what extent of consultation did you undertake with the people that are on the ground to develop a plan, a workable plan in amalgamation?

Hon. Mr. Thomson: — The education equity task force met with 81 different groups, obviously including the large provincial groups. They met with every school board in this province. They met with a number of different associations including LEADS, SASBO, the STF, the FSIN, a number of subsets within that. They met with the school councils association.

We've established along with that a restructuring coordinating committee comprised of the educational leaders, those people that you refer to as on the ground, to help drive through this process, to make sure that the appropriate steps are taken, that this is a workable transition. Those consultations have happened. That approach is underway and over the coming

years we will continue to work with that restructuring coordinating committee to work through both the major and the minor issues that are resulting from the amalgamation.

Mr. Hart: — I realize that there was a number, quite a number of groups made presentations to the committee, but all those presentations were made after you outlined the plan. My question is, and perhaps I should have been more clear on that, how much prior research did you and your officials do? And how much consultation did you do before you had your May 18 announcement where you dictated that this is what's going to happen and it's going to be in this time frame? What type of research did you do? Did you look at Manitoba and did you consult with the people in Manitoba? Do you know what the additional costs . . . or what the costs of amalgamation were in Manitoba? And what are the additional operating costs as a result of amalgamation in Manitoba?

Hon. Mr. Thomson: — Yes we looked at the Manitoba situation. We looked at the situation in Alberta. I think it's fair to say that when we initially embarked on this process that there was — certainly at least on my part — a very definite interest in us looking at emulating Alberta's approach. I think I stipulated that, I indicated that, at the January — I don't know what day we released the Boughen Commission — January 8 announcement. I think at that point I indicated that this was one of the issues I thought we should pursue. As we explored it we saw that clearly the Alberta model didn't fit with Saskatchewan's model of local accountability. It certainly had many strengths but it was not easily adapted to our political model here.

The Manitoba situation, I thought it was interesting in June that the school board association brought in one of the officials from Manitoba that was very involved on their amalgamation. She indicated that she believed that it was better for us to be pursuing it this way so there was less uncertainty within the system, that a directed response provided some benefit. Certainly this has been a difficult process but it's one that is necessary.

The member asks what kind of consultation we had. Well in January we presented our response to the Boughen Commission. I didn't hear the member stand up once in the legislative session this spring and ask us to raise taxes. I have yet to see the opposition sponsor a motion to expand the sales tax to go onto restaurant meals, as Boughen has called for. Which by the way would provide \$55 million worth of immediate relief that we could redirect into property tax relief. I have yet to see any of that.

But what I do certainly see is the need, still, for us to fix the system. And that's what these changes are endeavouring to do.

Mr. Hart: — You mentioned the restructuring committee. Could you indicate who sits on that committee and what organizations they represent?

Hon. Mr. Thomson: — You want both the names of the individuals and the names of the associations?

Mr. Hart: — Yes please, if you have it.

Hon. Mr. Thomson: — I can tell you the names of the

associations. We have the school board association, the STF, LEADS, SASBO, school councils. Who am I missing — CUPE, SEIU (Service Employees' International Union). Anyways, it's basically the who's who of the education sector.

Mr. Hart: — So would you agree that this amalgamation affects, by and large affects only those school divisions located in rural Saskatchewan?

Hon. Mr. Thomson: — No I . . .

Mr. Hart: — Largely affects them?

Hon. Mr. Thomson: — No. I mean, the only cities that are exempt from this, the only divisions that are exempt from this are Lloydminster, Saskatoon, and Regina, and then the three northern divisions.

Mr. Hart: — I guess I was referring to what we traditionally think of rural Saskatchewan, the smaller urbans and the towns, villages, and RMs.

How many of those representatives on the restructuring committee are rural people?

Mr. Sangster: — I could answer some of that. Representing SASBO, which is the school business, are Paul Baskey from North Battleford and Sandy Gessner from Wakaw.

Representing the LEADS organization is Norm Dray, representing Saskatoon East School Division and Dick Nieman, who's from Saskatoon.

The Association of School Councils, Joy Bastness, is from Sask Rivers, but I don't know whether she's Kinistino or Birch Hills, but in that area. And then their other representative — there's two others — Ruth, I can't think of Ruth's last name but she's from Kindersley. And the other one is from North Battleford.

A Member: — Ruth Griffith.

Mr. Sangster: — Yes, Ruth Griffith. And the STF, Murray Wall is the president, living in Saskatoon but he's from Watrous.

The representation is actually quite broad on a rural basis. There are certainly more rural than urban.

Mr. Hart: — I guess the observation one could make though is that those folks, most of them who are from what we would consider rural Saskatchewan, come from communities who will most likely benefit from this amalgamation in that their communities will be . . . could possibly be the centre of the enlarged school divisions and so on. And I've had that opinion expressed to me that perhaps, you know, the representation on this restructuring committee really didn't represent those people who are being most directly affected by it. But I mean that's an argument we can make at another time if we so choose to.

What I'd like to do is move on to the dollars that we're actually discussing, is the \$55 million. I understand, Minister, that to this point in time, there's been no decision made as to what form the property tax relief will take in this current fiscal year?

Is that correct?

Hon. Mr. Thomson: — First of all, I don't want to leave hanging this unfortunate assertion that's been made about a bias on the part of very hardworking people within the system or the sense that there is some kind of secondary agenda. I have heard this regularly. I think it's extremely unfortunate and calls into question the character of the men and women who are called to serve in any of these capacities, and I think it's completely unfounded.

I certainly heard this when I was listening to complaints from some about the education equity task force, and I think that that was an inappropriate and extremely unfortunate set of comments. And I'm sure that the member does not share those views and is doing what he can to dispel those from being further perpetrated.

With respect to the property tax relief, there have been no decisions yet made on the scope of the relief beyond the size of the envelope, the \$55 million over each of the next two years. There are significant differences of opinion between SARM and SUMA (Saskatchewan Urban Municipalities Association) on who should be eligible. SUMA takes the view that all classes of property tax payer should be available . . . or should be eligible for relief. SARM takes the view that it should be limited to agricultural and residential owners and ratepayers.

We have not yet made a decision on this and so it's . . . Obviously it has a significant impact on what the individual rebates would look like depending on who you allow to draw from the pool.

Mr. Hart: — Have you or your department, or anyone within your government, done any type of calculations as to what type of relief the average homeowner in, say the city of Regina would receive if the \$55 million was applied to all properties in the province, including the commercial industrial? And then also have you done any work that would indicate what type of property tax relief that same homeowner would receive if it was only applied to residential and agricultural land?

Hon. Mr. Thomson: — Yes, there are some broad ranges. I don't have those with me tonight but certainly there are broad ranges that we could work out as to what it would look like. The questions though are more complicated than that, because there is also a question of do you provide a flat dollar value rebate or do you do it as a percentage of the overall tax paid, which obviously also impacts on it.

And we're interested in trying to find a way that's the most fair in terms of allocating this money. I never thought it would be so hard to give away \$55 million in my life, but it is a surprisingly complicated set of questions that we need to deal with. If the member or the members opposite have any advice on that I'd be more than willing to hear it, as we are trying to work through these issues.

Mr. Hart: — I also have had constituents ask me as recently as a half hour ago, is it anticipated that property owners will see tax relief for 2002 or is this money only to be applied to the . . . or 2004, sorry, or will it be only applied to 2005?

Hon. Mr. Thomson: — It will be for the property tax years of 2005 and 2006. There will be no rebate in the '04 year. I think where some of the complication comes is the fact that we have booked it into our '04-'05 budget year. But the relief will be for the '05 property tax year.

Mr. Hart: — Thank you . . .

The Chair: — Thank you. Mr. Brkich.

Mr. Brkich: — Madam Chair. I think a number of letters you've received from Arm River, as you know they're mostly against a forced amalgamation. Mostly it's through concerns of schools being closed. I'll just use the Kenaston, Loreburn, Davidson, them three schools as one example, but it's spread out. They'll only be represented by one trustee right now under the proposed amalgamation. And that worries them. That they've lost . . . some of the smaller schools won't be able to vote a trustee in, that the bigger centres will have the votes. Is there any way that . . . is it up to the board to have more trustees, or are you having a recommended amount of trustees per division?

Hon. Mr. Thomson: — There will be 10 trustees per division with the exception of those areas where there are unique circumstances like Meadow Lake and Flying Dust. But as I talked to boards there, I had at one point suggested that we might want some flexibility to move the boards as large as 15. I was told very clearly not to do that. That the boards should not go beyond 10, and this was advice I took as we worked through the process.

Mr. Brkich: — You said . . . What was the reasoning for not going to 15 that they told you?

Hon. Mr. Thomson: — There were two main reasons that were presented. One was a concern about the unwieldy size of the board. That it would become too large to effectively build a team and to be able to convene members. That was one of them. The second was the sense that they were moving largely from seven and eight member boards, and they felt that moving to 10 would still be workable even in the very large divisions. That tended to be what the advice was. It was contrary to what I expected to hear, but nevertheless was what we reflect in these decisions.

Mr. Brkich: — Talking about that division, when it was first . . . under the proposed map, it was with the division running around Saskatoon, and there was concerns about that, but then when the new map came out it had Davidson and Kenaston, Loreburn going west to Kindersley.

And I know I've got a letter — and I think you probably got it too — from the principal of Davidson who was concerned, because the first he'd read about it was in *The StarPhoenix*. But one of the concerns he had raised, and that Davidson's trading pattern does run towards Saskatoon, and No. 11 Highway is two-laned all the way through that whole division if you had kept it that way. And it makes it a lot nicer for sporting events for the kids travelling in buses in that division that they'd be on, basically on two-lane for almost the whole time, which he thought was very important from a safety issue.

Do you have any comments of why they took that part of the division and ran it west?

Hon. Mr. Thomson: — I asked a similar set of questions of the task force when I met with them. There was another set of changes that were made in terms of, in the interim map they had Craik attached to this. As it was related to me, there were a number of issues that they took into account.

