



STANDING COMMITTEE ON HUMAN SERVICES

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STANDING COMMITTEE ON HUMAN SERVICES

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Mr. Hugh Nerlien
Kelvington-Wadena

[The committee met at 15:30.]

The Chair: — Welcome, everyone. Good afternoon. Welcome to the Standing Committee on Human Services. I'm the chairperson tonight. My name is Alana Ross. With us this afternoon we have Mr. Matt Love chitting in for Mr. Jared Clarke; Mr. Muhammad Fiaz; Mr. Marv Friesen; Mr. Warren Kaeding; and Mr. Hugh Nerlien.

Pursuant to rule 148(1), the following estimates and supplementary estimates no. 2 were committed to the Standing Committee on Human Services on March 28th, 2024 and March 20th, 2024 respectively. 2024-25 estimates: vote 37, 169, Advanced Education; vote 5, Education; vote 32, Health; vote 20, Labour Relations and Workplace Safety; vote 36, Social Services. 2023-24 supplementary estimates no. 2: vote 5, Education; vote 32, Health; vote 36, Social Services.

I would like to table the following document: HUS 31-29, Ministry of Health: Response to questions raised at the April 5th, 2023 meeting.

**General Revenue Fund
Education
Vote 5**

Subvote (ED01)

The Chair: — Today the committee will be considering the estimates and supplementary estimates no. 2 for the Ministry of Education. We will begin with the consideration of vote 5, Education, central management and services, subvote (ED01). Minister Cockrill is here with his officials. I would ask that officials please state their names before speaking, and please do not touch the microphone. The Hansard operator will turn your microphone on when you are speaking to the committee.

Minister, if you would please introduce your officials and make your opening remarks.

Hon. Mr. Cockrill: — Thank you, Madam Chair. Good afternoon, everyone. I'm pleased to be here today to speak to the Ministry of Education's 2024-2025 budget. With me today I have a large crew, so I'll go through all of them. With me today is Mitch Graw, my chief of staff. And from the Ministry of Education, Deputy Minister Clint Repski on my left; assistant deputy minister Jason Pirlot and assistant deputy minister Sameema Haque to my right. Also joining us we have the executive director of corporate services, Rhiannon Shaw; executive director of education funding, Angela Chobanik; director of education financial policy, Paul Lewis; executive director of information management and support, Sheldon Ramstead; executive director of early learning, Janet Mitchell; executive director of priority action team, Tim Caleval; executive director of student achievement and supports, Maria Chow; executive director of programs, Kevin Gabel.

Also joining us from Saskatchewan Distance Learning Corporation we have CEO [chief executive officer] Darren Gasper; vice-president corporate services, Michelle Miller; director of communications, Stephanie Ali; and executive director of finance and HR [human resources], Sara Hawryluk.

So, Madam Chair, I'm honoured to present this year's record Ministry of Education budget. Through this budget we are supporting students and teachers through a record level of investment, including increased funding to address classroom supports and significant capital for new schools and classrooms for a growing province.

This year's budget also continues to support our children's future through a growing investment in early years as we increase the number of regulated child care spaces available at \$10 a day. We are also supporting literacy in libraries and the important services that they offer in communities around the province.

Now we have many partners in education, early learning, and libraries whose work is integral to the citizens of our province. And I just want to thank the dedicated teachers, administrators, and other professionals across our pre-K to 12 [pre-kindergarten to grade 12] school system, the early childhood educators, the librarians, and library staff. Thank all of them for the important work that they do and their commitment to the families and people of this province.

Now the theme of this year's budget is classrooms, care, and communities. And we see those priorities clearly reflected in our Ministry of Education's budget. The education budget is a record investment of \$3.3 billion for 2024-2025. This is an increase of \$247.8 million or 8.1 per cent over last year in support of pre-K to grade 12 schools, early learning and child care, and libraries and literacy across the province.

Now the province's 27 school divisions will receive \$2.2 billion in operating funding for the 2024-2025 school year, and this is the largest ever increase in Saskatchewan's history. This is \$180 million or nearly 9 per cent more compared to last year's budget allocation. Now this increase includes funding to support enrolment growth; funding to address inflationary pressures, including fuel and non-teacher salaries; funding for the teachers' collective bargaining agreement; and increased funding for classroom supports. The 2024-2025 budget includes \$356.6 million for classroom supports, an increase of \$45.6 million or 14.7 per cent over the previous year.

On March 8th our government and the Saskatchewan School Boards Association, or SSBA, highlighted the long-term nature of this investment with a new multi-year funding agreement. With the support of the province's 27 locally elected boards of education, the four-year agreement between government and the SSBA commits a minimum of \$356 million per year over the next several years.

This agreement provides a written guarantee by government for long-term and predictable funding for classroom supports in our province. It is a direct investment that also recognizes the importance of local decision making and the diversity of Saskatchewan's communities. This increased commitment to funding for classroom supports also includes ongoing funding for the specialized support classroom pilot project and the Teacher Innovation and Support Fund pilot project.

Specialized support classrooms began as a pilot earlier this year to help school staff manage and de-escalate behavioural incidents. The goal is to assist students who need targeted

intervention in the short term while also reducing interruptions in the home classroom. These classrooms provide students with specialized short-term supports to help them with self-regulation by offering an additional learning space with specially trained staff. This work is to provide examples of successful long-term solutions to targeted intervention methods and to increase teacher capacity to manage complex classrooms.

The ministry believes starting with eight schools will provide the education sector with several approaches which could be transitioned into other divisions in the near future. The ministry will be working closely with participating school divisions to evaluate the pilot's success, and data will be submitted by each school division and will describe the progress of the local initiative and the impact this pilot is having on students and staff.

And let me just pause and say that I've been speaking directly with school staff at these eight specific schools and hearing about their pilot project just getting up and running. Hearing some very positive feedback so far about how this pilot will positively impact both students and teachers in those schools, and really, I think give us an opportunity to look at a new approach for how we work with students with challenges across our system.

And I do think it's important to note, and I'll probably get into this later in my comments, but out of the eight schools that we have the specialized support classroom pilot project at, there's eight different staffing models, which speaks directly to the diverse needs that we see in schools and communities across the province.

And when we talk about the second pilot project we have, which is the Teacher Innovation and Support Fund, this pilot project helps implement local innovative ideas to enhance our classrooms in such areas as teacher wellness, school safety, and student achievement. And we have seen great uptake in the program since its launch in February and hearing directly from teachers on how we can continue to support them with these unique projects.

Now to date, 24 teacher-led projects have been approved for funding for a wide array of engaging projects. And later this week or early next week, I look forward to announcing the next set of projects around the province to be approved under the Teacher Innovation and Support Fund.

I would remind the public, and teachers specifically, that applications may be submitted at any point in the 2023-2024 or the 2024-2025 school year, and the selection of approved projects will occur regularly throughout the year. And really we look forward to seeing more ideas come forward from Saskatchewan teachers over the next year.

Now in addition to supports for the classrooms, students and staff mental health continues to be a priority for the Ministry of Education. This budget provides \$609,000 to support initiatives related to bullying prevention, positive mental health, and student safety. Now this includes funding to support student access to Kids Help Phone.

And I would also say that our partners in the Ministry of Health are also providing \$3 million, an increase of \$1 million, to support and expand the mental health capacity-building

initiative. And I just want to thank my colleague, the Minister Responsible for Mental Health and Addictions, for the work that he and his team have been doing over the last several weeks and months to evaluate applications, where we'll be rolling out the mental health capacity-building initiative to more schools in communities around the province, following up on our government's commitment to expand that program to all school divisions across the province.

I should also say the Ministry of Health is also providing \$3.4 million in funding for integrated youth services, and this funding was annualized in last year's budget. And after a competitive call for proposals, the YWCA Regina, the YMCA of Regina and Moose Jaw, and Partners Family Services in Humboldt were selected by the John Howard Society of Saskatchewan, which is the group coordinating our integrated youth services sites. In addition to that, the Sturgeon Lake First Nation Health Centre in Sturgeon Lake First Nation is the fourth organization to host a site after previously doing so as part of a national research project.

Now these integrated youth services, they provide rapid access to youth-targeted supports, including mental health and addictions services, physical health services, education and employment and training supports, social and community services, youth and caregiver peer supports, cultural and traditional supports, and other services as identified by community need in those specific sites. The focus here though really with integrated youth services is really on prevention and early intervention so that we can better support the children and youth in our province.

Now the Saskatchewan Distance Learning Centre is having a successful first school year. And to date, more than 6,800 kindergarten to grade 12 students have enrolled in an online course, with registrations still coming in.

The Sask DLC [Distance Learning Centre] is funded through a combination of tuition fees from local school divisions and schools, based on the number of courses students enrol in, as well as an \$18 million direct grant from the provincial government. Grant funding for the 2024-2025 school year remains consistent, and tuition revenue will be determined based on the number of enrolments.

Students can register and begin to select courses for next school year starting today, April 8th. And more information on the wide selection of courses and the programming available to students can be found online at saskdlc.ca.

And I would just stop and pause to encourage all families and all students in the province to explore the options available through Sask DLC. We've announced several partnerships with industry associations across the province, most recently the Saskatchewan auto body repairs association. We have agreements and partnerships with the auto dealers, with the ag equipment manufacturers as well.

And really, we see these partnerships as really fantastic opportunities for kids to not only receive credit for hands-on training, but also to start advancing their careers while they're still in high school. And we look forward to announcing several more partnerships over the coming months through the Sask DLC.

Now in addition to record funding for the province's 27 school divisions, our government is committed to supporting students whose families choose to attend independent schools. This year's budget for associate schools is \$16.7 million, and there is \$21.1 million for qualified and certified independent schools and our historical high schools in Saskatchewan.

Registered independent schools are a valuable part of our education sector, as they provide parental choice in respect to children's education. Qualified and certified independent schools are required to comply with a specific set of criteria to be eligible for provincial funding, and this helps to ensure that students attending these schools receive a quality education comparable to all Saskatchewan students.

Now school infrastructure is another major priority contained in this year's budget. This budget has \$216 million, a nearly 47 per cent increase for school infrastructure compared to last year. Now this includes \$8.8 million for planning for nine new schools, two major renovations, as well as two minor capital projects announced in this year's budget. Now this includes new joint-use elementary and high school projects in both of our largest cities. That's four new schools announced in Regina, and four new schools announced in Saskatoon, Madam Chair.

[15:45]

We will be working with both Regina school divisions, the city of Regina, and the Ministry of SaskBuilds and Procurement to begin planning a new joint-use public and Catholic elementary school in east Regina, as well as pre-planning for a joint-use public and Catholic high school in east Regina as well.

We will also be working with both Saskatoon school divisions, the city of Saskatoon, the Ministry of SaskBuilds and Procurement to begin planning a joint-use public and Catholic high school in the Holmwood community of Saskatoon, and pre-planning a new joint-use public and Catholic elementary school in Brighton.

And, Madam Chair, I would just say that we have seen incredible growth in our province, growth that we haven't seen in this province for over a century. And these major, significant new school announcements in both of our two largest cities will play a large role in how we support that growth in our two major cities. I had the opportunity to speak with Mayor Clark in Saskatoon on the weekend, and I know he is hearing direct feedback from folks in the Brighton neighbourhood about how excited they are for that future elementary school in their neighbourhood.

Now as part of this budget, work will also get under way with the Northern Lights School Division towards the replacement of Minahik Waskahigan High School in Pinehouse. And I know that our MLA [Member of the Legislative Assembly] for that area of the province from the Athabasca constituency has been a vocal proponent of that project since he was elected.

Additionally, funding is committed to start planning major renovations with the Prairie Spirit School Division at South Corman Park School just south of Saskatoon — another growing neighbourhood of our province. And this project will see an expansion of the school with a renovation to the existing school to transform it from a K to 8 [kindergarten to grade 8] school to

a K to 12 [kindergarten to grade 12] school. Planning will also begin with the Chinook School Division in the southwest of our province for major renovations to happen at the Swift Current Comprehensive High School to address deficiencies in the mechanical, electrical, and fire suppression systems in that building.

There is also funding to support ongoing projects, including 11 new or consolidated school projects and three major renovations in Lanigan, Carlyle, La Loche, Saskatoon, Moose Jaw, Regina, Prince Albert, Balgonie, and Wilcox. And the Ministry of Education will continue working with the school divisions and the Ministry of SaskBuilds and Procurement.

I'd just like to talk a little bit more about these ongoing projects because obviously it's important to highlight the new projects in this year's budget, but there's also significant construction work going on in all these communities that I've listed all across the province. The new K to 12 school to replace and consolidate the elementary and high schools in Lanigan, again another growing part of our province, thanks to the investments in the potash sector. A new school will help to address the growth that we're going to see in that part of the province.

A new K to 12 school to replace and consolidate the elementary and high schools in Carlyle, and a new elementary school to replace Ducharme Elementary School in La Loche. That project in particular, Madam Chair, is of particular interest to me. I've been in La Loche now a couple of times in recent weeks. I had the opportunity to tour both the existing Ducharme Elementary with the principal, Ms. Leanne Gailey, as well as the new school, and to see what the new building is going to offer to students in that part of the province, a long way from here in Regina. It is very exciting to see really one of the largest elementary school gyms that we're going to have in our province is going to be in La Loche. And I'm very excited for those students at Ducharme for the opportunities that they're going to continue to have close to home, right in their community.

We also have a new elementary school to replace Princess Alexandra, King George, and Pleasant Hill elementary schools in Saskatoon.

We have a new joint-use facility with two new elementary schools to replace Sacred Heart, St. Mary, Empire, and Westmount schools in Moose Jaw and, Madam Chair, that's an important project as well. I believe the Empire School in Moose Jaw is currently the oldest building in the province to house students that we have right now, and we're really looking forward to the new joint-use elementary school in the southwest corner of Moose Jaw.

We also have a new joint-use facility with two elementary schools to replace St. Peter, St. Michael, Imperial, and McDermid elementary schools here in the capital city of Regina.

We have a new elementary school to replace St. Frances Cree Bilingual elementary school in Saskatoon. And that is a project that I know in my conversations with Greater Saskatoon Catholic Schools, they are very excited about that project coming to life. And we look forward to opening that school hopefully very soon.

We have a new francophone elementary school in Regina, and a

new francophone pre-kindergarten to grade 12 school in Prince Albert to replace École Valois. A new francophone elementary school as well going to be built in Saskatoon. And I can say that we have been working closely with the school board, with the conseil to move those projects forward as fast as we can to support a growing francophone community in Prince Albert and Saskatoon and Regina as well.