First of all, they had decided not to break up existing divisions, to as much as possible respect existing boundaries. Second of all, I was advised that there was conflicting advice between Kenaston and Davidson in terms of how they wanted the configuration. What you relay as Davidson's view was in fact relayed to the task force, that they favoured moving into the Saskatoon, rural Saskatoon division, whatever that is called . . . that one. But Kenaston favoured being still in with the . . . preferred to go with the Outlook area. The difficulty with Davidson being south and wanting to go north is there's no easy way to jump them over Kenaston.

They made a judgment call and decided that for a number of reasons, not the least of which that this more closely reflected the health division, to do that. They decided also then to leave Craik with the . . . what is that, Qu'Appelle Valley? Moose Jaw? . . . with whatever we're calling that south central division. So those were the discussions that went on. That was largely what the thought process was. And as a result they ended up with Kenaston, Davidson, Loreburn, Outlook moving into the western, into this west central division.

Mr. Brkich: — I know there was I think just possibly the one person who made the submission who wanted to go that way, because most of the people in Kenaston were talking about the safety issue too; that's come up. When I was there, they I think preferred, if they had to be in a division, they'd sooner have their kids going up the double-lane highway, that end. In fact I think there's some talk of possibly having a meeting trying to get a change for that corner.

Now I don't know the exact process or even if you're open to it. But I know that you could, or I could be writing a letter in future, wanting to meet with these people. I know that there is talk of a meeting coming up on that. And I hope that if they do have a consensus between the three towns to all move in one direction, that you would . . . would you be willing to meet with them and talk to them about it?

Hon. Mr. Thomson: — The difficulty with these changes is they impact not only the local catchment area but they also impact how the grants work out within the rest of the division. So unfortunately it's not as simple as being able to simply move this three set of schools into one division or the other without having significant impacts throughout.

And part of what the task force tried to do was balance this in terms of assessment per pupil with the local desires, and they have worked out this map. This is unfortunately difficult to do when we're at these decision points, so unfortunately what I would tell the member tonight, as I would tell the residents of these communities, is that this map is the one that we've agreed to move forward with.

I hope that it does not affect the, and in fact I don't see entirely why it should affect the way that sporting groups interact. Those natural trading patterns would continue to work as was. But I do know that the original proposal with Kenaston, Davidson, and Craik together in that large rural — what do we want to call it, Saskatoon — one was not seen to be particularly favourable. So it is difficult when we think about how to deal with this.

Mr. Brkich: — Thank you. I know there was quite a bit of worry about the size of students in that particular Saskatoon division of 10,000 going to 5,000, but it still seems like they're travelling just as far to have the 5,000 in . . . When I talk about the sporting events trading, it's usually, it's hard to say how it'll be, but most divisions will still have their sporting events in the division like they always had.

So you take even a look at Kenaston, there's quite a bit of a gap. Like I know . . . (inaudible) . . . between travelling, that's . . . for sporting games. You get Davidson and Kenaston, Loreburn are fairly close. Then you start getting at Outlook and then Dinsmore, Milden, Rosetown, there's a lot of travelling there, and it's not the best highway, and that's what probably has a lot of parents concerned.

Under the old way, going up, at least if you take No. 11 Highway, there's about seven communities or six schools right close: Dundurn, Hanley, Kenaston, Davidson, and Craik, that when they do their sporting events, a lot of the kids won't be travelling that much. Where when you start getting past Kenaston, and even in this map here, there is a lot of open, very open spaces between towns. You're looking at some places 30, 40 miles. You've got the dam, and there's only one place to cross into this division and that's at Gardiner dam. And so that kind of tightens things up too when you look at travelling through it. It's not you can just cut from Loreburn to Lucky Lake. You got to go all the way around and just cross at the dam.

The only other is the ferry, which only runs through the summer for the months in the school year. Most of the time it's closed. By the time they get the ice bridge in, it's not into January, so that was a huge concern at . . . or not a huge, but it was a concern with the parents worrying about travel within school activities with the division because once they get into that area, there is . . . they will be putting a lot miles on. So I just want that on the record, and I want you to be aware of that.

I got one other question I'd like to offer, and it was presented to me by a constituent. He really wanted me to ask you this. Ile-a-la-Crosse and Creighton School are divisions . . . are not being rolled into one. But he says Ile-a-la-Crosse received government grants of four and a half million dollars for 515 students, while the Davidson School Division had receiving 900,000 for 688 students. Can you give me some information on that, why the . . . how much . . . why there's so much difference?

Hon. Mr. Thomson: — Yes, grants are largely based on assessment per pupil. That would be the simplest of the measures. I mean, there's some — what? — 14, 17 different measures we'd use to assess foundation operating grant support. There's no doubt Ile-a-la-Crosse is, I think it's fair to say, the

poorest division in the province today. And whether we had put them in with Northern Lights or not, there was no way to really level that up. So the decision was made given both the size of Northern Lights, which is more than half the province geographically, there just was not . . . it served no particular purpose to move those together.

Foundation operating grant reform is a second initiative that we need to undertake within this, and it's one of those issues we need to work through. But it has to do with the capacity, as I talked with Mr. Hart about, to be able to raise money and to spend money on kids' education. I think, my guess is, there'd be very few people within Davidson that would wilfully exchange their lot with the people of Ile-a-la-Crosse, either in terms of their educational facilities or in terms of their services available. And that's part of what we took into account as we looked at how to deal with these initiatives.

Mr. Brkich: — Thank you. How many students are in Northern Lights?

Hon. Mr. Thomson: — Forty-four hundred students.

Mr. Brkich: — Pardon?

Hon. Mr. Thomson: — Forty-four hundred students. It's already a very large and populace division.

Mr. Brkich: — Yes, so adding them would have just added to 5,000 if you'd added Ile-a-la-Crosse in with Northern Lights.

Hon. Mr. Thomson: — Yes, we could have, although in that case we were almost at 5,000 anyway. I mean the debate that was going on within the northern communities was whether Creighton should have been added in. And again we looked at Creighton very much as we looked at Lloydminster, which is the border community issue, and decided not to do that. But moving Ile-a-la-Crosse in would have had minimal impact in terms of the assessment per pupil, and would have done little in terms of the population number.

So in these cases it was a decision because Northern Lights is already the single largest geographic school division within the province, that it was close enough to the criteria to leave, and that there was little to be gained by moving Ile-a-la-Crosse in.

Mr. Brkich: — It wouldn't have saved no money in administration costs?

Hon. Mr. Thomson: — Not likely in terms of this situation. Within the northern divisions there's already . . . I mean it's basically already worked through, there's . . . Don, do you want to comment on that?

Mr. Sangster: — It's my understanding, in terms of senior administration, there's a half-time director and a full-time secretary treasurer. So it's not as though there's a lot of savings to be found, I don't think in that particular instance.

Mr. Brkich: — On administration costs, I think you've talked about you think you will see some savings. But I think you will be quite surprised when we're back here in about a year or two years and going through the estimates, that after 2006,

administration costs will be up by the time you bring into the retirement packages, the buyouts, the gratuities of the members, and also just putting together administrative staff for this huge of a district.

I'll just use the one we talked about. I know you're going to need more than one director. You're going to need some sub-directors. And I will, in fact, I will say that I think in 2007 we're discussing it, administration costs will have — if you could compare the province right now and compare it afterwards — administrative costs will be higher throughout the province when you compare each division what they spent on administrative costs at that end of it.

Hon. Mr. Thomson: — Well the good news is we'll both still be here in '07 to debate this and to compare notes on where we're at. I don't believe that will be the case. Currently there are six directors in this division; there will be one after the amalgamation. While certainly there will be some superintendents, there will be overall fewer people employed in administrative roles. With any luck and through good management I would anticipate boards will redirect those savings into hiring more consultants and more teachers, just as we saw with the Sask Rivers amalgamation.

But it's hard to argue that we are going to need to see six directors in this division to administer in this division to administer this area.

Mr. Brkich: — Just one comment. I can remember that argument with the health board, and their administrative costs are higher than they were under the small ones. But that's just a comment. With that I will turn it over to one of my other colleagues that has some more questions.

The Chair: — Mr. Weekes.

Mr. Weekes: — Thank you, Madam Chair. Mr. Minister, I've been listening very closely to what you've been saying. I've got a letter from the West Central Municipal Government Committee and I think it's worth entering into the debate and entering into the record, which, their comments basically just is opposite to everything that you're saying is going to happen. And I'll read parts of it into the record concerning the proposed school division amalgamation:

The West Central Municipal Government Committee strongly supports the right of school divisions to self-determination, and therefore we philosophically oppose forced amalgamations of any kind.

Large geographic school divisions create problems for access to professional services and programs. Sharing high-priced professionals in rural areas is unworkable because of the large amount of travel time between schools. This was clearly proven by the demise of the shared service areas of the '80s which coincidentally were similar in size to what the government is proposing today. Shared service areas are now smaller in size which has enhanced delivery and improved the quality of the education system. Currently school divisions are sharing services and/or programming and are providing the best possible service in a cost-efficient manner that is

acceptable to the taxpayer and beneficial to the students. Past voluntary amalgamation such as the existing LandsWest School Division have not saved any money.

To justify any amalgamation it must demonstrate cost savings and/or increase quality of education. If the Boughen Commission is to be used as a proper model for improving the education system, it must be used in its entirety. Selecting individual components of the report, such as amalgamation, undermines the integrity of the Boughen Commission. A more responsible approach would be to accept the report in its entirety and support it with appropriate funding.

There is no indication amalgamation of school divisions will improve quality of education, reduce costs, promote fairness.

Mr. Minister, they've laid out from their experience of what has happened in that area in the past, and they're saying large school divisions are going to create problems for access to professional services as the one highlight. Also the sharing high-priced professionals, a huge increase in costs of travel time between schools. And they're on record as saying shared service areas are now smaller and has enhanced delivery and improved the quality of education.

And they backed this up, Mr. Minister, with the example of when the LandsWest School Division amalgamated. And they're just stating exactly the opposite to what you're saying is going to happen in the future. There's going to be increased cost. There's going to be . . . they're intimating that there's going to be possibly a decrease in the quality of education to the students. I'd just like your reply to that.

Hon. Mr. Thomson: — As I had indicated, in this area today we have six directors of education. I'm advised there are four superintendents. I think it's easy to say that after amalgamation that will not be the case. To me the savings are self-evident.