We also are going to have a new joint-use facility with two elementary schools in Regina's Harbour Landing neighbourhood, again a very quick-growing part of our capital city here and our province.

We have renovations and an addition coming to Greenall High School in Balgonie; renovations and addition to the Athol Murray College of Notre Dame in Wilcox; and renovations to Campbell Collegiate in Regina, one of our largest schools in the province.

Now, Madam Chair, there's also twenty-eight and a half million dollars for the 2024-2025 budget for the relocatable classroom program to further support enrolment growth. And this funding will help school divisions manage, at the local level, enrolment pressures in the fastest growing areas of the province and of their school divisions. And based on the ministry's current forecasts, these dollars will provide for approximately 40 additional relocatables to support Saskatchewan students in classrooms.

This year's budget also includes \$12.8 million for minor capital renewal projects to address structural repairs and renovations, and including two new projects. A new project in Jans Bay will begin planning to provide a much-needed gymnasium for Moswakanisihk Community School. And I know that this project again is another very important one to the local MLA for Athabasca, but I recently received correspondence from folks in Jans Bay very excited about this project. Currently students need to leave the school building, walk over to the community centre to participate in physical education activities. And so to have a gym attached to the school is going to be a big win for the community of Jans Bay and those students in the northwest of our province.

There's also a new renovation and roof repair project for Waldheim School. And the minor capital renewal funding will also allow for the completion of renovations to Kyle Composite School and École St. Margaret school in Moose Jaw. And the minor capital renewal renovation projects at Kelvington, Prince Albert, and Medstead will begin their second year of progress in this budget year.

And I'll pause there to talk a little bit about the minor capital projects. Again, these projects, they aren't the biggest and the flashiest capital projects that our ministry engages in on a year-to-year basis. But if you look at the communities on that list, whether it be Waldheim or Kyle or Kelvington or Jans Bay, again these are projects that have significant impact in ensuring that those families can be confident that their students have a great place to learn and really provide opportunities for teachers to work in revitalized facilities in these smaller communities around our province.

Now also in this year's budget, school divisions will continue to receive \$50 million in preventative maintenance and renewal

funding to support divisions in proactively maintaining existing school facilities across the province. Since 2008 the Government of Saskatchewan has committed approximately \$2.6 billion towards school capital — 69 new schools, 32 major renovation projects, and seven projects approved through the minor capital renewal program.

Building new schools and other important infrastructure allows us to continue to meet the growing needs of Saskatchewan families and communities. And, Madam Chair, the amount of investment should not be understated. I believe it was the former minister of Education who, in his reply to the budget just very recently, compared the investment that's been made over the last 15, 16 years by our government to what was the norm for education capital in the years directly prior to that. You know, we had years during that time, Madam Chair, where you could count the number of new schools announced on one hand. Madam Chair, I need two hands now to count the number of schools, and I would need three hands to count the new schools and major renovation projects and minor capital projects announced in just this year's budget, Madam Chair.

Now supporting the province's youngest learners is another important component of the Ministry of Education budget. The 2024-2025 budget provides \$408.7 million, an increase of 5.6 per cent or \$21.8 million from last year, for early learning and child care that supports young families all across our province. The most significant increase in this part of the budget is for additional funding under the Canada-Saskatchewan Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care Agreement. The funding will be used to further increase the number of regulated home-based and centre-based child care spaces in the province as part of the ongoing goal of ensuring families have access to regulated child care, regardless of where they live in our province.

To date nearly 8,700 new child care spaces have been created under the Canada-wide federal agreement. And this is a 49 per cent increase and includes approximately 6,700 centre spaces and nearly 2,000 home-based spaces across the province. We have allocated 5,751 new child care centre spaces to 85 communities between April 2021 and November 2023. And as of December 31st, 2023 there are 22,011 regulated child care spaces in operation.

We also remain committed to attracting, retaining, and growing a strong and skilled workforce of early childhood educators, or ECEs, as the province expands regulated child care spaces. Now Saskatchewan has been successful in recruiting and retaining an additional 384, or about 15 per cent additional certified ECEs between March '21 and March 2023. We know there's more work to do, and we look forward in this year's budget and in future years' budget as well continuing to make investments to grow this sector.

Now the increased budget in '24-25 will support the work of the early years branch to further increase the number of spaces as well as workforce members in the ECE sector. We're going to continue to focus on implementing workforce initiatives such as tuition-free post-secondary education bursaries, as well as increasing public awareness of the benefits of a rewarding career in this sector.

The province is also continuing to support a number of programs

that support young learners and families. And in 2024-2025 these programs will receive increases related to the federal bilateral ELCC [early learning and child care] agreement and the community-based organization increase in this year's budget. Specifically, this budget will provide \$5.5 million to the early childhood intervention programs around our province, and this is an increase of 161,000 over last year.

I know in my community, Madam Chair, our local ECIP [early childhood intervention program] group does great work with families to support new parents and ensure that kids can be connected with the supports that they need in communities.

This budget also provides \$18.1 million for KidsFirst, an increase of \$526,000. In addition to the funding increase, we are making an administrative change to the program name of the regional KidsFirst program. I'm pleased, Madam Chair, that effective a week ago, April 1st, 2024, the regional KidsFirst program will now be called Mobile Early Learning to better reflect for citizens the service of bringing early learning to rural communities.

There's also \$8 million for the early years family resource centres, \$214,400 for the lift to community-based organizations, and \$304,000 for newly operational centres. And let me just say, throughout my travels around the province over the last several weeks and months, I've had the opportunity to visit these early years family resource centres, you know, whether that's in Yorkton or North Battleford. I'm going to be in the new Saskatoon facility in the coming weeks and really looking forward to how these centres are going to better support, again, new parents as they set up shop here, set up, make their home in Saskatchewan, and grow their families here.

And when it comes to libraries in Saskatchewan, provincial funding to the public library system will remain constant this year at \$11.6 million. The total resource-sharing grant funding is just over \$8.7 million. This includes \$6.3 million for the seven regional library systems; \$1.4 million in municipal library funding for Regina, Saskatoon, and Prince Albert public libraries; and \$1 million for the library system in northern Saskatchewan. Public library funding for the 2024-2025 budget year continues to include nearly \$2.4 million of funding to CommunityNet, \$114,000 for the Saskatchewan information and library services initiative, \$100,000 to support out-of-province library loan program, and \$100,000 to support services for people with print disabilities.

[16:00]

There is again \$1.1 million for funded literacy organizations across the province in this year's budget. The literacy program is crucial as we support an educated, skilled workforce here in Saskatchewan.

In conclusion, Madam Chair, I am pleased to speak with you today, and committee members, about these significant investments in pre-kindergarten to grade 12 schools, early learning and child care, and libraries in our great province. I'd like to thank the dedicated staff at the Ministry of Education and the Sask DLC, and thank you again to all of our sector partners for your continued collaboration. Together we are going to continue to build strong communities and ensure that

Saskatchewan remains the best place to work and have a family. I value all the work that you do to make a difference in the lives of Saskatchewan people, and I would be happy to answer the committee's questions here today. Thank you.

The Chair: — Thank you, Minister. I see that we have been joined by Ms. Meara Conway. And I will now open the floor for questions. I recognize Mr. Love.

Mr. Love: — Thank you, thank you, Madam Chair. Thank you to the minister for his extensive opening comments. Just to be certain that I don't forget at the end of the evening, I want to thank all of the officials who are here and for their work in the pursuit of creating a brighter future for Saskatchewan children in our education system and our libraries and our literacy hubs. On behalf of the opposition, thank you for the work that you do and for the answers that you'll help the minister provide this evening.

For the sake of being prepared, my intention this evening is to focus the majority of my questions on funding for the K to 12 education system. I'll proceed with that, focusing on topics such as the funding model, impacts of inflation. We'll spend some time talking about independent schools. We'll spend some time talking about distance learning, student outcomes, capital projects, libraries and literacy. And the plan is that following our supper break, my colleague will bring some questions about early learning. Just so the officials are prepared, that's our intention this evening.

Minister, as both myself and my colleague as critics have been on these files for several years, I do want to ask that you keep your answers focused on the questions asked. During your speech this evening, you touched extensively on capital projects that were announced upwards of four to five years ago and repeated a number of commitments from even before the last election. So if you can please keep the comments tonight . . . You certainly opened the door for us to discuss the track record of your government over the last number of years in committee through your opening comments, but if you can keep your comments focused so that we can get through the questions that we have for the committee this evening, that would be appreciated.

Before we get into specific topics that I've named already, I'd like to verify some numbers, Minister, that you've posted. On February 1st of 2024 you posted a graphic on X, formerly known as Twitter, that showed your calculations for the claim that teachers were asking for a 23.5 per cent raise and stated that the CPI [consumer price index] for 2022 was 6.6 per cent, 2023 was 4 per cent, and forecasting 2.5 for 2024 and 2.3 for 2025. Do you still stand by those inflationary numbers that you presented in that tweet?

Hon. Mr. Cockrill: — Yes, we do stand behind those numbers. Now again perhaps, you know, sometimes on X, formerly known as Twitter, there is limited opportunity to provide context, which I'm sure you can appreciate as well. So maybe what I'll do is I'll just try and quickly explain kind of the context of those numbers and how we got to those, and that gives you that information as well.

So obviously, you know, that calculation — 23.4 or 23.5 per cent, depending on the rounding — is based on the STF's [Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation] ask, which was 2 per cent

plus CPI for the previous year. So again, what that would do is CPI for 2022 was 6.6 per cent, and the source of that is the 2023-2024 budget, 2023 at 4 per cent. Now again, sitting here today we know what the 2022 and 2023 inflationary numbers were. But going forward for the '24, now we know what the inflation number was in January of 2024, but 2024 forecasted at 2.5 CPI and 2025 forecasted at 2.3.

So you know, again CPI assumptions were as per Government of Saskatchewan's 2023-2024 mid-year report and the December 2023 forecast prepared by the Saskatchewan Ministry of Finance. Based on the calendar year, it is an average of the forecasts available from Statistics Canada, the Conference Board of Canada, and several private firms.

And again the 23.4 or the 23.5 per cent number, that is as per the Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation proposal that CPI would be based on the prior year's average annual rate.

Mr. Love: — Thanks, Minister. We'll come back to that later in the evening.

As you went through the process of developing this budget, what was your intent? Could you name two or three key priorities that you developed that are represented in this year's budget?

Hon. Mr. Cockrill: — You know, I guess when it came to starting to develop this year's budget, again I point back to the provincial education plan that we have and the four main pillars of that. The provincial education plan really developed with our partners in the sector, you know, endorsed by all 27 school divisions. And you know, really now we're getting into action teams and implementation teams on that. But you know, the four pillars there around student transitions, mental health and well-being, success of Indigenous students, and then around achievement and assessment, the provincial education plan really is driving kind of where we're trying to be strategic about making investments and adding.

I think generally though, you know, obviously the provincial education plan is what guides us. But I think this year's budget is really a good response to the growth that we're seeing in this province. You know, on an operating side, largest ever school operating increase that we've seen in this province. But then also on the capital side, I did go through the capital investments that we're making in this year's budget extensively in my opening remarks. And happy to talk about that further if you wish.

But really I think what we're seeing in this budget is a recognition that our province is growing, and so obviously that means we need to have more supports for students. We need to have more classroom space for students in communities all around the province. And I think that's quite clearly seen in where government is going with this education budget in this fiscal year.

Mr. Love: — Okay. Thanks, Minister. A few questions for staffing at the ministry. Can you report to the committee on how many FTEs [full-time equivalent] are employed at the Ministry of Education, and how many of those are certified educators?

Hon. Mr. Cockrill: — So in this year's, the 2024-2025 budget, the FTE count is 295.5. Compared to last year's budget, which

was at 269.5, it's an increase of 26. Now that increase is solely within the early years branch, and the 26 additional FTE there are represented in both consultants — again, working to expand our regulated child care spaces — and as well as data support and funding positions as well.

In regards to your question about certified educators, you know, that is not a number that we track. You know, thinking about the officials that we have who have joined me here tonight, they have a wide variety of responsibilities and tasks, you know, some more on the financial or administrative end of things. Again, not necessarily a requirement to be a certified educator to hold those positions in this ministry or any other ministry, so we don't keep track of that number within the Ministry of Education.

Mr. Love: — So, Minister, yeah, please don't misunderstand my question. I understand there's several professional capacities, experiences that are of great value to the ministry. But could you comment, at the level of executive senior leadership in the ministry, how many folks are working at that level who would be considered educators — certified teachers or had spent a career working in public education?

[16:15]

Hon. Mr. Cockrill: — Again those are numbers that we don't keep track of in terms of, you know, senior leadership if they are certified educators or not. Again we look to add people to the team that have demonstrated capacity and capability, whether that be in education or the private sector or in other areas of government as well. I know I've had the opportunity to work with these three folks here and many of the folks, you know, joining us tonight. I can assure you, Mr. Love, they have the best intentions for Saskatchewan students and the education system in our province.

I have full confidence that, regardless of their background, they bring their best to work every day in terms of making our system better and again work to, I would say, be very collaborative with our partners in education whether that be school divisions at a board level or administration level, whether that be Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation, whether that be LEADS [League of Educational Administrators, Directors and Superintendents] or SASBO [Saskatchewan Association of School Business Officials] or a variety of those partners.

Again you know, I can speak very confidently with my officials that they work diligently to be very collaborative within our sector.

Mr. Love: — How many individuals would you consider, Minister, are part of the executive leadership of the Ministry of Education?

Hon. Mr. Cockrill: — I'd say, you know, the folks that I get to deal with are sitting right beside me here. These are the folks that I deal with on a very daily or certainly weekly basis, certainly work closely with Clint and Jason and Sameema as well. You know, obviously the rest of the officials as needed, certainly Darren Gasper at Sask DLC as well. So those are the folks that I know that I have the most interaction with on a regular basis.

Mr. Love: — Yeah. It's a pretty small group, I understand. But

do you think that there'd be an expectation from the public that there would be at least one individual who would be considered a teacher, an educator, who had spent at least part of their career working in delivering public education at a school division level involved in leadership with the Ministry of Education?

Hon. Mr. Cockrill: — You know, I'm not going to speculate on the expectation of the public in regards to your specific question, Mr. Love. I mean, I can speak to my expectation as minister is that regardless of these people's professional backgrounds, as long as they're bringing their best to their work each and every single day, and you know, as long as I can work collaboratively with them and they're working closely with the sector and listening to folks in the sector, that's my expectation as minister.