Mr. Weekes: — Well, Mr. Minister, in LandsWest School Division that didn't happen when they amalgamated three other school divisions.

Hon. Mr. Thomson: — Well in Sask Rivers we saw happen there a significant number of new teachers hired. We saw new special ed consultants hired. Same experience in terms of Qu'Appelle Valley. I mean, those are the models that we are looking at in terms of moving this forward.

Mr. Weekes: — And also for the record, the town of Wilkie is on record as against forced amalgamation of school divisions as well. They just don't see the point in it and they don't see the benefits, actually. These people see that it's a step backwards in the process, and quite frankly, to say it again, they have proof or information to the contrary concerning their experience with LandsWest School Division.

Just looking at the map, Mr. Minister, this proposed school division — my colleague talked about Davidson and Kenaston — it goes all the way over to the Alberta border, including Kindersley, up north to Biggar, Landis, and of course south to the Saskatchewan River. This just seems to be one huge area

that doesn't make sense as far as trading patterns or connection between communities. And one wonders how possibly these communities in this area are going to be able to . . . how this fits in the overall plan of improving quality education.

Hon. Mr. Thomson: — What this provides us with is an opportunity to have a relatively sizable student population, to have a relatively equitable distribution of assessment per pupil. This provides a . . . I believe, within the west central zone, as the member himself has quoted, we have co-operation among many of the municipalities today, which seem to be a community of relatively common interests. I am convinced that the map that the task force has provided us with is a reasonable one.

I'd also indicate that the issues around distance and such that the member refers to are already factors within these divisions.

You know, I went to . . . did my elementary school in Kindersley, Saskatchewan; my dad taught in Marengo. It's a long ways between those communities. It's a long ways from Marengo to Alsask; it's a long from there to Eatonina.

When these communities are all continuing to thrive with schools as they have for years, what we now need to do is to figure out how we free up administrative resources to be able to provide these schools with the kind of technological support and other student supports that they deserve to make sure that rural education continues to be exceptional and not fall behind that of the cities. That's what we need to do. And I would be very encouraged to hear the member provide me with any kind of defence as to why we need six directors of education in this area and four assistants in order to carry out the administrative work.

Mr. Weekes: — Well, Mr. Minister, your own record of saying that the school trustees in the school divisions in the past have been wasting money. I'd like to ask you where they've been wasting the money.

Hon. Mr. Thomson: — What we have is a systemic problem. We have expenditures on administration support that needn't be there. We have six directors in this area; four assistant superintendents.

Mr. Weekes: — You've said, Mr. Minister, that there's an overbuilt infrastructure in the school system, so that means there's going to be a number of school closures coming in the future then?

Hon. Mr. Thomson: — No, what we have today is an infrastructure that was built for a much larger student population. When we take a look at the student data as we've seen this year with the student census of 3,500 fewer students than only one year ago, there's still the same infrastructure to support. There's no doubt that we need to find ways to free up administrative money to continue to support that infrastructure and to be able to find new resources to put into instructional services and technology-enabled learning to make sure that the educational quality is maintained. That's what we mean.

In terms of the resources, does this area need sixty trustees, six directors, four assistant directors to run its administration plus

how many secretary-treasurers, how many front and back office officials? I would argue that when we're finished with the reforms and the amalgamations that the answer will very clearly be known.

Mr. Weekes: — Well if it's an overbuilt infrastructure, I guess I'll have to refer to what happened in the Radisson School. And your government didn't put the Radisson School under the moratorium and it's closed. I mean, when you talk about an overbuilt infrastructure, it only can mean one thing, that there's going to be closures.

Hon. Mr. Thomson: — I don't follow the member's logic, but that's not much different than most days around here. I don't see how it is that he equates the growing cost of supporting the infrastructure with leading to more school closures. The issue that will lead to school closures are changes in our enrolment.

I think I've indicated previously both to the Assembly and this committee tonight, that what we are looking at are relatively stable numbers of school closures, somewhere in that seven to ten. I think the highest we've ever been was somewhere in the 20s, and that was back in the mid-1970s. It's been significantly lower than that ever since.

What we need to figure out is how we redirect money out of administration into student services. That to me sounds to be a fairly straightforward and positive set of changes.

Mr. Weekes: — But because you'd never put all the schools under a moratorium, there are school closures.

But I'd just like to talk a bit about the Radisson School. I'd like to know why you and your government did not put Radisson under the moratorium on school closures through this process, and on the other hand went to the Saskatoon (West) School Division and tried to convince them to keep the school open. So there's a contradiction in your approach there. I don't see why you couldn't have kept Radisson open and put it under the moratorium and give them a couple of more years to work at keeping their school open.

Hon. Mr. Thomson: — The moratorium today is a voluntary moratorium. The Saskatoon (West) board made their decision. Whether I agree with that decision or not is immaterial. I think it's probably fairly well known that I do not agree with that decision that Saskatoon (West) made, nevertheless that's theirs to make under the statute. That's a decision that they will need to account for as they go back to their ratepayers, and so be it. But it is a decision that was solely theirs, and not one that we could influence despite my best efforts to attempt to do so.

Mr. Weekes: — Thank you. That's all for me.

The Chair: — Mr. D'Autremont.

Mr. D'Autremont: — Thank you very much. Mr. Minister, interested in some of your comments about the number of superintendents that would be in a division. I wonder if you could explain just what you see the role of a director of education and the superintendents as.

Hon. Mr. Thomson: — Within the new divisions it will be

essentially the same as it currently exists.

Mr. D'Autremont: — So their role is to supervise the, along with the principals, the teaching staff to ensure that the mandate of the Department of Education and the school districts are being followed through on.

Hon. Mr. Thomson: — Yes, that would be part of their, part of their role. Certainly there will be a need to think about whether there is a new opportunity here for us to make better use of principals within teacher supervision. I think that there's an opportunity for that. I mean the organizational structures are trying to keep pace with changes in terms of administrative practice and technology that are available today.

Mr. D'Autremont: — So what do you think would be the appropriate level of staffing for director of education and superintendents for the 5,000-student divisions.

Hon. Mr. Thomson: — These are in part stipulated by the number of teachers that they have under the STF agreement. I don't know what the . . . Don, are you able to articulate that?

Mr. Sangster: — I don't know the exact numbers, but it's based on the number of teachers and you are only allowed to have a maximum of so many out of scope on, and I don't know the numbers. But I know that what has been told to us by the LEADS executive directors, that the new school divisions as they were looked at in the first . . . in the initial map, so I haven't talked to them since the final map went out, but the numbers haven't changed much. So he said that the numbers, they would be in the range of maximums of five, six, or seven out-of-scope LEADS members.

Now the biggest one will be the one up around Prince Albert which will have just over 9,000 students. I know they're not at the maximum now of the numbers that they qualify for, so I don't know what it would be. So I would assume he's probably talking about seven in that situation and maybe it's only five at 5,000. I'm not sure.

Mr. D'Autremont: — So it relates to teachers though, not to students.

Mr. Sangster: — It's . . . (inaudible) . . . It's part of the contract, the collective agreement, between the school boards, the province, and the teachers' association.

Mr. D'Autremont: — So while you don't know the exact numbers, would it be safe to say or within the ballpark, one for every 300, 350 teachers, if I'm looking at the numbers of . . . in the other divisions that are currently in place?

Mr. Sangster: — I think it would be in the range of one, sort of, for each . . . There is a requirement in the Act that you must have a director of education. So even some small school divisions with a single school theoretically have to have a director, maybe part-time. And then for each additional number of teachers, then you get an additional out of scope.

When I was in a school division of around 100 teachers, we were allowed two, a director and one assistant. So we similarly . . . I think that's the range. So it's probably one plus every 50

additional. I'm not sure.

Mr. D'Autremont: — So roughly 1:50.

Mr. Sangster: — And that's only a guess.

Mr. D'Autremont: — I won't hold you to it. Now, Mr. Minister, you were saying that as my colleague was asking questions, that there was about four superintendents in the division he was talking about and that those numbers would certainly be reduced. Will those numbers though still fall within that rough 1:50 ratio?

Mr. Sangster: — Yes, the reduction would be driven by that. There will be today in the system more people than there will be positions after amalgamation. And that I think applies in just about every division with the exception of Sask Rivers. So that will need to be worked through.

Mr. D'Autremont: — So does the minimum, the 1 — let's call it 1:50 and that can be adjusted as the case may be — the 1:50 ratio become the maximum then, rather than the minimum?

Hon. Mr. Thomson: — Yes, that's right.

Mr. D'Autremont: — Okay, so does that also then become the minimum, that the ratios will be 1:50, if that's the number, and that they won't be 1:40 or 1:30?

Hon. Mr. Thomson: — Well it's certainly the maximum under the collective agreement. And I don't know that it then becomes, you know, the base or the gold standard in terms of the number. I don't believe that it will become the floor. It certainly is the ceiling in terms of the number.

And the example I guess we look at is Prince Albert and Sask . . . yes, Sask Rivers and Qu'Appelle Valley, which both currently do not move up to that ceiling under the formula. So this will need to be worked through by the board in terms of, you know, what the group . . . what the numbers are and what positions they make available.

Some of these divisions will have more unique needs just because of the geographic population centres. And I think about the west central as an example, where we have Kindersley and Rosetown both with sizeable populations, and obviously a large population on the west side, around Davidson, Outlook as well.

In the area of the province that you're from, certainly Weyburn, Estevan will have some demand for satellite office services of some variety. I can't imagine in the Southeast, given its current configuration, that there would only be one regional office. And so that will drive some of that decision making.

Mr. D'Autremont: — So regional offices will be dictated then by the number of teachers in an individual location rather than the travel distances required?

Hon. Mr. Thomson: — No, it'll be more by travel and I think by historic relationships in terms of what those trading patterns are, the catchment areas. I can't imagine a scenario where we end up with the Southeast served only by a head office in Weyburn or Estevan. And I don't know a politician foolish

enough to predict which one it would be.

Mr. D'Autremont: — Why does it have to be either one of them?

Hon. Mr. Thomson: — I can imagine that there's a good argument coming for Alida, Saskatchewan right about now.

Mr. D'Autremont: — But Weyburn and Estevan, neither one of them is near the centre of the new division.

Hon. Mr. Thomson: — I think arguably there will also be a need, as I think about the new map, with Moosomin being added in. This is one of those issues that will need to be sorted out.

And it may be a case that they end up with an administrative head office in one of the largest population centres, and choose to have instructional services based in some kind of regional grouping. So that's entirely possible but that's something the local boards are going to have to work through.

Instructional support services are not counted in the cap, as I understand it. Is that correct?

Mr. Sangster: — If they're in scope . . .

Hon. Mr. Thomson: — If they're in scope. Right.

Mr. D'Autremont: — So when you were talking to my colleague the comment was made that there was four superintendents in that division already, and that there wouldn't be. Who's making that determination? Is the Department of Education mandating how many superintendents will be in the area or is this going to also be left up to the board, providing they meet the requirements as outlined in the STF contract?

Hon. Mr. Thomson: — The reference I was making was to the six directors that are currently there. There will be only one director per division.

Mr. D'Autremont: — Well you used the word superintendents.

Hon. Mr. Thomson: — Oh, sorry. Part of that is just catching up with the nomenclature we use now. They used to be superintendents; now they're directors. But there are six directors, four superintendents . . .

A Member: — Four assistant directors.

Hon. Mr. Thomson: — Four assistant directors. And so what we will see is there will be one director after this, instead of the current six. Whatever other configuration will need to work within that formula, and I anticipate that the savings that they use will be directed into additional instructional services and instructional resources.

Mr. D'Autremont: — If there are any savings. If, let's say, the division's fall . . . they already have, you say, six directors and four deputy directors, assistant directors; so for a total of 10 personnel in that area. I don't know what there would be for a teacher complement in that area that meets that requirement.

But if you're going to have a staff level, oh let's say it ends up being six; your director of education is going to be supervising a larger area, he's going to be supervising more schools, he's going to be supervising more students.

All of those things, if you follow the government protocols, means that they have more responsibilities than they previously had so their pay scale reflects that added responsibility. That means their pay will in all likelihood go up from what it is currently. You're not going to in all likelihood be rolling back those individuals that are currently there. Some of them may take on additional duties as well, so that may mean that there may be an increase in salaries for them. So while you may save some for the four people that have been let go, you'll have severance packages to deal with. You'll have the additional costs of the people that you have retained on, especially the director of education.

So your savings from simply letting four people go is going to be minimal. And with the increase in the division sizes, most of that will be eaten up in visiting the local schools throughout the district unless those people simply don't bother visiting the schools that make up the rural component within their divisions.

My own board, Souris Moose Mountain, has gone through amalgamation and at public meetings they have clearly stated that there was no savings to be had. And they went from, they didn't hire any additional staff, they had half-time directors of education at the time, they stayed with one director of education; they did the same thing with the treasurers, the secretary treasurer for the divisions. So they didn't add staff, but at the end of the day there was no additional savings. In fact as they still complain, that the government didn't give them enough for the experiment that they did do, because they were one of the initial ones that did the amalgamation, and others later got more.

So if the requirement is that you have a certain number of teachers per assistant . . . director of education or assistant directors, and you estimate that there is going to be some saving there . . .

I found your comments about Ile-a-la-Crosse interesting, that 515 students in that division surrounded by — which is a very small division — surrounded by Northern Lights which does cover indeed half of the province, surrounding entirely Ile-a-la-Crosse with about 4,500 students, if you amalgamated those two and made them 1,500 . . . excuse me, 5,000, they have a half-time director of education. Why simply couldn't that be rolled in with the Northern Lights and you probably would eliminate that half-time position. By including Ile-a-la-Crosse in the Northern Lights, you wouldn't need a separate secretary treasurer for the division, that work would be carried out by Northern Lights. So there is some savings there. So why did you pass up on those savings opportunities?

Hon. Mr. Thomson: — I think one of the things that's important for those of us who live in the southern half of the province to understand is that the northern half of the province, those communities north of the northern administration division line, are truly isolated and remote communities. It's not even . . . As much as we think about distance that we need to travel in the southern part from community to community, it's nothing

like up north where there are just no easy ways to link these communities up except by air. That is something that is just not the case in southern Saskatchewan with our highway system today. And I think that's something that we just don't appreciate.

I know we like to think about it as being the same. But we have how many divisions in the southern half of this province compared to one division in the northern half of this province. If we were truly going to follow the northern model, we would probably have four divisions — one in the North, one in the South, one in Saskatoon, and one in Regina. If we truly wanted to follow that as an example. Then we would come to understand what distance is all about. That's one of the factors we had to take into account, was true isolation and remoteness.

Mr. D'Autremont: — Mr. Minister, your argument doesn't hold water there on that particular case. Ile-a-la-Crosse is on the highway from Beauval to Buffalo Narrows; both communities of which are in Northern Lights. If you were talking about Sandy Bay, yes I would agree; they aren't on the highway. But Ile-a-la-Crosse is on the highway. It's no more isolated than Buffalo Narrows is or Beauval. They're both on the highway and so is Ile-a-la-Crosse. So that argument is facetious. It holds no water.

So, Mr. Minister, what was the real reason why Ile-a-la-Crosse was not included in the amalgamation and placed into Northern Lights?

Hon. Mr. Thomson: — Well the argument is exactly as I have stated it. But I'd appreciate if the member wants to elaborate on whatever speculation he has. I'm certain to appreciate hearing it.

Mr. D'Autremont: — I don't know why you would not have placed it in there . . . into Northern Lights when you were amalgamating the rest of the province. But it doesn't . . . The argument you put forward that distance is an impediment . . . Distance is an impediment across this province when it comes to education. Distance is certainly an impediment in Buffalo Narrows, just as much as it would be in Ile-a-la-Crosse or Beauval. But they're both . . . All three of those communities are on the highway.

Hon. Mr. Thomson: — As I have previously explained, there are a number of issues, not the least of which was the assessment per pupil issues that we looked at — the distance, the remoteness, the benefit to the amalgamation — and it was deemed not worth pursuing. That was why. If the member has some other view that he wants to pursue, whether he believes that that's the argument or whether he accepts it or not, isn't for me to pass judgment on his opinion. I can simply lay out for him what the rationale was that we used. If he's arguing that we should have been even more stringent in terms of reducing the number of school divisions in the southern half of the province, you know I would welcome him to put that on the record.

Mr. D'Autremont: — Well you certainly eliminated a very large number of divisions in the southern half of the province. And you have one school division, Ile-a-la-Crosse, that sticks out like a sore thumb when you place your arguments about the cost-saving potentials of amalgamations. You turn around and

you say that there would be no cost saving by eliminating a half-time director of education and treasurer in the Ile-a-la-Crosse division with 515 students. And yet you say that there's going to be massive savings in the southern divisions through amalgamation that's going to be turned around and passed on to the classroom.

If there's savings to be had in southern Saskatchewan in amalgamations, there would be savings to be had in Ile-a-la-Crosse by amalgamating into Northern Lights, and yet you say there is none. So how can we possibly believe that there is savings in the southern divisions when you're saying there's no savings in the North?

Hon. Mr. Thomson: — As we take a look at these issues I think what the member will see is faulty in his argument is we're not talking about eliminating one half-time director in the west central division. We're talking about there being six full-time directors in the west central division. This is significantly different in terms of the magnitude. That's a significant difference in terms of the salary and the cost savings.

So I, you know, I appreciate what the member is saying. Frankly we could have applied the same standard to the rest of the province that we have in place with Saskatoon and Regina, which both function extremely well with 21, 22,000 students. We could have done that but that wasn't the decision we made. We decided instead that this was a workable set of criteria; that it was an appropriate set of criteria. And we decided that it was reasonable within the North for a number of reasons — including Creighton's unique situation, including Lloydminster's situation — to leave those out — the same way we decided not to look at changing the boundaries of Saskatoon and Regina.

The criteria were there. I think that they provided us with a workable base and a workable map, and it is one that I do believe will advance our cause in terms of administrative efficiency.

Mr. D'Autremont: — Mr. Minister, are you saying then that in those divisions that only employ a half-time director of education, that there will be no cost savings for amalgamation?

Hon. Mr. Thomson: — Cost savings are not the primary reason for driving forward the amalgamation. It is our ability to be able to support the infrastructure, to have a more sustainable system, to have relatively uniform tax rates, and to be able to move forward with redirecting money out of administration into student support that need to be looked at. Those as a whole are why we are looking at this.

Mr. D'Autremont: — Well one of your three or four reasons for doing this, you state, is to redirect money out of administration to the classroom. You went on to say about Ile-a-la-Crosse that there was no savings. It was not important to do that because it was only a half-time director of education. So again I ask you, in those areas that have a part-time, half-time director of education, there will be no savings because of them?

Hon. Mr. Thomson: — No, I think the member knows that he is not articulating the position that I'm putting forward. What

we have done is take a look at a number of criteria and we have balanced those off. It is not the same uniformly across the board. In some cases we have divisions that will now be as large as 9,100 students; we have some that are as small as 5,100 students.

There are a number of factors that we took into account. Certainly one of those was the assessment per pupil. And the fact that it is a division that is already . . . In the case of Ile-a-la-Crosse, there is very little that would have changed as a result of having amalgamated it.

Mr. D'Autremont: — Mr. Minister, how much influence around the cabinet table did the former mayor of Ile-a-la-Crosse have, the current member from Athabasca, in making the determination that Ile-a-la-Crosse would remain a separate school division?

Hon. Mr. Thomson: — I'm not at liberty to talk about cabinet. But I can assure you that no member of the caucus, when we were dealing with these issues, showed any parochial interest whatsoever.

Mr. D'Autremont: — Well, Mr. Minister, I guess it's my prerogative to not believe that.

Hon. Mr. Thomson: — Okay.

The Chair: — Mr. Krawetz.

Mr. Krawetz: — Thank you, Madam Chair. Mr. Minister, I'd like to clarify a couple of things that . . . I've been here since we started listening to your responses and there are some things that I'd like to have you clarify.