And you know, I'll use for example Darren Gasper, the CEO of Sask DLC. I mean he's been a teacher I believe in Sun West School Division and now at Sask DLC. Again we have these competencies in various positions in our ministry. But when it comes down to . . . You know, certainly we do look for opportunities to bring more of that expertise into our ministry. But again our job is about execution and so we're looking for people that can execute on the ministry's work each and every single day.

Mr. Love: — Yeah, thanks, Minister. Part of my question is just related to the amount of changeover that there's been within the ministry, and we've seen some educators leave for a variety of reasons. And so that's really at the root of my question is the large changeover in leadership, especially as your ministry is engaged in some fairly controversial matters when it comes to education policy creation. So I can't help but wonder what kind of impact that's having at the ministry level.

So I'm going to move on and ask some questions about the funding model. Minister, can you comment on what adjustments were made to the funding formula this year?

Hon. Mr. Cockrill: — So the only formula change to the funding formula in this year's budget is a change that we recently made to how enrolment after September 30th is supported. And again that's a change in this year's budget, but we actually also made that change to reflect the post-September 30th enrolment growth that we're seeing in the current school year.

So you know, and again this change was made after, I would say, extensive consultation with the operating grant advisory committee and a working group that we had within OGAC [operating grant advisory committee] to specifically look at post-September 30th enrolment.

This is something that I know the ministry has been hearing from school divisions about over the last number of years, and really driven by the fact that with more out-of-province immigration happening . . . You know, if you're moving from Maple Creek to Regina and you have school-aged children, you may try and do that strategically before the school year starts, right. But if you're moving from Somalia to Regina, you know, the timing doesn't always necessarily work out perfectly before a school year.

So again school divisions in the province, especially in our two large urban centres, are seeing significant enrolment after September 30th, which again is where, you know, kind of the

main funding formula kind of calculation is made based on enrolment on that specific date. So again that's the only formulaic change. And I'll just share a little bit about that.

So school divisions that see . . . There has to be two conditions met: a 0.5 per cent increase in terms of enrolment, as well as 125 head count increase as well. Again in some of our smaller divisions, a 125 increase would be a significant percentage growth. And what we're seeing there is two point . . .

You know, in this current school year, so for the 2023-2024 school year, three school divisions in the province met that threshold. And just under \$2.9 million was distributed in additional dollars to those three school divisions, again to support those school divisions being able to add more teachers and professionals and support the new students that showed up in their school division after the end of September.

Mr. Love: — So, Minister, would it be your opinion that in the past those dollars for increased enrolment would have been delivered after September 30th numbers came in? Now those dollars are being delivered as part of the funding formula in the budget?

Hon. Mr. Cockrill: — Yes, so you know, the ministry is using September 30th as the date where the reconciliations are done because that has historically again been the peak of enrolment in school divisions across the province. So again, obviously once we get kind of middle of the school year, the actuals are compared to the forecast and reconciled as such.

What we are doing with the post-September 30th enrolment formula is trying to recognize and account for the fact that in several school divisions September 30th is no longer the peak of enrolment. So again, September 30th continues to be the main date of reconciliation, if you will. In this year's budget the funding that we project is based on school division forecasts for what they'll see on September 30th in 2024, just to clarify that.

Mr. Love: — So on that note, Minister, what is the percentage of enrolment increase that was experienced this year? And what's projected for next year? And if school division numbers, the actual enrolments turn out to be higher, will the government make adjustments to fully fund the increase? And if they're lower than the projected amount of enrolment, will the dollars in this year's budget be clawed back?

[16:30]

Hon. Mr. Cockrill: — So the percentage of enrolment growth that we saw from the 2022-2023 school year to the 2023-2024 school year was a 3.2 per cent increase. And then what school divisions are currently forecasting for the 2024-2025 school year is a 1.3 per cent increase compared to this current school year.

Now I will just caution that the ministry is actually preparing . . . You know, obviously we work with school divisions closely on enrolment numbers to just understand how they're getting to those numbers and how we're preparing for those. The ministry is preparing that those forecasts could very well be low.

And you know, I would just point out the way . . . So we have \$20 million that was added in-year during this school year to

support the kids that are already here. So that \$20 million that was added mid-school year last year, that's been annualized in this year's budget because again that's supporting the kids that are already in our schools, that came this last school year.

We have added in this budget \$30 million for enrolment growth. And again obviously, you know, we're working with school divisions. We do expect that the population influx, population growth in Saskatchewan is going to continue at levels that we've seen over the last couple of years. So we are prepared for a larger increase than what is currently forecasted by school divisions. And then again, whatever comes after September 30th, we have \$5 million set aside for that post-September 30th formula as well.

So you know, obviously based on the forecasted funding that we see today on April 8th versus September 30th actuals, if the actual is lower than what's forecasted right now, the funding amount will be lower once they're reconciled for the September 30th date. But if there's growth post-September 30th, that is now being funded in an additional manner. Again if a school division goes down after September 30th, there's no clawback after September 30th.

Mr. Love: — Okay. How does the funding formula account for per capita funding? Or is it funded more on a per-student basis?

Hon. Mr. Cockrill: — So certainly there's been lots of discussion over the last several months on per student or per capita funding for a K to 12 education. Again those are both measurements. They're not how we determine how funding is distributed across the province.

Obviously, you know, number of students is a factor in that, but it's not the only factor. Geographic dispersion, as an example, is another factor. Take the Lloydminster divisions for example, right. It's essentially an urban division, right. There's no schools in those divisions outside of the city of Lloydminster. It's also unique for other reasons, given its interprovincial nature. So the geographic dispersion factor is quite low there, whereas in a Chinook School Division or a Northwest School Division, which is right next to Lloydminster, certainly there's a lot of geographic dispersion and so those factors have to be funded differently.

You know, fixed costs versus variable costs, right; the type of build; the number of schools that a division has and the type of schools that a division has, you know. A good example is, say if your school division has 100 students and my school division has 100 students; you have two schools and I have one school for 100 students. It's going to be different, right, because you have another building to look after and maintain. Your fixed costs are higher. Maybe your geographic dispersion in your school division, you know, kids don't need to travel as far. There's less of an expense on fuel or busing.

You know, supports for learning is another example as well where, you know, the funding is different between different divisions based on socio-economic and community health data, right. We know that the needs of students, it can vary. The challenges that students may see in a Prince Albert would be different than, you know, down the road in Birch Hills, for example, right. So again there's more factors to the funding formula than just the number of students in a division or a school.

Mr. Love: — Agreed. But one thing you didn't mention is per capita funding. So time and time again in this Assembly and in the media you've referenced per capita funding for education. Does the province of Saskatchewan, Minister, does the province of Saskatchewan fund education per capita? Does any province in Canada fund education on a per capita basis?

Hon. Mr. Cockrill: — I don't know the answer to that question, Mr. Love.

Mr. Love: — Yes, you do.

Hon. Mr. Cockrill: — I would remind you that per student or per capita, these are ways to measure. But when we look at how we disburse funding to different areas of the province, to do it only on the number of students, that doesn't make sense. Because again I use the example of Lloydminster or Northwest School Division. Different context, right. I mean you have a significant geographic dispersion in one school division, and you may hardly have any geographic dispersion in another division.

So again these are measurements. And I understand why different groups, you know, yourself and myself, are using different measuring sticks, if you will. But at the end of the day, if we just looked at the number of students, that wouldn't properly and equitably fund students and education around the province, in our view.

Mr. Love: — But we're here today having a conversation about increased enrolment, how many students are coming into Saskatchewan schools from near and far. And I would argue that your political messaging on per capita funding has absolutely zero bearing on what takes place inside a Saskatchewan school.

And I'll note your predecessor, the previous, Minister Duncan, knew the answer to this question, Minister. Last year in this committee, when I asked him if any provinces fund education on a per capita basis, he said, I'm not aware of any. So you know the answer to that. Everyone in this room knows the answer to that. There isn't a province in Canada that funds education on a per capita basis. So now you know.

Now you brought up the example of Lloydminster school, and I was going to get to this later. The two divisions in Lloydminster, are they able to set their own mill rates? And what was the \$800,000 adjustment sent to those school divisions this year allocated for?

Hon. Mr. Cockrill: — So when it comes to Lloydminster, and again I note the member for Lloydminster isn't with us tonight, but if there's anybody who knows the Lloydminster Charter in this building it would be her. And she is best equipped to talk about all things Lloydminster.

So again, Lloydminster, being unique, what does happen in Lloydminster is the city of Lloydminster does have the ability through the Lloydminster Charter to add an additional property tax levy which really ensures equity in that community regardless of if you live on the Alberta side or on the Saskatchewan side. And again, both Lloydminster divisions, being interprovincial or bi-provincial, you know, they're funded approximately 60 per cent by Alberta, 40 per cent by Saskatchewan, you know, give or take a few per cent over time.

So the legislation that we have does allow the city of Lloydminster to apply the levy up to 0.75 mills. But you know, in recent history the tax levies never reach this level. It's historically been applied between 0.5 and 0.6 mills to residents in that community.

Now again, given the uniqueness of Lloydminster and how it's funded by two different provinces, you know, we do have two challenges there. Alberta, they've made some adjustments to their funding formula over the years, and the city of Lloydminster is also further reducing their seamless tax levy. So we provided additional dollars to both Lloydminster divisions in last year's budget as well as this year's budget, again just to ensure that there is, you know, good continuity of operations in both those school divisions, equity for the educational experience regardless of which side of the border you live on.

[16:45]

Now I talked about the operating grant advisory committee earlier when we were talking about the post-September 30th enrolment formula change that we made. The Lloydminster issue, if you will, is another one being explored by OGAC and a working group within OGAC right now. I know we have some upcoming discussions between OGAC and the two Lloydminster divisions. It's certainly a discussion that I have with Paula and David whenever I have an opportunity to be in that city and visit their respective divisions.

So again, wanting to make sure that, you know, while respecting the uniquenesses of Lloydminster, being the interprovincial city they are, we are undertaking work currently with both Lloydminster divisions as well as discussions with the city of Lloydminster as well as Mayor Aalbers and his staff to just understand where they're going and how we can ensure that students in the Lloydminster divisions continue to receive a quality education.

Mr. Love: — Thanks for the answer, Minister. What rate of inflation did you factor into this year's budget when it comes to operating funds for our school divisions?

Hon. Mr. Cockrill: — So overall, as is noted, it's an 8.8 per cent budgetary increase year to year from last budget year to this budget year in terms of the funding that's being provided to the 27 school divisions. Pardon me, the school operating grant that's provided to pre K to 12 education in the province.

Again, the funding factors do vary from division to division. I've already given the rural vs. urban challenges of geographic dispersion. But you know, working with school divisions to understand actual costs, I mean in this year's budget there's a \$10 million increase to address the increasing cost of fuel, for example. And you know, obviously that increase will be mostly felt in divisions that have significant transportation operations.

But there's also additional dollars to deal with, you know, non-teacher salary increases that we've seen over the years as well as the increased cost of CPP [Canada Pension Plan] and EI [employment insurance], which all employers in the province have to deal with as an additional cost as well.

But I would just point to the 8.8 per cent overall increase to the

school operating grant.

Mr. Love: — So, Minister, I've seen one of your government's budget day releases: 29.8 million to address inflationary pressures, including fuel and non-teaching salaries as you've noted. And that's frankly good to see. It's a positive sign. These are both pressures that your predecessor at times indicated didn't impact schools or simply weren't budgeted for and were simply left to school divisions to find efficiencies. So moving in the right direction.

But my question, I'll pose it again. You've indicated in your budget day releases, "address inflationary pressures." What was the rate of inflation for school divisions that you calculated?

Hon. Mr. Cockrill: — You know, in drilling down on a specific rate, it's not really possible to do, because again the funding factors are so different from division to division. Like the fuel cost for example, right, that's going to look different for Regina Catholic than it is for Chinook.

So again we have been working with school divisions to understand actual cost pressures, and you know, added these dollars, nearly \$30 million to address some of the actual costs that our divisions are seeing. And again the impact of inflation is just one of the many factors that's considered when determining the Ministry of Education's budget.

And again, you know, nearly a 9 per cent increase in school operating funding, I think that is, we hope that that is a . . . I don't hope. That is a significant positive step forward in terms of supporting school divisions so that they can make decisions that best support students and families.

Mr. Love: — So, Minister, the first question I asked you tonight was about your tweet about teachers' salaries. And you indicated that the inflationary numbers that should be included would be 6.6 per cent, 4 per cent, 2.5 per cent, and 2.3 per cent. You've used these numbers to, you know, to disparage teachers through the bargaining process.

So when it comes to school divisions, what inflationary pressures, which cost drivers are you acknowledging school divisions experience? You've mentioned fuel, non-teachers' salaries. Which other inflationary cost drivers does your government recognize?

Hon. Mr. Cockrill: — So again, you know, CPI is not necessarily a perfect correlator for cost pressures that divisions have. I mean if we look at, you know, the \$55 million in this budget for enrolment growth; \$30 million or nearly \$30 million to deal with non-salary inflation; non-teacher salaries; the additional costs around CPP, EI; then we have, you know, \$28 million additional for classroom supports. That in itself is a 14.6 per cent increase over the last school year.

And then again in this year's budget we've set aside . . . You know, I'll just say, whatever kind of agreement we come to with the Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation, government is committed to fully funding the CBA [collective bargaining agreement]. But what we have, because we don't have an agreement on this day yet, we've set aside \$66.6 million out of \$180 million to fund, you know, currently what we have on the

table for teachers in terms of a salary increase.

You know, wherever that number lands, government will be there to fully fund it and work with school divisions to do that. But again, the number that we're dealing with today that's real is the 8.8 per cent increase to school operating funding, the 14.6 per cent increase to classroom supports funding. I mean these are real dollars in the budget that we're dealing with and, I think, adequately reflect some of the challenges of rising costs.

[17:00]

Mr. Love: — Minister, would you agree that the roughly . . . This'll be a short question.

The Chair: — Oh okay, a short question? Okay.

Mr. Love: — From your own government's budget documents, roughly \$30 million tagged for inflationary pressures out of upwards of a \$2 billion budget would be less than 1.5 per cent rate of inflation. Would you agree with that statement?

Hon. Mr. Cockrill: — Mr. Love, to provide a short answer to a short question, all \$180 million address costs in the sector, right. Obviously there's inflationary pressures around fuel and CPP and EI, but most of the costs that our school divisions have are salary related, right.

And so again, most of the funding allocations that's provided to school divisions is unconditional, and school divisions are able to use it to hire teachers, to hire other professionals. You know, just because it says inflationary pressures beside \$29.8 million, I think what we're seeing in this year's budget is \$180 million that is addressing growth as well as rising costs for divisions around the province.

The Chair: — Seeing that it's now just past 5, we will take a recess until 6 p.m.

[The committee recessed from 17:01 until 18:00.]

The Chair: — Good evening. Welcome back, committee members. We will now resume consideration of the estimates and supplementary estimates no. 2 for the Ministry of Education. And I would just like to remind everyone to please keep dialogue respectful.

I recognize Ms. Conway.

Ms. Conway: — Thank you, Chair. So we'll be moving over to early learning and child care just for about an hour. I tried to wrestle more time from my colleague, but it'll probably amount to just that.

And there's lots of ways to tackle this, but I thought just looking back at previous years there were a few kind of recurring data points. So I thought I might just ask those off the hop so that maybe you can start to compile that while we kind of go into some of the more sort of theoretical questions rather than those hard data points.

And I'm sure you're expecting these questions. So I'm just wondering, just to get us started, wondering if you can give me

the number of EC I's, II's, and III's we have working in the system at the moment; their average salary by position, the way that you've broken it down in the past; the number of new spaces — and I think the best way, just so we're comparing apples to apples, that we should do this is the number since April of 2021; I think that's what's been provided in the past — so both the created space and the operational spaces; the number of licensed homes and licensed centres currently operating, and which of those spaces are in homes and which are in centres; program training seats, just an update there, number of program training seats.

And then this is, I think, my last kind of hard data point question — I think, although don't hold me to it — is updated kindergarten readiness numbers. Yeah, if you could provide that. I think all of that will be pretty standard. Yeah.

And then in the meantime, if you want to like hunt for that, that's fine, Minister, but I could also just kind of ask you, to begin, whether you personally believe that providing affordable and high-quality early learning and child care for Saskatchewan families, as is being provided under the agreement with the feds, is good public policy, if you could speak to that.

Hon. Mr. Cockrill: — Yes. Can we start with the data? Can we give you some of that stuff?

Ms. Conway: — Absolutely.

Hon. Mr. Cockrill: — Okay.

Ms. Conway: — And I'll just clarify, if any of this is a little bit onerous to get, happy to receive it at a future time. The main number that I'm interested is the number of spaces.

Hon. Mr. Cockrill: — Just navigating all the binders, so we want to make sure that we've accounted for all the requests. So why don't I start and if I miss any then you can let me know, okay?

So first of all, your first question was around number of ECEs at various levels and the average wage. So currently right now we've got 4,445 people working in the sector. Now these numbers are at the end of March 2023. We don't have the updated March 2024 numbers yet, just given that it's early April, but we're working on those.

So at March 2023, 3,021 of those staff are certified. And by level we have 1,220 at ECE I; 1,122 at ECE II level; and 1,270 at the ECE III level. Now obviously, given the fact that these are March 2023 numbers, we will have more today than what I've shared with you here. But of course we're happy to share those updated March 2024 numbers with you when they do become available.

Now you did ask also about average wages in the sector. And again these are March 2023 numbers. So the average hourly wage for ECE I was \$18.01; for ECE II, \$21.93; for ECE III, \$26.32 per hour as an average wage. Now from 2021 to 2023, the change in average wage, you know, at all three levels, the increase ranges between 15 and 17 per cent over that time frame.

Now your next question was regarding spaces. So again as of end of December 2023, the total regulated spaces that we have operational in development are 26,322, so that's total. 4,301 of

those spaces are in homes; 17,710 of those spaces are in centres; and we currently have 4,311 centre spaces that are in development as of December 2023. So that's total at the end of 2023.

If we look at the new regulated child care spaces since April 1, 2021 — and I believe these are the same numbers I shared with you at committee maybe a couple weeks ago — total new spaces, 8,656. Those are operational and allocated. 4,345 of those are currently in operation; and about 4,311 are allocated and currently in various stages of development.

Now again the increase . . . We also have, in addition to that I should say we have just shy of 300 provincially funded school-based spaces that had been announced and are also in various phases of development with anticipated opening dates in 2025.

Now if we go to your question specifically regarding the number of training seats that we have, for ECE I [early childhood education] program training seats we have 1,493. And these are at a range of institutions, you know, Saskatchewan Polytechnic, Saskatchewan Indian Institute of Technologies, Collège Mathieu, Carlton Trail Regional College, Great Plains College, Northlands College, North West College, Southeast College, and Suncrest College.

We also have for ECE II, we have 417 programming training seats, again available at Sask Poly, SIIT [Saskatchewan Indian Institute of Technologies], Collège Mathieu, Gabriel Dumont Technical Institute, Great Plains College, and Southeast College.

For the ECE Level III we have 252 program training seats at the moment: Sask Poly, SIIT, Collège Mathieu, and Great Plains College.

And then we also have 20 program training seats in the advanced certificate in early childhood education, and those are available through SIIT. So total training seats, we have 2,182 training seats across the three levels for ECE, as well as the advanced certificate as well.

Now I believe your final data point was around kindergarten readiness. So currently for the 2023-2024 year, which again is the last data that we have available, we currently have 57.4 per cent of the fall screens that are at tier I which are, complete developmental tasks without difficulty; 25.8 per cent at tier II, experience some difficulty completing developmental tasks; and 16.8 per cent at tier III, which is children experiencing significant difficulty completing developmental tasks.

[18:15]

And again the latest spring screenings, these results will be available late summer, early fall 2024. Have I hit all your data points?

Ms. Conway: — Yes. Can I just ask you to repeat a few things? So either I wrote it down wrong, or the number of certified ECEs doesn't . . . Like the breakdown didn't amount to the total. Can you just clarify that

Hon. Mr. Cockrill: — Sorry. So yeah, I'll be more clear on that. Pardon me. So total working in the sector as of March 2023 was

4,445. Now, we have 3,021 of those with the various three levels of ECE, and then we have 1,424 working in the sector with no certification at this time.

Ms. Conway: — Sorry, I think I maybe just wrote it down wrong. How many ECE I's are working currently?

Hon. Mr. Cockrill: — Oh. So I'll go through the three levels of ECE: ECE I, 1,220; ECE II, 1,122; and then ECE III, 1,270. And as I'm reading those numbers out . . .

Ms. Conway: — There's more.

Hon. Mr. Cockrill: — Yeah, the 3,021 number isn't correct, but I think we're on the same page now in terms of math.

Ms. Conway: — Okay, yeah. I just wanted to make sure I wasn't crazy. Okay, thank you for that. And then I missed number of ECE I seats. Just the total, not the breakdown.

Hon. Mr. Cockrill: — Sure. So the ECE I program training seats, currently 1,493.

Ms. Conway: — Thank you. And I missed the tier II number for kindergarten readiness.

Hon. Mr. Cockrill: — Tier II number, 25.8 per cent.

Ms. Conway: — Thank you. Great. Yeah. No, that's good. Might take a minute for those numbers to percolate.

Minister, I just wanted to kind of start by asking you whether you're on board for the goal of providing affordable, high-quality early learning and child care for Saskatchewan families as is outlined under the Saskatchewan-federal agreement. Do you think it's good public policy?

Hon. Mr. Cockrill: — You know, I certainly think anything we can do, things that we can do like this to make life more affordable, you know, specifically for families in our province is a good thing. I would say that, certainly as it relates to young families, we want young families to be able to, you know, grow their families here in Saskatchewan, to view Saskatchewan as a place where that can happen better than anywhere else.

You know, certainly, speaking personally, I know even my own family has benefited from increased availability of child care seats. It's allowing my wife to return to the workplace and certainly me to continue doing this role. So you know, I think it's a really good thing.

Now the agreement that we have with the federal government, as the numbers indicate, the agreement has allowed us to accelerate the development of spaces. You know, we signed on to that agreement knowing that the end of that agreement or the goal of that agreement is to provide affordable child care for families.

Now would we have done things differently if we were not doing it with the federal government or we didn't have the agreement? Yeah, there are some things I think that we would do differently. And you and I spoke about maybe a few examples of that at committee a few weeks ago — the age limit of six as one example — some of the inflexibilities, I guess, of the infrastructure grant.

I think I used the example of, you know, a furnace replacement at a facility being renovated not being an eligible expense. I mean in our province if you buy a house or you buy an old commercial building, of course you're going to check to see if the furnace needs to be replaced. In a lot of our smaller communities older buildings are being purchased and being refurbished to be child care spaces. And I've written to Minister Sudds on this topic and, you know, on other topics relating to some of the restrictions around the flexibility of the agreement and how that directly impacts our ability to add spaces as aggressively as we would like to in Saskatchewan. We're continuing to have that dialogue and work through that.

But again, overall the goal of providing affordable child care is a good thing. That's why we signed on to the agreement with the federal government. You know, does it work perfectly for the Saskatchewan context? Not perfectly, but we continue to advocate with the federal government to make those necessary changes and be a good partner there.

Ms. Conway: — Thanks, Minister. I'd love to hear more about what conversations have gone on with the federal government about what might happen when this agreement expires.

I agree with you; affordability is a big one under this agreement. I trust you also recognize that there are benefits to early learning and child care beyond, you know, simply the affordability and even going back to work inherently in that early learning education and development of the child.

And so to that end, you mentioned some inflexibilities or some maybe priorities that you might do differently if you had, you know, maybe fuller control of these funds. It does appear to me that over the last couple of years the amount that Saskatchewan provincially is putting into child care sort of remains stagnant. Correct me if I'm wrong.

Can you speak to why there hasn't been maybe more prioritization of some of these gaps that we're seeing? Because I agree there are gaps. I've written to your predecessor about that gap in terms of the six-year-olds aging out; huge gaps in terms of support for vulnerable kids, complex needs. Hope's Home is full. The grant is not up to the task, in my view. Why not step in, you know, and even make the early learning system in Saskatchewan even more robust by seeing some additional investments from the provincial side?

Hon. Mr. Cockrill: — Yeah, certainly I mean the provincial dollars that we spend every year in the early years space, again very, very targeted dollars, whether that's KidsFirst or the family resource centres or ECIPs, you know, ECIP organizations across the province. You know, certainly I think there's . . . Well when we signed the agreement with the federal government there was a stipulation that we could not displace dollars that we're already spending provincially with federal dollars.

And so again, the province is continuing to invest in those, you know, strategic areas that are targeted at more vulnerable populations. And I mentioned in my opening comments this afternoon, you know, the family resource centres, and certainly how I personally see those, as well as our KidsFirst program, which the name is changing. I can't remember it off the top of my head right now.

But I mean these are all, I think, really positive investments. I think, you know, overall in terms of how we grow the sector, I mean there's challenges in terms of . . . And I've used the building-an-airplane-mid-flight analogy before, so I won't go down there. But there's a challenge when we're moving a sector that's largely unregulated, home-based, to a more regulated way of operating. And I know the federal government acknowledges there's a challenge with that as well. You know, other provinces have that challenge moving to a mostly regulated sector at this point.

So I think back to, you know, certainly the conversations that I've had with SECA is one example — Saskatchewan Early Childhood Association — with Georgia Lavallee, the executive director there. And again it's important that we continue to expand the regulated sector, but it does have to be . . . Something that Georgia reminds me often is, you know, as we look to expand aggressively in terms of more spaces, we also have to ensure that quality is there as well.

And so that takes time to make sure that we've got the right training seats in place, that we have people adequately trained. And also, you know, that we have adequate ministry staff to be supporting our regulated centres, and again helping them get set up, and then being part of that collaboration in terms of ensuring the regulations are being followed so that we can adequately ensure families that the child care services that they're receiving as a family are of high enough quality.

[18:30]

Ms. Conway: — Thanks, Minister. I'm familiar with the provincially funded programs like ECIP and the KidsFirst — now Mobile Early Learning; I forget what it's called. In speaking with folks on the ground, wait-lists through those programs are up. I've heard that even child and family youth is, like, referring people to ECIP because they can't handle their caseload. It's all very concerning.

I guess I'll ask this question a different way. Has the province provided any additional funds towards early learning and child care since the agreement with the federal government was signed?

Hon. Mr. Cockrill: — So certainly you know, Ms. Conway, as you already mentioned this, the overall increase of provincial dollars over the last several years is, you know, very modest in terms of the provincial dollars being put into the child care programming piece. You know, I would say though there are some challenges. A lot of, you know, KidsFirst, ECIP, these are organizations that are also competing for staff with our regulated child care sector too. So there's a bit of a trade-off there, you know, if there's more spaces there, then they're competing with the same labour pool, I guess you could say.

You know, I would highlight though in terms of additional provincial investment in child care, I talked about in my opening comments — and one of the earlier questions from your colleague — again just the additional FTE that we're adding to the ministry to help support and accelerate growth in this sector.

Ms. Conway: — Thank you, Minister. I'm familiar with the previous years, what was negotiated in terms of the carry-forward

amounts under the agreement. I'm just wondering if you can speak specifically and concisely to the 2023-24 year. I know under the agreement, it was a 10 per cent carry-forward, I believe. But I'm wondering if you negotiated for it to be more, and how much was spent under that agreement in 2023-24 and how much was carried forward?

Hon. Mr. Cockrill: — So for the 2023-2024 fiscal year, the amount that was carried forward from the previous year was just over \$72 million. Again year-end for that fiscal is still being finalized but certainly confident that we will be spending a good majority of that.

For the carry-forward dollars from '23-24 to be moved into '24-25, it was, under the agreement, 10 per cent. We did renegotiate and get 45 per cent carry-forward. So again we expect that'll be about just 95, 96 million being carried over to next year. And then the year following we did negotiate a 35 per cent allowable carry-forward to go from '24-25 to '25-26, and then it goes back down to 10 per cent after that.

Ms. Conway: — Sorry, how much did you spend '23-24? And how much did you carry forward?

Hon. Mr. Cockrill: — Well we haven't confirmed those numbers yet because we haven't finished the year-end. Fiscal year just ended eight days ago.

Ms. Conway: — Right. Can you commit to providing me to that when you have that?

Hon. Mr. Cockrill: — We can do that.

Ms. Conway: — Thank you. And sorry, you've negotiated now 35 per cent to be carried into '24-25?

Hon. Mr. Cockrill: — Sorry. We have negotiated 45 per cent to be carried over from '23-24 to '24-25, and then from '24-25 to '25-26 we negotiated 35 per cent to be carried over in that future year.