You've indicated that the largest need for amalgamations is to reallocate funds from administration to the classroom. And I'd ask you to provide the total amount of money that the K to 12 system requires as an expense. What is the expense total, expense of the K to 12? And then, as a percentage or as a dollar figure, how much of that amount is actually dealt with in the category of administration?

Hon. Mr. Thomson: — I want to say that that is one of the reasons. It is not the primary reason for moving forward with this reform.

The single most significant reason for moving forward with the reform is to deal with the equalization of assessment per pupil ratios so that we can move towards a more uniform mill rate, so that we can equalize out the disparity between school divisions.

As I understand the overall dollar values, the taxpayers today commit about \$1.3 billion to K to 12 education on an annual basis. The amount that's spent on administration would . . .

Mr. Sangster: — Well it's . . .

Hon. Mr. Thomson: — Sorry, Don. Do you want to just . . .

Mr. Sangster: — Well the amount is two and a half per cent of 1.3 billion. But I think you need to indicate that that does not include the out-of-scope LEADS members, because they are

actually included in the instructional support, and we actually do not have a breakdown of that. We are actually changing our financial reporting as we speak, to get that.

So the 2.5 per cent does not include the LEADS members, and so I can't tell you that. But it does include SASBO and all board operations.

Mr. Krawetz: — Right. Thank you, Mr. Sangster. Mr. Sangster, as you are aware, I sat on a school board for nine years. And there was always a concern that the expense for the director of education was included in instructional material . . . instructional cost, because it skews the numbers. And you're right in saying that.

But when you talk about two and a half per cent, Mr. Minister, what do you hope to realize as an administrative cost — regardless of whether that change, as Mr. Sangster has pointed out in terms of reallocating the cost of the directors and all other out-of-scope personnel — what percentage do you hope to reduce to as a final percentage for administration costs? Have you set some goals?

I know one of my other colleagues was asking you about goals and objectives and to be able to measure the plan that you're putting in place. And, you know, whether it be 2007 or 2009, what do you expect to see in the K to 12 education as far as a percentage spent on administration — comparing apples to apples, using today's system as we know it today?

Hon. Mr. Thomson: — Well it's an interesting question the member asks, as if that is the sole reason that we're pursuing the changes. As I've indicated, the number one reason for pursuing the changes today is to make sure that we have a relatively equitable assessment per pupil ratio, which will then allow us to have more uniform mill rates across the province, will allow us to have more uniform resources available for instruction, and will allow us to move forward with property tax reform.

In terms of a percentage target, we don't have one today. There isn't one, and that is in part because divisions will need to work through their arrangements appropriately. However there is no doubt that this new system will be able to operate with less money spent on administration.

Mr. Krawetz: — Thank you for that response, Mr. Minister. But, Mr. Minister, as I was listening, I did hear you say a number of times, besides arriving at assessment equity, you did talk about reallocation of funds from administration and administrative expenses into the classroom. And you've made those comments publicly, where you suggested in fact, I think, that boards of education were not necessarily up front.

You made the comment today, as well, that over the last five years the government has increased education funding by \$125 million. Could you indicate to us and to the province, over that same five-year period — when we talk about additional costs incurred by boards of education, especially in the area of human resource costs, cost of teacher contracts — over that same period of time that the government has increased funding by 125 million, could you tell us what the expenses increased for all boards of education over that same five-year period.

Hon. Mr. Thomson: — Well I don't know that I have that detail here but if the member is suggesting that for the most part the money that has been provided by the government is there to satisfy contractual obligations negotiated particularly around teacher agreements, I would argue that he is likely correct, that that is primarily where that is gone.

Certainly there are rising costs within the system today. There is no doubt about that as we look at it. And I think we've enumerated a number of those, as has the school board association.

Mr. Krawetz: — Thank you, Mr. Minister, and I await a response from yourself or Mr. Sangster in the future.

But, Mr. Minister, one of the comments you made today was you said, well I believe . . . and I defer to *Hansard*, I guess, tomorrow. You said that the 125 million was provided by boards of education, yet you did not see mill rate declines at the board table, suggesting of course that the boards haven't done a very good job.

How do you equate your answer of a few minutes ago when you just said that, you know, the costs have increased probably equal? I don't know myself exactly whether they're exactly equal or slightly ahead or slightly behind. How would you have expected boards of education to lower mill rates if in fact there has been \$125 million increase in expenses over the same five-year period? How would you expect them to lower the mill rate?

Hon. Mr. Thomson: — I was simply stating a fact. I wasn't assessing any particular value to it other than the fact is that the taxpayer is contributing significantly more, whether it's to provincial resources or local resources, to support a school system that is increasingly expensive to run for increasingly fewer students.

That is the difficulty. That is the challenge built within the system today. This is why we need to make changes to our system, is to make sure that we can put the affordability and sustainability back into it. And I think, you know, certainly as elected officials I think we all try and balance out our interests in terms of making sure we've got the absolute best educational programs available with the desire to make sure we do that in the most efficient way and hopefully provide some tax relief to ratepayers.

Mr. Krawetz: — Mr. Minister, I don't argue with you at all that amalgamations have taken place for the right reasons and there was a need to continue with them. However, it's been very disconcerting and frustrating to boards of education, as you might recognize, that the criteria has never been very finite.

And we've had a number of ministers of Learning who have suggested that amalgamation should be a goal — whether it be by way of numbers, or whether it be by way of finances — but there has never been a criteria. And you're right, Mr. Minister, enrolments are key. And I want to indicate — and I'm quoting from the Boughen report — that in 1989 the enrolment in the province of Saskatchewan was 200,900 . . . sorry, 200,276 students. And today the enrolment, and I'm not sure exactly what the September 4 numbers were, but the enrolment

projected around 171,000. So in that period of time there's been substantial decline.

The reason I picked 1989, Mr. Minister, is that that year was the year that the boards of education — then known as Kamsack, Canora, and Timberline — met to discuss amalgamation. And we were discussing amalgamation in 1989 for a number of reasons.

One was financial. Secondly, it was regarding program and program delivery. Boards of education and trustees were looking at opportunities to ensure that the best possible education system was delivered. And that was — and I can tell you honestly — that discussion occurred in 1989. So amalgamations have been before us before and many, many boards have taken the opportunity to move forward.

Mr. Minister, I'm sure that you're familiar with the *School Finance and Governance Review* that was presented by Dr. Herve Langlois and Dr. Murray Scharf. And, Mr. Minister, in 1993 the SSTA (Saskatchewan School Trustees Association) then completed a document called the *Task Force On Educational Governance*, and I'm sure your officials have mentioned this to you. And I want to quote two paragraphs from this document just to show you that things haven't changed a lot over the years. And this is directly from page 17 of that document, and it says:

The Task Force on Educational Governance approached the question of school division size from several perspectives. When the relationship between school division . . . (administration) expenses and size was reviewed, it was apparent that the greatest potential administrative efficiencies are achieved at a minimum size of 2,500 students.

In other words, it set a low parameter. The other thing that it did, Mr. Minister, is that it indicated that:

. . . the Task Force considered school enrolments and reviewed distances necessary to achieve minimum . . . (distance) enrolments of 2,500 to 5,000.

Interesting number of 5,000.

It quickly became apparent that in some parts of the province and especially those areas around the smaller urban centres, this size of school division would be easily achieved. In other parts of the province, particularly in the Southwest and (the) North, the minimum of 2,500 might be too great.

So one of the recommendations, Mr. Minister . . . And by the way, Mr. Minister, and I know you may not have followed it back then, in 1992 there were 114 school divisions that existed.

Recommendation no. 1 in this report at that time was that:

There be approximately 35 public school divisions in Saskatchewan, each with a minimum enrolment of between 2,500 and 5,000 students in most cases.

I'd ask, Mr. Minister, whether or not reports done by other

groups . . . I know Mr. Sangster was a member of LEADS then and there was a report done by LEADS' officials dealing with governance and the size of school divisions. I'm wondering whether any of those recommendations, ideas were looked at as you developed the model that you are introducing today.

Hon. Mr. Thomson: — Well I think the quick answer is yes. There were a number of different issues that were looked at and certainly the experience over the last decade was looked at, both in terms of the speed and the success of voluntary amalgamations. The success of various amalgamations — some were successful, then more successful than others.

As I see what the members articulated tonight is a very true reflection that the more things change, the more they stay the same. The only difference in terms of this approach is we've decided to act on the reports rather than simply commission another one and let it collect dust.

Mr. Krawetz: — I wouldn't suggest that you do another report and let it collect dust. As you can see, this one's pretty dusty. It's been sitting on my shelf for a long period of time.

But what I do want you to recognize, Mr. Minister, is that the conclusive evidence of a lot of these reports is that one size does not fit all in Saskatchewan. And to suggest that we must have 5,000 students in a school division makes for some very large geographic areas. You've indicated in your map that I've looked at where there's tremendous size. And I don't know, Mr. Minister, you haven't elaborated fully because you've said that the boards of education, the new boards of education will arrive at those decisions.

Do you think that realistically in many of these large school divisions that we'll have a situation where there'll be one school division office, with two or three satellite offices functioning, to be able to provide that contact with the public to ensure that the taxpayer is near enough to an office where they actually can stop in and ask questions? Do you expect that that will be the outcome?

Hon. Mr. Thomson: — First of all, let me say that I agree one size does not fit all. That's why these boards are of various sizes. We have a minimum of 5,000. We still have a situation today where half the students in the province are educated in three boards, four boards under this scenario. The remainder deal with the other half of the student population.

I mean, there are certainly geographic issues that need to be taken into account. We didn't apply a strict 5,000 students per board because that would've been foolish. We would've had to create four new boards in each of Saskatoon and Regina.

Obviously we need to take into account local circumstance. We have some boards that under this configuration will be 91, 9,200 students. But what is clear from the student population data is that all of these boards have one thing in common — they have declining enrolments.

Where we saw the Melfort-Tiger Lily amalgamation happen only . . . how many years ago, five years ago . . . last year, but when it started out, we were looking at it having a student population of 20, how many hundred students . . . yes, 2,500

students. And today it's at about 2,000 students, Melfort-Tiger Lily. I mean, these are declining enrolments. This is part of the difficulty we're trying to work through in the system.