Ms. Conway: — Thank you. I mean fair to say the province is having some difficulty spending this money. Can you speak to why that is when there is a shortage of high-quality, licensed child care spots in the province?

Hon. Mr. Cockrill: — Well I think the answer to that, I've already canvassed that a little bit in terms of, again, moving a sector . . . You know, the overall challenge is moving a largely unregulated sector to being a regulated sector. So again to become regulated there's requirements around what infrastructure are available. And not everybody who's unregulated wants to be regulated, right. So you know, it's not just a perfect transfer from unregulated spaces to regulated spaces.

To be trained, that takes time as well. So certainly again, we are looking to how we . . . And then the other issue is, again, some of the flexibility challenges within the agreement as well. I mean I don't want to talk about the furnace example again, but there's another example where, you know, from the ministry's perspective, we'd be fully ready to work with those operators in that specific challenging situation and get those dollars out the

door, and to help them with the development of their spaces. But the agreement binds us from doing so.

So you know, again there is certainly . . . You know, I had a chance to talk in committee a couple weeks ago about our amendment Act. You know I answered near the top of your questions tonight that we do see it as a priority to add affordable and quality regulated child care spaces in the province. But again, creating a whole new sector nearly from scratch, there's just challenges with that.

And I think some of those are, you know . . . We can probably as MLAs all think of specific challenges that we've heard about in our various communities. But yeah, it's not as simple as snapping your fingers and adding 8,000 child care spaces.

Ms. Conway: — No, it is not, Minister. And you know, we've been back at estimates a few times since this agreement was signed, and we've all canvassed the challenges. And of course I'm very much aware of those challenges. But we've, previous to now, honed in on a few mechanisms that were identified for tackling that challenge. One of them was the creation of wage grid. Another was the creation of a workforce strategy and the third was the creation of an expansion strategy.

Did you get a chance to review . . . Do you review like previous years' estimates in preparation for the current estimate? And I don't say that to be snarky. I'm just wondering if you reviewed the context of some of the conversations I had with your predecessor around those three items, a lot of discussion on that. A firm commitment that those were coming, timelines. We still don't see them. And I guess we did have a bit of a back-and-forth recently at committee because it felt a bit like you were walking back this commitment for a wage grid, or that we were sort of talking at cross purposes.

So I'm just wondering on those three items, is that still something the government, you know . . . We shared that language, me and your predecessor. We used that language. We seemed to agree on the fact that that was a shared language we could use.

[18:45]

Those were things that were coming. There were firm timelines. Can you speak to those three things? Are they going to happen? If so, when are they going to happen? Because very much these were identified as tools for tackling all of the challenges that you identify which are very real. But then we have to get beyond that, and estimates is a great way to get beyond that and really, you know, dig into the policy and what's being done to tackle these challenges. So I'm wondering where are those three substantive mechanisms at in terms of their development at the government level?

Hon. Mr. Cockrill: — So maybe just starting with your question specifically on wages and the implementation of a wage grid, I mean certainly as I've said here before, it is something that we are working towards. We have made, you know, I would say significant investments through the agreement in the wage enhancements.

And there are clear delineations between different pay levels for the different levels of training. You know, I think one of . . .

Obviously it's up to operators to determine how the funding will be used in the workforce enhancement grants as well, you know. And we want there to be flexibility because I can tell you what we have heard from operators is, you know, some operators want to use that to provide benefits or pension plans.

In a labour market where there's lots of jobs and not enough people, we need to make sure that there's flexibility there. I mean we are continuing to develop a wage grid and move in that direction, you know, and again . . . But we have to work with the federal government to make sure that it's sustainable and where we go after that.

On the workforce strategy, obviously, I mean, you know . . . And I appreciate you asking earlier about the number of training seats that we have because that's been a big part of, again, trying to recruit people to the sector and then helping them level up once they're in the sector so that they can kind of see a path forward with the longer term career or work within the sector.

There is a national discussion being, happening right now around the workforce strategy because again our province is not unique in terms of challenges of attracting workers to the sector. And an action plan that is being — or work plan, pardon me — that's being developed in the conversations with all the provinces. I believe our next meeting on that with our provincial and federal partners is sometime in May to continue working on that.

You know, and really again with the expansion strategy, you know, there's several initiatives that we're trying to undertake when it comes to expansion, whether that's . . . You know, I talked earlier about all the major capital projects that we have going on in the pre-K to 12 space, you know, certainly including . . . We need to be including child care in those new schools, and schools that are seeing major renovations as well. You know, again, investing in infrastructure, you know, working with groups like SECA to expand public awareness around working in the sector. So again lots of work being done but looking for, you know, just again given the time frame of the agreement as it stands today and the priority that there is on getting spaces allocated and fully operational, you know, we're looking for clear, implementable things that we can move forward with to expand the number of spaces.

Ms. Conway: — And I'm just trying to get at what those are, Minister, because you're not putting a lot of the meat on the bone for me here. Child care, access to subsidized child care is still very difficult to get. If you were one of the lucky parents that already had a spot or maybe you've benefited from one of the 15 per cent of the targeted 28,000 spots — 15 per cent — that's what we have today, operating today. So we're nowhere near our targets. We have child care deserts across the province. It's still very difficult for working families to access subsidized child care. Retention continues to be a problem in the sector — burnout and retention. I also talked to SECA. I talked to all of the stakeholders across the sector. This is still a big concern.

You know, this is a government that was quick to announce the \$10-a-day daycare. But then I'm not seeing a lot of meat on the bone in terms of these other things that need to be done to ensure that this historic agreement isn't sort of passing us by. And it feels a bit like we're spinning our wheels in terms of committing to actual comprehensive strategies in terms of, you know, getting

there. We're not spending all the money available to us. We're not on track to meet our targeted spaces by a long shot, by a country mile. Many people out there cannot find affordable, subsidized, licensed child care. And it sounds like we still don't have any comprehensive plans to get there. So it's frustrating to come back to estimates year after year, and you know, there have been several different commitments on the record to have these plans and they just don't materialize.

So I acknowledge there's been a bit of improvement. You know, we have more ECEs now. We have, you know, some more spots. We have some more training spots. But certainly nowhere near what we need to meet those targets.

And I'll remind you, Minister, that 28,000 number, it's not just taken out of thin air. That's, I believe, 59 per cent of children between the age of zero and five. So that's a really evidence-based target in terms of who needs child care out there. So the fact that we're only at 15 per cent of those 28,000 spaces speaks to a real shortage in terms of access to child care spots.

So I guess I'm just expressing some frustration here in terms of it doesn't sound like there's any commitment around these strategies and then being able to provide them to me so I can see them, or being able to articulate them. Can you respond to that?

Hon. Mr. Cockrill: — You know, I would just say there, you know, we talked earlier . . . of course this is an important thing to expand access to quality and affordable child care. Are we where we want to be yet? No we're not. But as I've said many times before, I know my predecessors have said, I mean there is a challenge when you're moving from an unregulated sector to a regulated sector. And when I look at the work that our officials are doing and our ministry staff are doing and that many in the sector are undertaking every day, I do think that we are making good steps towards expanding the sector.

I mean expanding the training opportunities is a big one. Making those largely free of charge, I mean that's a fantastic opportunity for people looking to level up in their career and looking to do, perhaps, something different or something else with their work. I mean the wage enhancements, you know, the work that we've done, you know, we've been preparing materials to support new providers in developing spaces and how to apply, you know, for more spaces.

I mentioned the public awareness campaigns. The community partnerships . . . some community partnerships that we are undertaking to target the areas of need that we have. I mean, you know, there's a couple areas of the province that are seeing . . . that are going to see pretty significant economic growth over the next number of years with different industries moving into those parts of the province. And certainly we understand that for those private sector investors to be able to attract staff to their facilities, there needs to be adequate child care spots. And that's something that we work on with those communities and those investment proponents as well.

Even the legislation that we brought forward that you and I had a chance to talk about at committee a few weeks ago, I mean this is part of, again, making the sector more responsive to the needs out there and allowing us to meet the demand. And you know, certainly we have a ways to go but I think, you know, again as

we've transitioned to largely unregulated to regulated, I think we've made good progress. There's still more to go. There's a lot more to go, but I think we're putting the right foundational blocks in place in terms of training, in terms of the wage enhancements, in terms of being able to offer the increased capital grant to spaces opening up. You know, these are the right things to be doing to expand the sector, so I feel confident that we're going to see the flywheel start to turn a little faster.

Ms. Conway: — Minister, the wage enhancements have been modest. My understanding is a lot of the low-hanging fruit has — as has been referred to before, you know, transitioning unlicensed spots to licensed spots — I believe that's been exhausted. But maybe you could speak to that, whether you think that's the case. Is there a comprehensive strategic plan for identifying and initiating the development of more child care spaces?

Hon. Mr. Cockrill: — Sorry, can you just repeat the last part of the question?

Ms. Conway: — Is there a comprehensive strategic plan for identifying and initiating the development of more child care spaces at the government level? Like, not just waiting for hopefully a CBO [community-based organization] to show up and make a pitch. Is there a plan at the government level to create new spaces?

[19:00]

Hon. Mr. Cockrill: — You know, I would just say this. There's a lot of capable officials here tonight from the Ministry of Education, a lot that aren't here tonight. I've talked about the 26 additional FTEs that we're adding within the ministry to support the child care sector. Could I task the very capable officials to, you know, create a nice thick report, you know, in shiny, laminated pages and a nice Government of Saskatchewan cover? Absolutely. But I think our focus, Ms. Conway, is trying to be responsive to the sector and trying to accelerate the development as much as we can.

And you know, again being responsive to the two major needs that we see around infrastructure and labour, you know, we've made changes to the infrastructure grant. We work with specific applicants when there's challenges around infrastructure. I've talked before about how some of the limitations of the federal agreement, you know, do affect that as well. You know, I mentioned before about building child care spaces in new school projects. I mean those are provincial capital dollars being put in to build those spaces, and we think that's a good thing.

You know, on the labour side, again, training seats, workforce grants, wage enhancements. You know, I think where we're trying to go is having a team within the ministry that's responsive, as responsive as possible to some of these challenges.

You know, I'll use the example: a change that we've made internal to the ministry recently is we used to receive a bunch of applications and then have kind of a batch approval process. You know, we'd wait to a certain end of the month or what have you to go through everything. But again, if somebody was missing something in their application or something was insufficient, then you're waiting for the review period and then you're waiting

to, you know, kind of work with your consultant on rectifying that and getting that application to the right spot.

You know, now we're doing approvals on a more rolling basis, which is allowing us again as a ministry to be more responsive to operators and to applicants. And you know, I've even noticed just in my time as minister, that has allowed some of these discussions — which before maybe took months — we've been able to kind of compress that timeline and again try and be more responsive to operators and to providers and get them going on the right road sooner and get those spaces opened up for families.

Ms. Conway: — Thank you, Minister. I am going to try to be an hour, or just a few minutes beyond, in fairness to my colleague. There are a number of questions I didn't get an opportunity to ask. There are a few things I would like to follow up with you about via letter, and I'm just going to put them on the record here. And if you want to enter any comments on them, feel free to. Otherwise I'll just follow up.

One is around data collection. I know that the ministry collects data around readiness for kindergarten. I'm just wondering if there's any plans to correlate that to licensed child care. It would be good to identify the role of licensed child care in preparing children for school, if it's not already being done.

On the KidsFirst and ECIP programs, again my understanding is these are incredibly successful programs that really haven't been expanded in any way over the last couple years, despite we see the complexity of needs go up and the need go up. And you know, wait-lists I understand are going up with respect to these programs, so hoping that this is something you'll consider as minister is more investment in these very successful programs.

Heard a concern a few times around the child care subsidy. I understand it's now being administered to families directly and that possibly families are being, like, aging out. So if you have it, you'll get it until the kid aged out, but it's not being extended to new people. And then again it's being administered directly to families instead of licensed child care providers, which creates some issues. So I'm going to follow up with you about the subsidy.

I didn't get a lot of opportunity to speak about the vulnerable and children with complex needs. This is something my office hears about all the time. People can't get into child care spaces. Oftentimes when they share what challenges their children have, child care centres don't want to take them. The grant system that exists is not a sufficient incentive, it seems, for centres to take on kids. And I don't fault the centres. I think it's probably a product of feeling like they're operating at their max capacity. So as child care critic, something I hear about often and more and more every day for sure. I think I'm content to leave it there.

Oh, the child nutrition program. This is not identified as a separate allocation in the Estimates book. So would love some numbers related to this program, including the number of children that will be served, number of meals, costs, who the money is going to, how the budget allocated for the child nutrition program has changed over the past few years. If you could provide some information about the child nutrition program, now or in the future, that would be fine. I would really

appreciate it.

I mean we know that utilization of food banks has absolutely skyrocketed. Many communities don't even have food banks. And this is obviously fundamental, for kids to be fed to be taking advantage of their education. So if you could speak to any plans to expand that program and then those data points that I mentioned, I would appreciate it. If you could undertake to provide that I would appreciate it.

Hon. Mr. Cockrill: — So happy as always, Ms. Conway, to receive correspondence from yourself and work with you to find answers on questions that you may have, specific or general. I will just share, I do have some specific numbers available on the child nutrition program, so if you'll humour me I'll just share those.

We're going to be investing \$2.7 million in the child nutrition program this next year, or in this current budget year I guess you could say. And you know, last year a slight increase to that, an increase of about 75, \$80,000 from the previous fiscal year. Last year that funding was split between 19 different school divisions, and 22 different CBOs across the province provided more than 5.9 million meals last year and 63,000 Good Food Boxes.

Certainly I'm aware of the recent announcement by the federal government to talk about a food program. Obviously as with any program brought forward by the federal government, we're going to be taking a look at that and reviewing and ensuring that . . . You know, I would say details on that have been fairly light so far, so we're not quite sure how that impacts the work that we're already doing and how we could potentially work with the federal government to target dollars to more specific vulnerable populations.

But certainly I know expanded nutrition programs is something that the Saskatchewan School Boards Association has advocated for over the last several years. And I've heard about that desire at board tables around the province and certainly from individual teachers and other school staff that I've spoken with over the last several months. So certainly we don't have a clear indication on where that federal program or where those federal dollars are going to go, but certainly we'll be having the conversation with the federal government to try and understand that and figure out how that works for Saskatchewan.

Ms. Conway: — Thanks, Minister. And I just want to thank the officials for answering my questions today or assisting to answer them.

One thing, the case that I brought to your attention — I don't want to mention her name on the record — she did get a call. It seems like it's moving in the right direction. Should she be hopeful about where things are going? She wasn't quite clear. She contacted me. I said, well I'm seeing him tonight so I'll find out.

Hon. Mr. Cockrill: — I'm happy to provide an update on the record or off the record tomorrow if you prefer.

Ms. Conway: — I think it's fine to provide on the record, not providing any names or anything.

[19:15]

Hon. Mr. Cockrill: — Absolutely. So I'll just share, you know, the application that you brought forward, it has been completed and the initial screening with the family assessment meeting has been done. She's been invited to attend some virtual licensee manual training sessions and been given several options of dates later this month. She has received a follow-up call from our program manager to confirm that she did receive the invitation, is aware of the dates. So we do have a consultant assigned to her specifically and working with her towards becoming regulated.

In the meantime, children who are attending the home are now eligible for the retroactive parent fee reduction grant which will be paid out once she does complete the licensing. So again I do appreciate you bringing the case forward, and I think it gave us a good opportunity to look at the policies that we have and figure out how we can support operators like this individual.

Ms. Conway: — Thank you, Minister. I want to thank you for the action you took on that file. She will be very pleased. I know she's planning to go to those trainings and to do anything that she needs to do to make this happen. And I know the families that access that child care will be very pleased as well, so thank you.

Hon. Mr. Cockrill: — Ms. Conway, you can have assurance that I will personally be following up on the case over the next number of weeks and months, and happy to chat about it with you offline at any time.

Ms. Conway: — Thank you so much. And I'll pass it over to my colleague, Mr. Love.

The Chair: — I recognize Mr. Love.

Mr. Love: — Thank you, Madame Chair. Thanks to my colleague for the great questions there. So, Minister, I'm going to resume some questions related to the budget specific to the government messaging of an increase of \$180 million. Specifically, Minister, school operating line (ED03) shows an increase from roughly 1.904 billion to 2.062 billion, an increase of 158.8 plus change. Literature distributed on budget day indicates \$180 million increase, so where is the other \$21 million that isn't indicated in that line in the budget?

Hon. Mr. Cockrill: — So this is one of those fun little intricacies of the Education budget every year, when the numbers that are put out in the Estimates document are on the government fiscal year. The \$180 million number that I've referenced many times is the school year now, the 2024-2025 school year. Just because — and again, school year different than the government fiscal year — when we communicate with school divisions, it's a little bit easier to communicate in the school year number just because that's what we work with them on.

Mr. Love: — That's a significant change from government messaging in the past. So are you saying that there's a \$180 million increase to operating funds for next school year over and above what divisions had for the school year we're currently in?

Hon. Mr. Cockrill: — Budget to budget, it's \$180 million increase. So the school year, the school year figure in last year's

budget to this year's budget, there's a \$180 million increase.

Mr. Love: — Okay. So let's talk about school budgets. So let's talk about the budgets that schools have had to operate this year considering dollars that were announced on budget day a little over a year ago. You made your adjustments, enrolment top-ups, pilot projects, the \$40 million announced in June. How much more can school divisions expect when they're making decisions in the coming weeks for their school year beginning in September? How much more will be there for school divisions to allocate at that time, compared to the school year that we're currently in?

Hon. Mr. Cockrill: — So obviously last year when school divisions at budget day and started working on their budget for the next school year, I mean the difference between last year and this year is \$180 million. As you indicate, there were dollars added in-year to, you know, to be responsive to needs that were being heard from school divisions.

So you know, the budget, the 2024 budget number versus the 2023-2024 actual funding number, it's an increase of \$140.23 million to school operating funding. But again it's the annualization of the \$40 million, and we talked about the 20 . . . Earlier today we talked about the \$20 million targeted enrolment growth being annualized. You know, the same is true for the \$20 million that we added for classroom supports to the school divisions.

And so again there is . . . Whether you want to include the \$40 million or not, it's there. It's being annualized, being . . . you know, government trying to be responsive to the needs of school divisions. But budget to budget, what school divisions knew about on budget day last year to what they know about budget day today, it's \$180 million increase.

Mr. Love: — And when we're in this long, drawn-out, very public discussion on classroom complexity, do you believe that the increase to operating funds for next year will provide school divisions an opportunity to put resources back in the classrooms that have been cut over the last 10 years to solve the problem of classroom complexity.

Hon. Mr. Cockrill: — You know, I look at the budget-to-budget increase and some fairly, you know . . . forecasted some fairly significant numbers when we break it out division by division. You know, several divisions forecasted to see a double-digit increase in school operating funding. I look at Regina Catholic forecasted to have a 14.3 per cent increase in school operating funding; Saskatoon Public, 10.3 per cent forecast in operating funding; Saskatoon Catholic, 14 per cent increase in school operating funding.

You know, certainly based on the discussions that I've had with school divisions, you know, sitting in their boardrooms, visiting their schools, being able to hear directly from them and their staff all around the province, I think this is a really good step in terms of helping to address challenges that we see in our schools. And you know, as I talked about earlier with capital, I mean we are seeing significant growth in the province. You know, this is not the end of where we're going to need to invest in education to support students and families and teachers going forward.

But I would also point to, you know, in addition to what I think is a significant increase to school operating funding, you know, what we've been able to bring forward and come to an agreement with the Saskatchewan School Boards Association in terms of setting a floor for classroom supports funding over the next four years, I think is a really positive step forward for the sector. Even before becoming minister, you know, having meetings with my local school divisions and hearing from them the need to have predictability around their funding, you know, they have a significant increase. We have now some predictability for school divisions.

I was talking to . . . And I've mentioned the multi-year funding agreement that we've had with post-secondary institutions now and where there was just a top-up on that. You know, I was speaking with several people in the post-secondary space over the last couple of weeks just, you know, and I know for them they were expressing just how the multi-year funding agreement, when it came time for those institutions to put their budgets together every year, again having that predictability, having that certainty, allowed those divisions to plan a little bit more and to match need with resources.

And so again, I think the increase certainly and the multi-year funding agreement helps us get to a much better spot in terms of funding for education.

Mr. Love: — Minister, I don't disagree that multi-year funding does provide predictability, but my concern is it's predictably inadequate. And when we use the post-secondary example, those institutions have had multi-year funding for a number of years and that's been renewed. And they're thankful for that, for those making decisions of where the resources will go. But we have had the Chair of the faculty association here, those doing the teaching and the instructing in those institutions, talking about the impact of cuts to the inadequate funding. So that part is also true.

Now, Minister, I'd like dig into this \$180 million increase. And let's talk about what this is actually going to mean for school divisions contemplating budget decisions that they need to do to plan for next school year. We've already taken out \$40 million for annualized enrolment and classroom supports that were announced last year in June, delivered this year.

Minister, in your own budget documents from your government, we can also look to some other costs in there. The \$29.8 million for inflationary pressures, non-teaching salaries, that's an investment in status quo, not in adding in supports. Thirty-five million to support enrolment growth, that's an investment in maintaining the status quo for those new students, not adding in new supports; 66.6 million to fund the teachers' collective bargaining agreement, an agreement that has not been signed yet. And I believe that that number represents your initial offer, but we'll get into that later.

When you add that all up, that's over \$171 million to maintain the status quo in our classrooms. There is 8.6 million left over that I believe can be used to add in supports that have previously been cut under your government's watch. Do you believe that that investment is enough to give back the supports that teachers are demanding because our students' learning conditions have suffered with inadequate supports in the classroom? Is

8.6 million enough to turn this thing around and get supports back to our students who desperately need it?

Hon. Mr. Cockrill: — Mr. Love, the \$35 million for enrolment growth for the 2024-2025 school year, that is forecasting for students that are not yet in Saskatchewan schools. So that is not a status quo investment. I'm sure we can agree on that, that we're . . . That is money being allocated to school divisions for students that are not yet in Saskatchewan schools. So just keep in mind that, again, we have annualized the \$40 million as you point out, but to say that enrolment growth dollars are a status quo investment is just simply wrong. It's for students that are not in our schools, right?

[19:30]

So you know, I've got a few quibbles with your question. But certainly that one should be addressed right off the hop, that that \$35 million is for students that will be coming to Saskatchewan schools come September. And even, again, the 5 of that \$35 million being used to address for students that won't even be in our schools September 30th, the next time the count is done, that are going to come in the next school year, whether that's December or January or February, into 2025, the second half of the school year.

So you know, and obviously the inflationary pressures number which we talked about, you know, earlier this afternoon, you know, these are to address costs that school divisions are seeing and are forecasting to see as well. So you know, to say that there's only \$8 million of new dollars, of new funding for school divisions is simply untrue and not representative of what's being presented here, especially your \$35 million enrolment growth number. To say it's status quo when those students aren't even in our schools yet is kind of a misrepresentation.

Mr. Love: — I'll gladly respond to that, Minister. I'm looking at solutions that will reduce class size and bring supports back to classrooms in the terms of specialists, more teachers, more EAs [educational assistant], more specialists in our schools. And I simply don't see that here. I see, of the \$180 million that was touted in here on budget day, and messaging coming from your government — and from you, Minister — I see more than 171 million of that is not earmarked for any new supports.

Now when you talk about \$35 million for enrolment growth, is it your belief that that funding will reduce class size? Will we see a reduction in the pupil/teacher ratio due to that support, or is that simply earmarked for new students when they arrive?

Hon. Mr. Cockrill: — So I'll remind you of some numbers that I previously shared this evening but I'll share again. You know, certainly budget to budget, you know, an 8.8 per cent increase in school operating funding. We talked about enrolment projections, I believe, in the afternoon. I shared with you that school divisions are projecting a 1.6 per cent increase in enrolment projections. I think that's low. I think it'll be more than that based on what we've seen the last couple of years coming into the province, which is a good thing. We want more people moving to this province and that's been a good thing for Saskatchewan.

You know, do I think that, you know . . . So we look at a 1.6 per

cent forecasted growth of enrolment. And certainly it's, you know, when we look at the numbers that we've been provided by divisions and have been working with divisions on, you know, there's some divisions that are expecting a slight decrease. Some are expecting growth, some expecting more growth than others. But for a 1.6 per cent enrolment growth and an 8.8 per cent increase in budget-to-budget funding, and then even if you want to take the \$40 million of annualization out, that's still at 6.7 per cent increase for a 1.6 per cent growth in enrolment. Absolutely there's going to be more dollars there for divisions to hire more teachers, to hire more support staff, to ensure that adequate supports are being provided to students and being able to keep class sizes at a manageable level for teachers, and again, being able to ensure that supports are being provided.

I would also point to the pilot programs that we have announced and annualized in this budget, and again, committed the continuance of those pilot programs through our multi-year funding agreement with the Saskatchewan School Boards Association. You know, I'm looking forward to, out of those pilot programs, being able to see school divisions find, you know, adjusted or new ways of ensuring that, you know, students can be supported in a way that makes sense for them and makes sense for that community context.

So I'm absolutely confident that this budget starts to address needs that we're seeing in the classroom. And I certainly have trust in local school divisions are going to allocate these dollars responsibly and wisely in their respective divisions.

Mr. Love: — Minister, I'd caution your level of confidence that this budget is the success that you believe it is. When it comes to returning those services that our students need that have been cut over the last 10 years, what I'm hearing from school divisions is that this will be . . . I am hearing thankfulness for predictability, that is true, but not the adequacy of the funding. And I think that as there's little to no recognition of several other factors that drive inflation for school divisions, they'll have to find those efficiencies in here.

Support for increased enrolment early in the budgeting process is positive, but that's going to maintain services for the new students, not reduce class size, which as you know is a major concern for parents, students, and teachers.

Now, Minister, what would be a normal process, when the budget comes out, as far as providing technical briefings for division board Chairs, directors, and CFOs [chief financial officer]? What would normally be done at budget time to provide that information? In previous years, maybe say the last three to five years, what would normally be provided?

Hon. Mr. Cockrill: — So I'll share with you, Mr. Love, certainly what I . . . This is my first budget process in this specific ministry. You know, obviously throughout the budget development process, you know, that's the main reason that I was out touring with school divisions. That was during the time of the budget development process, and I wanted to make sure that I got out to meet with school divisions and hear direct feedback that I could then feed back to my team and certainly into the treasury board process and the finalization process that is done around budget.

When it comes . . . And you know, I would just say too that the

same thing happens between the ministry and other sector partners, whether that's SASBO or whether that's LEADS, whether that's the Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation. You know, there's discussions that happen on an ongoing basis throughout the year in regards to questions about budget or, you know, feedback or concerns. So you know, certainly what budget day this year it looked like, I had a briefing call with all 27 board Chairs. Some joined us in person on the 20th of March. Many joined virtually, just given the geographic dispersion of school divisions.

Following that up, the ministry had a call with Chairs, directors, and CFOs. And then of course our ed funding team certainly is available to all school divisions and has conversation with school divisions on a regular basis about various questions that come up immediately after budget but also throughout the year.

Mr. Love: — Minister, it's my understanding that a technical briefing for CFOs typically takes place either the day of or the day after the budget. Is that a correct understanding that that would be normal?

Hon. Mr. Cockrill: — So previously there has been a meeting with CFOs following budget day. As I indicated in my previous answers, all 27 CFOs were invited to join the call with Chairs and directors. It was on budget day, on March the 20th. Certainly it's our understanding that most CFOs did attend that meeting and many CFOs asked questions at that meeting.

And actually there was a . . . We received 25 questions on that call. And certainly any questions that were received more than once, we did actually distribute a Q & A [question and answer] document to all CFOs the week after budget to just answer some of those more frequently asked questions and help provide clarity for CFOs.

And then as I said, you know, our education funding team is available for CFOs, you know, immediately after budget of course, but throughout the year with various questions.

Mr. Love: — Minister, it's my understanding that a technical briefing with CFOs, set apart from board Chairs and directors, always takes place the day after the budget. That request was denied this year. Why not have a separate meeting with CFOs, as has been customary, so that they can provide the analysis that their board Chairs and directors need?

Hon. Mr. Cockrill: — As I indicated, CFOs from all 27 school divisions were invited to join the call with Chairs and directors. You know, certainly budget day is a busy day, and certainly we're trying to make sure that we touch base with all of our sector partners as possible. You know, I think that, again, speaking to the ministry staff that were on that call, there were several CFOs that asked questions. Our understanding is that most CFOs did attend that.

And then our CFOs are of course available to answer any specific questions from specific divisions on budget day, after budget day, and throughout the year to help CFOs. Because obviously, you know, CFOs take away the information that's provided and start to prepare analysis for their boards and their directors of education. So certainly our ed funding team is ready to work with all CFOs.