I don't know there's actually that much difference in where we would come out with views between the member and myself in terms of the benefit and risks of amalgamation. But I know that we do have significant difference of opinion on the process. This is the process we have opted to move forward because we want to move forward.

There's time that we need to put back the stability back into the system rather than being in a constant state of amalgamation that we have been in, as the member points out, roughly since 1989, and continuing to look for evermore a strategic and creative alliance of different boards. Now is the time for us to simply to go in and reinvent the system.

That's the decision we made. It's the decision that, process-wise, we're being criticized about today. I accept the criticism. I just believe that the end result will be worth it, and that may be where we differ. And it may be an issue that isn't resolved for a number of years. But I do believe that the work that's been done by the task force, by the department, by previous learned fellows who have looked at these matters, come to the same conclusion that we should pursue it.

I can't tell you why we didn't pursue Scharf-Langlois at the time. I did however ask Murray, Dr. Scharf, when I ran into him at the world congress, what he was thinking. He still of course thought it was a good idea but was quite pleased not to serve on the committee again and go travel about to sell it.

That's where I think we are today. And I appreciate that there are differences of opinions. And frankly any time we try to invoke this kind of change in a system, it's very, very difficult and it's disruptive; and I appreciate that. But I do believe that it is necessary.

Mr. Krawetz: — I will concur with you Mr. Minister, that amalgamations are necessary. And I think our differences are over the fact, as I've indicated, that these studies show that efficiencies for administration purposes are gained at about 2,500 students in some instances. There's nothing that says that Saskatoon public can't exist at its current level. And when you said, why didn't the Scharf-Langlois report get invoked? The lobby by School Boards Association was in fact a production of this task force document that says, don't do it, reconsider something else. Reconsider a province that has 35 public school boards of education. In 1993 this was presented. Nothing happened.

We had ministers indicate through, as I said, incentives to go ahead with amalgamation. But you can see, Mr. Minister, that if you don't put a minimum criteria, and I know that Mr. Boughen made a lot of reference to the boards of education with, you know, 100 students or less than that. And if the minister of Learning over the last number of years has not indicated that I want to have a school division that will not have less than — pick a number — 1,500, 2,000, 2,500, whatever the case may have been, you would have had tremendous number of amalgamations occur beyond the number that have already occurred. That would have happened.

But it's not something that has been done and therefore, Mr. Minister, when boards of education who have been through two amalgamations as in the case of members of the Canora school division board who, you know, don't exist. The Crystal Lake School Division which they formed in conjunction with Timberline School Division, doesn't exist today. It's now the Eastland Lakes School Division which is joined now with Kamsack. They have been through two amalgamations. They are now going to go a third amalgamation.

And the criteria has never been clear. The criteria said, here is some financial assistance, here is what we would suggest boards do, and we want to ensure that amalgamations take place. They have followed the direction of previous ministers.

Now, when you now produce this document and I notice that for the area that I'm talking about, the new school division that I live in would include Eastland Lakes, York School Division, Melville-Deer Park, and Potashville; I note that three of those four are amalgamated school divisions. They have already been through amalgamations. I now see an enrolment of 6,337 as far as the September 30 enrolment, so a good-sized enrolment for a large area, but I don't think an unworkably large area.

So I want you to be aware that I am going to try to help boards of education get through this and get on with providing education for the students, because that's why boards of education exist. They're there to provide the best quality education to students. And we as politicians and the people involved in the bureaucracies never, can never forget that. That's our number one goal. And the thing that we need to look at though, is will the criteria change? I notice that two of the school divisions, the 12 school divisions, have an enrolment projection from last fall of 5,143 students in one case, and 5,275 in another case.

Based on the direction of the enrolments in the province of Saskatchewan — I believe we've been dropping between 3,000 and 3,500 students per year for the last few years and I think that's continued to be in force — what will the criteria be three years from now when these school divisions slip below 5,000? Will we again be . . . Will those boards of education who have just gone through, in many instances, a third amalgamation be told no, it's not good enough any more because you're now down at 4,500 students or 4,300 students and it's now time to amalgamate again?

Hon. Mr. Thomson: — I'm not sure exactly how to disagree with what the member has outlined. I think that he has outlined fairly clearly what the process has been to date. I think he's outlined what some of the difficulties are. Certainly I think he understands the political reality of the difficulty of me having set the criteria and told boards go ahead, meet these criteria voluntarily.

Very, very difficult to get boards to come to that 5,000 student population because it ends up with a configuration much as we have today, or to say that there will be no zero-grant boards within the existing configuration. Those are difficult for boards to deal with.

That's why we made the decision to go with a facilitated process, a directed process, what the members opposite call a

forced process. That was a deliberate decision and not one easily arrived at, but one arrived at because we believed that this was the right time to do this and that this was a better approach, to say once and for all let's get large enough student populations, let's get these boards back to positive value, and let's rebuild this system in a way that can move forward.

I have no doubt that these boards will not hold, some of them will not hold the 5,000 students. There's no doubt about that. That's not . . . that is a criteria for drawing the map; that's not the criteria for them continuing. That was one of the reasons, however, that we did resist the argument put forward from some divisions that the numbers should be 4,000, 3,500, because those then start to creep back down into those 2,000 ranges.

The criteria, I would argue, we did exactly as the member suggested we should do, which was lay out what the criteria were. We were very clear in this because we wanted it to be based on a set of clear criteria that boards could understand what the configurations are. And obviously as you start map-making — and we've got four boundaries to our province and a certain natural set of divisions — there's only so many ways to draw the map, especially at the same time you're trying to move zero-grant boards out of that status or negative-grant boards out of that status.

This is why we undertook it. I think that this will hold for many years to come, and I hope that it does do exactly what the member indicates that it should do, which is take away the need for us to consistently look at amalgamation that draws away time and resources from instruction — which I agree, those issues are the ones that trustees are elected to do. Frankly I think they're the ones that we as provincial politicians are more interested in, but the ones that don't consume our time at this point. My hope is that this will hold for . . . I think it's probably optimistic to say a generation, but I would hope that it would hold for significantly more than a decade.

Mr. Krawetz: — Thank you for those comments, Mr. Minister. Mr. Minister, there's a couple of things that you know occur in the past. School trustees sit around a board table and there are always two things that they wish for. They wish for an increased grant on the foundation grant formula, and the second thing they wish for is an increased enrolment. And the only way you can get an increased enrolment is if we have a growing population. So that has not happened in the province of Saskatchewan. And we continue to show that, you know, we will get smaller as the province continues to lose the total number of students in the K to 12 system.

A couple of final questions, Mr. Minister. And it deals with the area that I represent. When you talk about school divisions and the need to provide a certain, you know I guess I won't say type of education but probably quality of education, you've based it around this fact that you have to have 5,000 students. And I know that there are many school divisions — and I'm sure the deputy minister would agree and Mr. Sangster would agree — that there are many school divisions today who are referred to as full-service school divisions, who provide just quality education on all of the schools that they operate. And some of them are at 1,500 students, some are at 2,000, some are at 2,500 students.

It doesn't necessarily matter on the number of students that you have if you are required to provide quality education. And I believe that's what directors of education, and principals, and teachers, and boards of education strive for all the time, is quality education.

So while, you know, Hudson Bay, as it sits with — I don't know the exact number — I believe they're around 1,000 students, they provide a pretty good education system to all of the students in that area. I understand from listening to you and listening to your officials that there's hope that it can improve. And I don't know how it can do that, to be honest with you, when I believe that the system that they provide right now is very, very good.

I believe that the largest benefit might be in that they'll be able to maintain the current program and the current services if in fact they're part of an amalgamated school division. And that's what I indicated to you that that was a goal that I had as a trustee in 1989, that we were going to be able to save industrial arts programs, and we were going to save our band program, and we were going to save all the things that those school divisions, each of those divisions, had in 1989 but were in jeopardy of losing because of a number of things like funding cuts. I've been part of a school board where we had minus 4 per cent grant cut, and minus 2 per cent grant cuts. So those are realities that trustees face.

My question regarding those four school divisions that I just mentioned which make up this new school division, could either Mr. Sangster or the deputy indicate, how many current directors and/or assistant directors and/or superintendents — whatever they may be called — how many exist in this configuration right now?

Hon. Mr. Thomson: — Sorry, which . . . are you speaking of the configuration with . . .

Mr. Krawetz: — The gold coloured one which would be Eastland Lakes, York, Melville-Deer Park, and Potashville.

Mr. Sangster: — Eastland Lakes, I believe has a director and I'm not sure, yes . . .

Mr. Krawetz: — An assistant.

Mr. Sangster: — . . . and an assistant. York has a director and two assistants. And Potashville has a director, I think maybe an in-scope consultant, but not another out of scope. And Melville-Deer Park has a full-time director. So we're . . .

Mr. Krawetz: — And Potashville.

Mr. Sangster: — Oh, Potashville is one.

Mr. Krawetz: — One.

Mr. Sangster: — Yes. It has an in scope.

Mr. Krawetz: — So, Mr. Minister, I see four directors of education and probably three or four assistants, superintendents. For that size of school division to have 6,037 students, and I'm not sure what the teacher numbers will translate into, would you

not see probably one director of education and as many as five or six, we'll call them superintendents rather than assistant directors? Do you not see one and possibly five or six, in other words very similar totals to the ones that exist right now?

Hon. Mr. Thomson: — I would advise that it's more like you would see four or five, but that we would see fewer.

Mr. Krawetz: — Right. So therefore if we have a director plus four or a director plus five, we're still talking five or six administrators. Now, my last question, Mr. Minister. If you're the director of education in the current Eastland Lakes or York or Potashville and you become, you are the successful candidate for this new configuration, would you expect that the director of education will receive the same salary that he or she currently receives as the director for any of those separate small ones versus the large school divisions?

Hon. Mr. Thomson: — Within the LEADS membership there is a fairly well established range of salaries based on student populations. And I think it's fair to say that where we see the directors of very large divisions, like Saskatoon and Regina, that the variance is not of a significant magnitude different. I don't have the grid with me tonight. But I think at the low end we see in a 500-student population, a low salary, an average salary — what? — 80, 75.

Mr. Sangster: — No, more than that; 90 would be low.

Hon. Mr. Thomson: — Ninety. And at the top end . . .