Mr. Love: — So, Minister, you've disagreed with my analysis of this budget. I'm not sure if you read the analysis provided by a CFO in the news earlier today, but certainly there's folks around the province crunching these numbers, and I don't think that they're willing to simply accept government messaging on what this means for our classrooms.

So I'll give you another opportunity. You've disagreed with my analysis that 94 per cent of this increase to operating funds will provide status quo funding. But again, I'm looking at your own government's communications.

So the pilot projects exist this school year, both the teacher innovation and the . . . blanking on the name of the other one, but the behavioural support classrooms. Those exist this year. The increases for student enrolment, \$40 million annualized, that exists this year. 29.4 million for inflationary pressures, that's not anything new; that's not providing new services and supports that our students need. 66.6 million for teachers contract, again that's no new services coming with those dollars.

Which dollars in this budget do you believe will be allocated for actual new services to support crowded and complex classrooms starting next school year?

[19:45]

Hon. Mr. Cockrill: — You've acknowledged, Mr. Love, that you and I are going to have different views on this budget, and that's fair. You know, when you ask the question, which dollars in the budget are going to be . . . are school divisions going to be able to use to provide additional supports to students, students that are in our classrooms today, students that are coming to our classrooms next year, again I would say there's \$180 million more this year than there were last year.

But you know, you laugh like those are not real dollars. And that's ridiculous, Mr. Love. That is absolutely ridiculous. That \$20 million that was added mid-year last year, it ended up in 266 positions being hired across 27 school divisions. To say that those dollars didn't actually have an impact on students, aren't having an impact on students now, and won't have an impact on students going forward, that's a ridiculous assertion. Not to mention the eight and a half roughly million dollars, or \$8.6 million increase that's in supports for learning this year. The ministry, we expect that could hire another hundred-some positions in school divisions across the province. I mean those are real positions with real dollars behind them.

You know, and so I just, again you and I, we're going to have different opinions on dollars that are going to be available to school divisions going forward. And you know, to say that these dollars aren't real or they don't count I think is being a little bit . . . Well I won't use words that are unparliamentary, but I don't think that's an accurate way to portray a resource that's available to school divisions.

When I look at the whole school operating budget writ large — \$2.2 billion for this next school year — roughly 2 per cent of that is restricted or directed, right. So we think about the \$7 million that we have that's specifically targeted or directed for divisions to hire EAs. Those dollars must be used for divisions to hire EAs.

And we look at the pilot programs that we have as well. Those are directed or restricted dollars. But with all the rest of the \$2.2 billion that are available in school operating funding, divisions have the opportunity to make decisions around whether they're going to hire more teachers or more support staff, understanding what is available from a labour perspective in their communities, what the needs are in their communities, what that looks like in an urban division versus a rural division.

Again you and I will also differ on our opinions in terms of whether or not it's school divisions that should make those decisions, but certainly I trust our 27 school divisions that they're going to use this significant increase to add supports that are going to serve students and help support teachers.

Mr. Love: — I'll correct the record, Minister, before I move on. I laughed because your chief of staff and I made eye contact and laughed at each other. That's what the smile was at, okay, so if you have a problem with that we can discuss it later.

At no point did I indicate that these dollars don't matter. At no point did I say that these dollars don't . . . I asked what new dollars will there be to add supports back in that have been cut under the last 10 years under your government.

I'll remind you that we've gone from, in 2015, being first in the country in per-student funding, and this budget may indeed put us in last place. You are the minister overseeing that. And so I come here to committee to bring questions about what supports will be there. You failed to answer that question when asked.

I do trust local school divisions to make good decisions. I'll correct the record on that. We do not disagree on that, Minister. But for the last 10 years, they have not had the autonomy to make decisions about what supports to add back in. They've only had the autonomy to receive inadequate budgets from your government and make decisions about what will be cut.

Trustees describe a situation of sitting around board tables in tears, cutting supports that they know students and families depend on. They describe a situation where our school systems are cut down to the bone. So in a year when they are not described in that way, they're describing, for the first time, potentially just being able to maintain services, I asked you, Minister, what services do you think they'll be able to afford to add back in, and you didn't answer.

So I'll give you one more try, Mr. Cockrill. What support, how much money do you think — not that the rest doesn't matter; please correct that understanding now — how much funding in this budget do you think will go above and beyond the dollars that were already allocated this school year, above and beyond dollars allocated for new students, above and beyond dollars allocated to address inflation, to address contracts, so that divisions can actually afford to add back in supports that have been cut over the last 10 years? What is the dollar figure that you would assign to those decisions?

Hon. Mr. Cockrill: — Well as I've stated before, there's a significant 8.8 per cent increase in school operating funding. If you don't want to count the \$40 million that was annualized — I'll repeat the number again — it's \$140,229,000 or a 6.7 per cent increase to 27 school divisions. So those are the dollars that are

in addition to funding that was available to school divisions last year in order to provide supports for students.

You know, and that again, 98 per cent of those dollars are not restricted or targeted or directed. School divisions have the ability to make those decisions. And I am confident, as I've said before, that our 27 divisions, again having sat across the table from all of them, I am confident that they're going to be working hard to make decisions to allocate those dollars wisely in their schools and to ensure that supports are available.

Mr. Love: — We'll see what happens in spring when school divisions analyze their budgets and deliver them to the public.

Minister, is your government still collecting the carbon tax on natural gas that's purchased by school divisions? And without the Climate Action Incentive Fund that hasn't been available to school divisions since 2019, what mechanism is there for school divisions to get those dollars back and invest them into needed changes in our school infrastructure?

Hon. Mr. Cockrill: — So I didn't expect to talk carbon tax tonight but happy to do so. So as Mr. Love would be aware, starting January 1st Saskatchewan is no longer collecting natural gas on home heating, whether that's through natural gas or for SaskPower customers who use electricity to heat their homes. Now carbon tax is still being collected on heating for businesses, for schools, for other organizations.

And again the reason that we are not collecting the carbon tax just on residential home heating is because that was the same benefit that was put forward to those in our country who use home heating oil, some of which do reside in Saskatchewan but most of whom reside in Atlantic Canada.

And certainly our government, from a larger policy perspective, felt like the same benefit that had been extended to customers who primarily reside in Atlantic Canada should also be provided to residents of Saskatchewan. And certainly that was a contentious decision by our government to go down that way to ensure that there is carbon tax fairness across the country. It's a reasonable policy and certainly, you know, it's something that I hope every member of this House would support.

So you know, going beyond what was offered, our government is not going beyond what was offered to customers elsewhere in the country. And unfortunately school divisions are continuing to pay the carbon tax which is . . . You know, there's been some news articles out of I know Prairie South School Division specifically about their cost. That was a piece of a discussion that I had with the Prairie South School Division board when I met with them.

You know, and again there was a time where school divisions were receiving the Climate Action Incentive Fund rebate back from the federal government. That has since stopped. You know, we've done some very preliminary calculations on what we estimate school divisions across the province are paying in terms of carbon tax. We actually estimate it's in the neighbourhood of \$11 million for this school year. You know, that's on natural gas and power and on fuel as well, so kind of looking at all three areas.

Again our government's perspective, I know our Premier's perspective right from day one when he was Minister of the Environment, is that there shouldn't be consumer carbon tax. And we can see quite clearly that the carbon tax as being paid by school divisions . . . I mean those \$11 million, that would be great to see that going back into our classrooms instead of paying a tax that doesn't do what it said it would do on an environmental front, and it is now clearly causing affordability challenges for individual residents and now for school divisions and small businesses across the country and particularly in Saskatchewan as well.

So certainly it's a staggering number when you look at how, you know, the carbon tax affects school divisions. Certainly our government is of the belief that that tax should go away, and you know, because again we're seeing the effects on many in our province and how that does affect our province's ability to compete. Again we have relatively emissions-intensive industries, but when you look at what we actually produce for the world, you know, including fine young students who are going to go on and train in a variety of sectors, it's disappointing that that cost would be placed on school divisions.

[20:00]

Mr. Love: — I share your disappointment. I don't believe that that cost should be put on school divisions at all. We certainly believe that on this side of the House as well, but as minister, what are you doing about it?

Hon. Mr. Cockrill: — Well our government talks pretty regularly every day. Every day, if you're listening during presenting petitions, there's a petition that we put forward to end the carbon tax.

Again it's a discussion that I know I'm having with boards. I expect that it'll be a discussion at Spring Assembly this coming week with the SSBA. I believe that Prairie South School Division is bringing this forward as a concern, and really for divisions to unite and have a united front in terms of lobbying the Liberal-NDP [New Democratic Party] federal government to review really the harm that this tax is having on institutions like schools.

Mr. Love: — Minister, I want to move on and talk about another category of questions I have on what the complexities are in our classrooms and exceptional student needs. As we get into this topic, Minister, my first question is, what is your vision for inclusive education in Saskatchewan?

Hon. Mr. Cockrill: — Make a couple comments and then I'd actually just like to use the specialized support classroom pilot as a bit of an indication and kind of just talk through a little bit about what's going on there, because I think it is indicative of an opportunity we have to go down a road when it comes to inclusive education. I mean obviously, you know, in anything I try and do, I try and, at the end of the day, be practical. So you know, looking for practical solutions that meet the needs of the individual students and the individual communities, recognizing that, you know, we really have a wide range of communities and students as well in the province.

So you know, I think when it comes to inclusive education, obviously we want to meet the needs of students, but I think

where we want to . . . When it comes to inclusion, it is not inclusion at all costs but rather inclusion where it makes sense. And I really think that the specialized support classroom pilot is a really good indicator of that.

And maybe I'll just provide some context on that pilot. I mean, that pilot really came to life from some discussion that I had with teachers around the province and schools that I had the opportunity to visit as well as with some of my predecessors in this file, and you know, with conversations as well with different trustees in the province who have been around not just a couple of years but decades in the sector and have seen different iterations and different ideas.

But when I look at what the eight school divisions are doing in these eight specific schools, I mean, the staffing allocation is unique in all these schools. There is really, you know, an emphasis on supporting positive behaviours and really ensuring that, you know, kids who are seeing or experiencing, you know, difficult behaviours that require intervention get that on an individualized, targeted basis, but then with the goal of having them reintegrated back into their home classroom in those elementary schools.

And you know, I look at, you know, one school . . . And again, the funding that's been provided to these school divisions is really . . . again, when I look at even the list of eight schools, and having been in a few of them, they are unique schools even to each other on the list. I mean, one school for example has, you know, in the specialized support classroom, one teacher and one EA additional. Another division is adding two classrooms, each with a teacher and an EA. We have another school that's adding 1.5 teachers, so in having an education coach and then a half-time, land-based learning teacher as well, as well as two EAs. And really, you know, that's to build, you know, with that specific pilot project it's really to build capacity within that specific support classroom but then also in the whole school, as kids who are in the classroom for a time and then go back to their home classroom, you know, have the best opportunity for reintegration and being able to participate in that learning environment.

So I think just overall, you know, inclusion where makes sense instead of at all costs is really my vision for inclusive education.

Mr. Love: — Do you believe that all children in Saskatchewan have a right to education?

Hon. Mr. Cockrill: — Absolutely. You know, and I had the opportunity to . . . You know, as I said, I've had the opportunity to visit a lot of different schools, schools in neighbourhoods with very challenging socio-economic factors, schools in quote unquote better off neighbourhoods in different cities or communities, large schools, small schools, schools with high proportions of First Nations and Métis students, schools with very few First Nations and Métis students and, you know, had the opportunity to meet students with a wide array of abilities. And absolutely we want to provide . . . We believe that children have the right to education in Saskatchewan, and we want to do our best to provide that.

Mr. Love: — Does the ministry maintain records on the changing nature of the Saskatchewan student body over the last

10 years? And can you provide a document detailing the changes over the last decade for EAL [English as an additional language] students, foreign-born students, students with intensive support needs, homebound, and home-based students? I'd be pleased if you'd be willing to table that for the committee.

Yeah, I'd be happy to move on if the minister can provide this document by tomorrow. I certainly don't expect these numbers to be provided tonight. If he's willing, I'll just move on to another question.

Hon. Mr. Cockrill: — I'm happy to share some of the numbers I do have with you. There is a bit of a limitation of what I can provide, certainly on the division-by-division basis. Because when there's less than five students in a particular category in a division there's, you know, certain privacy rules around that. But happy to provide to the committee, when we can, the summaries.

I mean certainly when we look at perhaps some of the categories or the vulnerabilities that, you know, that would be discussed, I mean, you know, you mentioned specifically English as an additional language students. I mean, currently in this school year, we see about . . . 12 per cent of provincial enrolment is the number I have who have English as an additional language. You asked about home-based students as well, I believe? You know, I could work out the percentage basis for you but I have the hard number which is just under 4,600 home-based students registered with school divisions around the province.

When it comes to proportion of First Nations and Métis students, we have about 18.8 per cent of enrolment in provincial division schools would identify as First Nations or Métis.

And then when it comes to intensive supports, and there's several categories, you know, we have about 5.3 per cent . . . This report shares 5.3 per cent of the student population identified as requiring intensive supports. And again we'll review the data that we do have and just make sure that we're good to share it with the committee.

Mr. Love: — So, Minister, if you can just commit to this this evening, providing documentation for those categories. So you report on home-based, but also homebound . . .

Hon. Mr. Cockrill: — I don't have the homebound numbers here tonight but we can . . .

Mr. Love: — Okay. So those can be reported to the committee in a tabled document — the actual numbers, not the percentage, where it is safe to report so.

Hon. Mr. Cockrill: — Sorry, Mr. Love, I spoke too soon. We don't have the homebound numbers. We don't collect those numbers. But certainly the other categories we can share with you.

Mr. Love: — So if you can report on the actual numbers for those for each of the last 5 to 10 years, whatever you're able to report on for each of those categories. And with the ISS [intensive supports student], you spoke of a couple categories for those intensive support need students, whether those are . . . if that is broken down by students who receive occasional or regular supports. I'm not sure how the ministry breaks it down, but by

the categories you use is certainly okay. I believe last year the number was 10,040 students were designated as receiving intensive support needs.

Hon. Mr. Cockrill: — And that number I can share with you, Mr. Love, is, that number for this school year is 10,442, with 2,851 students receiving occasional supports and 7,591 receiving frequent supports.

Mr. Love: — Okay. Thanks, Minister. And can you commit to tabling a document for each of those categories for the last five years? Don't need that now, but when your officials are able to assemble that information.