Mr. Sangster: — Well I would think in the range of 130,000 is probably . . .

Mr. Krawetz: — So with that range of 90 to 130, you would expect that these new school divisions, the directors of education are probably going to be in a range of 105 to maybe 125. Is that an accurate range?

Hon. Mr. Thomson: — I would think that's reasonable.

Mr. Krawetz: — That's reasonable. And obviously then, the superintendents or the assistant directors are going to move up as well into that range because now they're responsible for 7,000 students and not responsible for 900 students any more. Would that be an accurate assumption?

Hon. Mr. Thomson: — I'm not sure that that would be, that that would hold as true. We need to take a look at how it gets configured within each of these systems. I would need to look more closely at what the grids look like in divisions like Qu'Appelle Valley or Sask Rivers or one of those larger . . . (inaudible interjection) . . . Yes, or Sask Valley, one of those larger ones. We'd have to take a look at that. But I don't know that that would hold necessarily true.

If I can just return to what the member's central arguments were tonight around the amalgamation issue. I want to say that I think it is a mistake to think that any one of the criteria standing by themselves is sufficient reason to undertake the amalgamation or would provide a sensible enough set of guidelines for devising or divining what the new system would look like.

Taken as a whole — 5,000 students minimum, no zero-grant boards, that they all move to positive grant status, that they take into account the trading patterns and keep whole divisions whole today, that we move forward to make sure there's more relative equity in terms of the student, per-pupil ratios — those taken as a package, I think, are a sound and sensible set of criteria that we've established for the amalgamations.

Certainly if we take any one of those points by themselves, we can construct any number of arguments as to why that may not be in and of itself an appropriate criteria. But when taken as a whole, I think that they provide a balanced foundation for us to build the new system on. That's why we've undertaken this. That is why we have constructed the criteria the way we have and why we have facilitated moving forward.

We really do believe that it's time now to get past the debate about how we do it and get into getting it done. And frankly I share the view, I'll tell the member, that ministers of Education or Learning are not much different than board trustees. We too sit around the decision-making tables hoping for more money and for more students. And that, I think, is something that we all share in common, and unfortunately I think our response is always as muted as the . . . regardless of which of those tables we sit at.

So we need to continue to move forward with this. I think this is the right time and the right set of criteria for us to use in doing it. I accept the criticism of those who say that we have forced significant change into the system and that it has not been nuanced perhaps as much as some would have liked.

But it is . . . I really do believe, and the cabinet and the caucus are of the view, that we just need to make these changes now so we can get on with making the education reform that is going to make sure that the dwindling number of students — and frankly in some areas, growing number of students — that do not have the same access to resources today, have first class education. And I think that's something we share with members on both sides of the aisle.

The Chair: — Mr. McMorris.

Mr. McMorris: — Thank you, Madam Chair. I have a couple of, I guess statements, and one or two questions.

We're getting near the end of our time and I appreciate the time that you and your officials have spent. I've written down a few notes as the two and a half hours have passed by, and I found it quite interesting. And certainly you and I have talked many times about the different rationale as to the amalgamation — whether it's the dollars, whether it's education, whether it's equity. And I can agree or disagree with most of those. I can see your point, if I disagree, but I can certainly see your point.

I do have to admit though, the Ile-a-la-Crosse one doesn't meet any of those criteria. I mean your argument as to why Ile-a-la-Crosse remains as a division, and you've done all the work that you've done throughout the province, I mean there is no connection there whatsoever.

When you look at the map, your rationale was, well isolated communities. Sandy Bay is isolated. Ile-a-la-Crosse, compared

to Sandy Bay, isn't. When you talk about efficiencies, every argument that you've used today, tonight, I can agree with somewhat until you came to that one. And that one just holds absolutely no water.

I think, you know, a fellow member made the comment about the former mayor. I maybe would question whether it had more to do with politics than it had to do with anything else, when you look at all the 58, not all — 59, I guess it is — school divisions that are affected through this and who they are represented by, as compared to that one. That's my comment.

I do have a couple of questions though regarding pay for trustees. We've talked a lot about pay for directors; we've talked about . . . Ken, the member for Canora-Pelly, talked about the directors and the superintendents. We've never talked once about what trustees will be looking at for pay. And I know this is . . . I think there'd be very few trustees that would say they ran for the position because of the money.

But you also have to realize that there's been very few trustees that have run in this province for that position with the responsibility that these new trustees are going to be facing. Every trustee that has run in this province over the last number of years can talk to a former trustee and say, what can I expect? But there is no one, I don't believe, that has told trustees, the 10 out of 12 divisions, 120 people that will be elected to these new chairs, what they can expect.

And it's not probably the reason why they're running, but I would submit . . . I've had a couple say, well I'd sure, I plan on running; if I win, what would I expect? I don't know what they can expect. I realize that's at the first board meeting, but there's no precedent here. I mean, they don't know what to expect. I don't think they really know what to expect as far as remuneration. I also believe they don't know what to expect as far as the workload they're going to be facing in the next extended three years to three and a half to four years of their mandate. What message should I give those trustees?

Hon. Mr. Thomson: — Well I think as very much as the member's outlined, this is an issue that can only be dealt with by the new boards. Where we've seen these significantly larger amalgamations, there's not been any significant upward pressure on the remuneration for trustees. But this is an issue that they'll need to sort through.

Like the member, I too have not heard any members or any potential trustees express to me either interest or disinterest in the position based on, frankly, either the amount of money that they would receive in compensation or, for that matter, the geographic distances that have been outlined in some cases. People who are interested in these positions are committed to moving forward the cause of education within their local areas, and I believe that'll still be the primary factor.

With respect to the northern divisions issue, I have to say that a more compelling argument in the North was the amalgamation of Northern Lights with Creighton. But it became too difficult to do as a result of the border community status of Creighton and Flin Flon. But in terms of the debate that was going on within the northern communities, that was where . . . there was a lot of argument within the La Ronge community that there

should have been amalgamation with Creighton. That was where that debate fell.

I don't know what else to say on that issue. I regret that the member opposite believes that somehow there is some big P partisan political agenda at work here. There was a number of small P political agendas at work across the province as we looked to how to put communities together and what worked and what fit. And that was no different in the North as we looked at the criteria than it was in any part of the South, or for that matter deciding to leave Lloydminster out or Creighton out or not to expand the boundaries of Saskatoon and Regina.

I mean there were a number of different issues that came into play. And that was what we weighed out, was how to still make sure we had a strong rural voice in rural education to make sure that there was good representation, that the areas were naturally working together, that they had some focal point and shared some common values and common economic drivers that were working towards a relatively equitable assessment per pupil. Those were the big issues we looked at.

And yes, there are a couple of different ways we could have drawn this map. This is significantly different than the interim map, but I think it's a much stronger one. So those are the comments I would offer to those two points that the member has raised.

Mr. McMorris: — Well I guess, I mean I'm going to leave the northern issue completely alone because we could spend the rest of the time on that. We don't have much time.

The trustee pay issue is definitely going to be an issue going forward because again I don't know if anybody can really legitimately tell a person running for that position what the workload's going to be and what is expected of them. People knew over the past 50 years what the role of the trustee was, what the workload, roughly, of a trustee was. But no one I don't think can honestly say. Will it be three times the time that a former trustee put in within a year? Will it be four times or five times? I would submit this first year is just going to be amazing workload for all the trustees, for the 120 trustees that get elected in June.

I was also interested in how you've designed the subdivisions of each division and how they are elected to the board. I realize you have ten trustees. I'm looking for example in the Southeast where you have the ten different areas located. You have two out of Estevan, two out of Weyburn. Estevan has a population of 5,215. Weyburn has a population of 5,159. Trustee one for example has a population of 4,172. In other words, he's representing 4,172 voters whereas Estevan and Weyburn, if you take two trustees in that population, are representing roughly 2,600. What's the rationale behind that?

Hon. Mr. Thomson: — I'm going to ask Mr. Sangster to provide the rationale.

Mr. Sangster: — I'll try to explain. What happened was they took the total number of electors in the school division under the new boundaries, and that was determined through the . . . We had a very excellent system using health records and so on. So we were comfortable that we had the numbers. So that gave

us basically, divide by 10, gave you the mean. Then they calculated the 25 per cent on each side.

At that point in time, then they looked at the city . . . If they were cities, because within large . . . any urban, not only cities but any urban that was within that range would receive one. Or if they were double that . . . because we don't have the ability or we did not have the ability in this first election.

School boards may have it the next time around, but in this election we didn't have the ability to divide up a city or a large town into two sections. Like dividing it down main street, we didn't know how many houses on each side of main street to actually count, to do a ratepayers . . . So within those large centres you had . . . so like in the cities of Estevan and Weyburn, they will be elected at large, two members each, and that's because those numbers qualified within that range.

So that had to be done first. And that was the advice given to us by, you know, the strategy around how it's been done in the past and how it's . . . So then you take that, what's, you know . . . so you've got four in this case. Then you have six left. Then you look at the population of the rest of it and then again create a new mean. And in Estevan, in that particular one, it favours the cities. There are also some, if you look at all 11 or 12, at all 12, there are some that also go the other way.

But that's the statistical method used. It is not exactly . . . I mean, it's the best we could do because we would not be able to divide or to go into the rural . . . include part of a city or part of a large urban. That's really what it was. And so it does create a few situations where they are within the mean of the whole, but by the time you take them out, it does change it slightly.

Hon. Mr. Thomson: — I might just elaborate a little bit. I had this discussion with Estevan and with Swift Current and had suggested that one of the . . . in terms of making sure that we had a strict equality of electors, had suggested implementing the wards within Estevan and Swift Current, within the smaller centres.

Both, when we were in the discussion with Estevan, both Estevan public and Estevan Rural made the point that they didn't think that was going to be workable for a number of reasons. One is the set of reasons that Mr. Sangster has outlined. The second is a concern about making sure that there was still a large rural voice within these boards. As you start to draw out, what you potentially end up with is losing that rural voice into those city wards. So this became problematic. This is not an ideal solution, but it is the workable one that we have.

I should also mention that when I met with Parkland division recently, they were very clear in saying that they wanted us to ensure that the ward system remains in place within the rural areas, after the reforms of '09, once they revert back to having that option at the local level. That's something we'll need to think about as legislators. I tend to favour that view that we should make sure that rural wards are maintained, rather than going back to an at-large system. But that's a set of discussions for a future education Act amendment.

This isn't perfect, but I think it's the best way that we have to make sure that there's a strong rural voice in these boards. And

I identified that of the reconfigured boards, there are only two that would be classified as urban-rural. All the rest would be predominately rural in terms of their representation. Recognizing that as we've debated here tonight, your definition of rural tends to change the smaller the community you come from.

In the Southwest for example, there's a huge argument that obviously Swift Current is not rural, that that is urban. Estevan, Weyburn are not rural, and yet some members tonight have defined them as clearly so. So it just all depends on your perspective, but I think that this was the best way that the task force could come up with drawing these boundaries that protected common communities of interest and at the same time dealt with that, whatever we want to call it, urban-rural representation on these boards.

Mr. McMorris: — Yes I can see there being a lot of problems moving forward. I mean you look at the example of Yorkton, they have three representatives on this board of ten when it comes to deciding on the division office, compared to Melville which will have one. I mean Yorkton already controls a third of the board, almost a third of the board.

I mean it is very problematic especially when the big divisions — some people say the biggest decisions — of what these boards are going to have to decide are within the next six months to eight months. I mean yes, maybe we can change it into the future and the next time the election cycle rolls around, but I mean the horse is already out then. Not to pursue that too much further, because I have a number of questions and we don't have a lot of time.

You talked about reassessment and how it's going to affect the east side. And certainly equity was a big issue and trying to match up assessment values in divisions was an issue. That's one of the major reasons. The other reason was around the 5,000 student mark, and which you have already said we'll probably be seeing that drop below within a couple of years.

I would submit that that southeast corner — Estevan, Weyburn — if getting away from zero grant boards and keeping the population was over 5,000, you'll lose both of those within the next two or three years because I would bet that area, if oil prices stay the way they are, and with reassessment, that that will soon be a zero grant board and within a couple of years will be below 5,000. What are your plans then, when two of the criteria that you set up are already out of touch with reality?

Hon. Mr. Thomson: — Well I appreciate the fact that the member says only two of them will be out of touch with reality because some of his colleagues have suggested that they all already are. I think that is an interesting perspective and, I think, just shows the difference of opinion within the caucuses on how to move forward with this.

The issue around the zero grant board, certainly as it pertains to the Southeast, will necessitate additional provincial resources going into education funding to keep it in a positive grant status. There's absolutely no doubt about that. There will need to be additional provincial money put into the foundation operating grant program. And that is certainly something that the government recognizes. That is part of the way that we'll

need to move to make sure that we stay on top of this.

Mr. McMorris: — I don't quite understand how that would work. If you're going to continue to put more money in, although that Southeast is collecting more than enough off of its property tax already, what will putting more money into the system do to affect this area which is funding education 100 per cent? Or do they then drop their mill rate further so that they can receive money from the government? I mean, I mean that's the whole issue that you're trying to correct, may be lost already within a year.

Hon. Mr. Thomson: — No. I appreciate what the member is arguing, but what we are talking about is as the pie, the provincial pie becomes larger, it maintains the integrity. We could make Estevan Rural a zero grant board today by putting a quarter billion dollars annually more into foundation operating grant. This won't require a quarter billion dollars to do that. But there is a relationship between those formulas. But that shows, I think, the disparity in terms of the assessment today.

Mr. McMorris: — My last point, I guess seeing the clock get close to our three-hour limit, is that the issue around satellite offices . . . and it's been mentioned many times tonight. It's been mentioned that you could, you know, envision a satellite office in Estevan or Weyburn depending . . . or Midale or Alida and Moosomin, and we can have a bunch of satellite offices to try and to, you know, appease some of the hard feelings because they're losing their division office . . . or let's not say a bunch. Let's only say two satellite offices in a district. Have you looked at the examples that have gone on in Alberta as far as the success of satellite offices in Alberta because this was started a number of years ago, satellite offices?

I've had the opportunity to talk to a former teaching colleague of mine who went out to Alberta after he was done here teaching and was a director out in Alberta, went through the satellite issue, has seen it operate and seen the deficiencies that are there. It's great on paper. And he said just about in every division they've tried it, they've gone away from it because it just hasn't worked out there for many, many reasons.

And I think it is a classic example of people sitting around a table saying, this would work. This will cure that problem. And I believe it would make sense around a boardroom table, but practically it hasn't worked in other jurisdictions.

Hon. Mr. Thomson: — Well this is exactly why local boards will need to make those decisions themselves. They'll have that opportunity to decide how many offices, where they're situated. That's one of the decisions that they will have the opportunity to make. And I assume that they'll weigh out the arguments the member opposite says.

But I want to make this point. During the three hours tonight I have heard a litany of arguments as to why this won't work. What has not come through loudly enough are those people in the system who believe that this will work, and are prepared to help make it work — the 91 per cent of the school boards who have voted to help make this work, the directors who are saying they're prepared to help make this work. Those voices have been lost in this debate, and maybe it's because we're only hearing from one side of the table tonight.

But I think that it is important for us to remember that we can be naysayers, or we can get on and make change. It's easy to sit around and let reports collect dust, to commission them, and I can tell you that's the easiest thing for a government to do. But when we actually want to make the change it is tough, and it takes some gumption to do it.

Are we doing everything right? I doubt it, but I think that we're giving this the push in the right direction and that the changes that we are enacting as a result of these reforms are going to bear fruit, and they will prove within the very short time to be the right decisions. Whether or not we like the process, I'm convinced that we will find that these are the right decisions for our time.

Mr. McMorris: — Well just in closing, it's interesting, Mr. Minister, I don't think you've once heard from our side of the table that we've been against amalgamation — not once have we said that. In fact we've been on the record many, many times. Many members of our caucus have been on boards that have amalgamated. I've got no problem with amalgamation. The process definitely is one issue, that's for sure, for all the reasons that we've said tonight, which I frankly don't know whether you've considered all those reasons when you went down this road on May 13 and you made your announcement, this is the way it's going to be.

Now you can say you had consultation before that. I don't know what it was; it was very limited. All the reports say, yes, we have to move towards amalgamation and we don't disagree with that.

But what you've heard around the table is people that are around the board tables talking to our MLAs. We're talking to parents and students and teachers, and this is what we're hearing. We'd love to come out and say, you bet, bang on, this is the best thing that can ever happen to education. And it might spell out to be that way. But frankly, Mr. Minister, that isn't what we've heard in rural Saskatchewan.

So if you expect us to come in here and pat you on the back when we're hearing something totally different than you haven't heard from before, then you're sorely mistaken. Not once have we said that we've been against amalgamation, but you have to realize that there are a pile of people that have a vested interest in education, and they don't feel the process that you've gone through will yield the results that you think they will.

Hon. Mr. Thomson: — I understand exactly what the member is saying and this is the point that I'm making. Yes, amalgamation if necessary, not necessarily amalgamation; it's certainly not using the process that we've outlined. We need to get on with it. We need to make decisions. Part of governing is about making decisions. I too wish I could sit back and armchair quarterback. But the problem is we don't have that ability. We need to make those decisions. And that's what we're attempting to drive forward with these changes.

I have attempted to outline tonight what the rationale for these are. I have attempted to outline this over the last 10 months that we have been working on this. And I appreciate that every time we do that that there are more questions, and that's good. I

appreciate the scrutiny and I appreciate the oversight.

But in terms of the approach, I do believe that we are taking the right approach, using the right process on the right criteria, and that we need obviously to continue to manage this process as it moves forward. And we need to address those who believe that this is not the preferred option, not the preferred route. And there are people out there, a number of them.

But I believe that as we look at this on balance, that what we have is a fair approach that's set on the right set of principles and is going to work in the best interests of making sure education dollars are able to be spent as trustees and the department and the taxpayers hope that they are within the system, within the constraints that we have. That's the approach we've taken. And I appreciate that it has been a difficult one, but it is a necessary one.

Mr. McMorris: — Well I'd like to thank the minister and his officials for being here tonight until this hour. I also will say that, you know, I guess tonight is over but the amount of people that will be watching the process move forward will be great. Because as I said, so many people have a vested interest in our education system, whether it's parents, teachers, trustees, it doesn't matter. It affects the future of our province.

So we'll certainly be keeping a close tab on the process and the progress and I guess the process that we see moving forward. So thank you for your time tonight.

Hon. Mr. Thomson: — Madam Chair, I too would like to thank my officials for coming out tonight and my colleagues on the government side who I know have listened with rapt attention tonight to this debate that we've had many times within our caucus.

And simply conclude by saying that I would certainly welcome and invite members of the Assembly on the opposition side to feel free to join us, not only in monitoring the change but in helping lead it.

And with that, I would again like to thank the officials for assisting me tonight.

The Chair: — Thank you. Then before us is the supplementary estimates for Learning, vote 5. Post-secondary education (LR11) \$46,311,000. Agreed?

Some Hon. Members: — Agreed.

Subvote (LR11) agreed to.

The Chair: — K to 12 education (LR03) \$30,054,000. Agreed?

Some Hon. Members: — Agreed.

Subvote (LR03) agreed to.

The Chair: — Education property tax relief (LR09) \$55,050,000. Agreed?

Some Hon. Members: — Agreed.

Subvote (LR09) agreed to.

The Chair: — And the Learning vote 5, is \$131,415,000. Agreed?

Some Hon. Members: — Agreed.

The Chair: — I will now entertain a motion for supplementary estimates 2004-05:

Resolved that there be granted to Her Majesty for the 12 months ending March 31, 2005, the following sum for Learning, \$131,415,000.

Have a mover?

Mr. Hagel: — I so move.

The Chair: — Mr. Hagel. All in favour?

Some Hon. Members: — Agreed.

Vote 5 agreed to.

The Chair: — Now a motion to adjourn? Mr. Borgerson, thank you. Agreed?

Some Hon. Members: — Agreed.

The Chair: — The committee is adjourned. Thank you very much. Thanks to the minister and his officials.

The committee adjourned at 22:02.