Hon. Mr. Cockrill: — Just read off those categories again into the record, just so that officials can go back and do that as well.

Mr. Love: — Yeah, it was the same ones that you mentioned. So EAL; I was looking for homebound — doesn't sound like you tracked that; First Nations, Métis, Inuit; and ISS, broken down by category.

So just for the record, is that a yes, you'll commit to tabling that?

Hon. Mr. Cockrill: — Yeah. We'll provide that to the committee once we ensure that we can package the data in a way that doesn't compromise identity of any students.

Mr. Love: — Of course, of course. Thank you.

Minister, I'm going to move on to another question related to inclusive education. What does it mean for a school division to provide a temporary exclusion for a student looking to enrol?

Hon. Mr. Cockrill: — Sorry, Mr. Love. Can you just clarify your question? Just the way you worded it. You worded it in a way of a student looking to enrol. Are you looking in the context of a student looking to enrol, or a student already enrolled at a provincial division school?

Mr. Love: — I suppose it could be in either case, but do school divisions report to the ministry if they issue a temporary exclusion? In other words, a student who is either already enrolled or looking to enrol, but is deemed by a school division as they do not have the supports available to ensure that that enrolment is safe for that student and others, and so they're issued a temporary exclusion.

Can you explain to me your understanding of what a temporary exclusion is? And while we're at it, how does the ministry track this? And how many exclusions have been provided this school year?

Hon. Mr. Cockrill: — So when it comes to temporary exclusions, again my understanding, *The Education Act* gives divisions the ability to make a decision around temporary exclusions.

This is something done at the division level, so not formally. Like the ministry doesn't approve these decisions or keep track of the numbers division by division. You know, my understanding is that most divisions, if not all, would have . . . Again, *The Education Act* gives divisions that power. Divisions would have

administrative procedure at a division level, could look different from division to division. And that's a decision made between division administration and the local school.

Mr. Love: — And you're saying that your ministry doesn't track how many of these students are simply not able to be accepted into school divisions around the province. Like, you don't know what the number is; you don't know how many there are in Saskatchewan. Is there children and youth unable to attend school because schools simply don't have the resources to support these students when they get there, and you don't know how many?

Hon. Mr. Cockrill: — So again, the ministry doesn't track these numbers because again there's no . . . You know, this is a division-level procedure and there's not a requirement within . . . You know, divisions are expected to follow *The Education Act*, but there's not a requirement in the Act to report that number to the ministry.

Mr. Love: — It might not be a requirement, but do they report that? Have any or do all school divisions that tell a family that they cannot accommodate the needs of their child, do they report that to you?

Hon. Mr. Cockrill: — Yeah, we don't collect that data. We'll collect data for students that are in the system, but in terms of students that you talked about having a temporary exclusion, that's not data that we collect or track.

Mr. Love: — So there might be 5; there might 500. The trend might be going up and you wouldn't know. That's what you're saying tonight?

Hon. Mr. Cockrill: — Well I'm saying we don't have that data from school divisions. I mean it's . . . You know, another example is we also don't track how many students between those ages specified in *The Education Act* just aren't registered in a school, right. And so we're not, you know, Deputy Minister Repski and I, are not out searching the streets for students that are not registered with a school. So that's not . . . There's another example of data that we don't necessarily track, right.

Mr. Love: — But these are students who want to be registered in a school, have tried to enrol, but were denied because there simply are not appropriate resources in school to ensure safety for these students and their peers and their teachers. So this isn't hard to track. Would you be able to assemble these numbers?

[20:30]

Hon. Mr. Cockrill: — I'll just ask one of our officials, Kevin Gabel, to maybe provide a little bit more context.

Mr. Gabel: — Kevin Gabel. The students that are medically excluded for safety or medical reasons, the school division is still providing them with educational services. They're in contact with the parents, and it might be access to distance online education, information, assignments, and so on. And they will work with the parents and the teacher.

Mr. Love: — So, Minister, is it your perspective . . . Earlier in this conversation you said that every child has a right to

education. Are you as minister providing for that right when you don't know how many students have been excluded from school on the basis of ability or safety? You don't know what the trend is, and you couldn't possibly without knowing that, adjust this year's budget to meet the needs of our students without being aware of how many can't even attend school because supports are not there for them to ensure their safety.

Hon. Mr. Cockrill: — You know, I think what Mr. Gabel just shared, there is . . . And I mean Mr. Gabel is well-versed in the administrative procedures in various divisions around the provinces. You know, the temporary exclusion here is for medical or safety reasons, not necessarily disability reasons. And you know, I think as Mr. Gabel also indicated, you know, school divisions in their own administrative procedures are still trying to work with those families and students to provide them with educational opportunities, however that may look.

You know, certainly I'll take it under advisement, Mr. Love, in terms of maybe there's a way to collect the data from school divisions and have a discussion with school divisions.

Mr. Love: — So just to clarify, Minister, your official said that there is programming being provided for these students by school divisions. But they're not technically enrolled in the school division, so they wouldn't be receiving any funding as a student enrolled in the division. So I'm just concerned that it's creating a little bit of confusion. Are these students enrolled in schools and receiving programming? Or have they been issued a temporary exclusion and they're not receiving programming?

Hon. Mr. Cockrill: — So the student . . . You know, the situation you're putting forward, Mr. Love, the student may not be attending . . . The student may be receiving programming alternate to attending in a, you know, brick and mortar school, you know, whether that be distance or online education. They're still registered with the school division and still included in our enrolment counts.

Mr. Love: — And are they receiving funding as part of that enrolment count?

Hon. Mr. Cockrill: — Yes. And when I talked earlier about how we have the September 30th enrolment count and now we have the post-September 30th enrolment formula to account for, you know, a situation where someone may come into a division after September 30th so that they would be accounted for with the registered with the division.

Mr. Love: — Does it concern you at all, Minister, in again this conversation of crowded, complex classrooms across the province, that you and your ministry are not aware of how many students we have that do have exceptional needs, no doubt, and school divisions simply don't have the human resources or the space, the teachers, the EAs, the specialists to ensure that these children can attend school? Does that concern you at all, finding out tonight that you're not aware of how many there are that this is happening to?

Hon. Mr. Cockrill: — Well as I indicated, I don't know the specific number in the small subset category that you're asking about, but if they're registered with the school division, they're included in our enrolment count. And obviously funding follows

that.

So you know, again we've talked at length today about the budget that we have different opinions on. You know, there's an increase in supports for learning, in the supports for learning funding across school divisions. You know, there's increased, just school operating funding in general, which will allow school divisions to hire more support staff where they're aware of needs. So again, I'm confident that school divisions are managing that appropriately.

Mr. Love: — And just to clarify, the ministry does not track the number of students accessing programming under temporary exclusion designation?

Hon. Mr. Cockrill: — That's correct.

Mr. Love: — Okay. So how did you determine in this budget that the amount of dollars in the supports for learning line was an appropriate amount of funding for students with complex needs, especially given what we've learned tonight that you don't know how many are being excluded from school? How did you determine that that SFL [supports for learning] funding was adequate?

Hon. Mr. Cockrill: — As I shared in the previous answer, you know, we have roughly 10,442 students in this school year requiring intensive supports. I mean that's one of the factors that we look at when we allocate supports for learning dollars. And I mean we also look at community health information and socio-economic factors as well. Again, you know, there's an \$8.6 million increase in supports for learning funding in this year's budget on top of the 20 million, the real dollars that were added in last year's budget and annualized again for this year.

Again, we are seeing more students in our schools. We are seeing more students requiring intensive supports. It's a conversation that I have with school divisions wherever I go in the province. And certainly, you know, that's why we've set the floor in our multi-year funding agreement with school divisions on classroom supports funding, and certainly looking how we can enhance that in years going forward to ensure that school divisions can support students where needed.

Mr. Love: — Minister, can you explain your understanding of the difference between a homebound student and a student issued a temporary exclusion? And does your ministry track either of these categories?

Hon. Mr. Cockrill: — So again, my understanding of a student with a temporary exclusion is a student that the school is working to figure out how to provide the supports needed for them to attend school in person. I mean, obviously a homebound student, that's likely a longer term medical issue or other issue where, again, receiving the opportunity or have the opportunity to receive education, whether that be online or delivered in the home. But they're likely also getting services from other agencies at home as well as a homebound student.

You know, certainly as these students are registered with the school division, they are counted in our enrolment numbers and funded. You know, if you're asking for a specific breakout of those two categories, you know, within our enrolment data, we

don't have the specific breakout of those two categories. But again, if they're registered with the division they count in our enrolment numbers and are funded.

Mr. Love: — Minister, if there was a trend of increasing number of temporary exclusions in the province, is that something you would want to know about so that you could work to provide adequate funding for these incredibly complex-needs students that are being issued these exclusions?

Hon. Mr. Cockrill: — I think it was three or four answers ago I said I'll certainly, you know, take your suggestion in terms of collecting that data more specifically under advisement. And I'll have a discussion with my ministry team on how that could happen and how we would work with school divisions.

Mr. Love: — Okay, Minister. I'm going to ask a few questions about independent schools. Can you provide a list for the committee, broken down by category? Again I'm looking for a commitment for this to be tabled for the committee for each school and their enrolment for the last five years in the categories of qualified independent schools, certified independent schools, associate schools, historical high schools, and alternative independent schools.

I wouldn't need that list this evening, but just wondering if you'd be able to provide a breakdown of the categories because what I'm able to find online doesn't include . . . I think we just get a list of all registered independent schools without being broken down by category.

[20:45]

Hon. Mr. Cockrill: — So I have the enrolment numbers for the last five years for the categories. Is that sufficient, or are you looking for a breakdown per school?

Mr. Love: — Yeah, a breakdown by school would be great if you can commit to tabling that for committee. But you can share it by category this evening if you've got that on hand.

Hon. Mr. Cockrill: — Sure. And just again, the same factor just on the privacy piece on providing that data down the road on any of these schools. So maybe I'll just start with registered independent schools. And I'll read you five numbers off for each category, starting in 2019-2020 school year and then ending in the '23-24, the current school year.

So enrolments for registered independent schools: 497, 481, 505, 457, and 386. Next for qualified independent schools, starting in 2019-2020: 991, 2,013, 1,833, 1,557, 1,204.

Next for certified independent schools, and obviously there's no data for the first four years, so just the enrolment number for the '23-24 school year is 288. Next for alternative schools, starting in 2019-2020: 261, 249, 242, 261, 228. And then finally for historical high schools, we have starting in 2019-2020: 643, 609, 654, 634, 680.

Mr. Love: — Minister, what was the increase in the budget this year for qualified independent and certified independent schools? And were there any changes in terms of new schools joining those categories?

Hon. Mr. Cockrill: — So I'll start by saying, I think it was your last question, just around the number of certified independent schools. So we do have a couple changes for that category for the next school year.

In the next school year we have two new certified independent schools: Saskatoon Misbah School moving over, as I believe they were an associate school with Saskatoon Public; and then we also have Valley Christian Academy that's moving to the CIS [certified independent school] category. They were an associate school with Prairie Spirit School Division. That school is located in Osler, I believe.

So now just in terms of the funding difference, and I know we're going to switch back to talking in government language for a second, or government-year language, not school year. So the government-year increase for registered independent schools, qualified independent schools, alternative schools, and historical high schools, there is an increase from last year's budget: 27,630,000 to \$29,046,000. Represents about a 5.1 per cent increase government year to government year.

And sorry, I should just clarify because you also, I think, mentioned associate schools in one of your first questions. Associate schools, you know, considering we have two associate schools moving to the CIS category, so after those numbers have been restated, we expect no increase in the budget for associate schools. Again this does also depend on September 30th numbers, once we get those at the end of September and actual enrolments.

Mr. Love: — So, Minister, the numbers you just stated, an increase of 5.1 per cent, did that category include associate schools?

Hon. Mr. Cockrill: — No.

Mr. Love: — That's only registered independent.

Hon. Mr. Cockrill: — Registered, qualified, certified independent schools; alternative schools; and historical high schools.

Mr. Love: — Okay. So just help me to understand. How did that only go up 5.1 per cent with two fairly new, large, certified independent schools joining that category? Did other school enrolments go down? Or did some schools drop down a category?

Hon. Mr. Cockrill: — So the increase stated is after the restatement taking them out of the public division numbers where they were associates before. So that 5.1 per cent increase is after the restate, after we kind of . . . If you take, you know . . . Do you kind of get where I'm going? Where if we look at last year's budget and we don't include their numbers in last year's budget and we compare last year's budget to this year's budget, it's a 5.1 per cent increase.

Mr. Love: — I think I see what you're doing, but that . . . I understand the move from associate school to certified independent is not a major, major difference in terms of the number of dollars, and it's a drop of 5 per cent average per-student funding. Is that correct? From 80 per cent for an associate

school to 75 when they move into the new category.

Hon. Mr. Cockrill: — Correct.

Mr. Love: — Okay. Minister, with relation to, relative to the changes that your government made over the last couple of years with distance learning — in particular, you know, taking distance learning away from public divisions without any consultation — why does your government continue to fund a qualified independent school to provide distance learning when you now have the Saskatchewan Distance Learning Corporation?

Hon. Mr. Cockrill: — I mean, the answer to your question is really around parental choice. Obviously, you know, we've made a significant, significant move into, you know, I'd say investing quite heavily into Sask DLC and increasing the opportunities there, but we recognize that parents and families do have choice. And you know, any qualified independent school is required to meet a significant list of requirements, but you know, again, parents and families have choice in terms of where they enrol their children.

Mr. Love: — Minister, the audited financial statements for the past couple of years for Flex Ed qualified independent school have raised concern of the Provincial Auditor, as the two highest paid employees also own another business that gets substantial contracts from the school. And as they're registered as, I believe, a not-for-profit corporation, I guess my question is, does that raise any concerns for you? And can you assure it appears in their audited financial statements that they have accumulated significant surplus over the last few years despite only receiving 50 per cent of the average per-student funding grant?

So I guess my question is, do you have any concerns about this? And can you assure us that the surplus of this online independent school, if the school were to cease to operate, that that wouldn't go to the board members of the school, as I understand legally would now be the case?

[21:00]

Hon. Mr. Cockrill: — So as it pertains to Flex Ed and my understanding of their operations, you know, they did in recent years have a surplus. Again their enrolment did jump quite a bit during the pandemic. I think the last numbers I looked at, it almost doubled during the pandemic as families were looking for different delivery models and different ways to ensure their children were continuing to receive schooling.

Obviously, you know, with the operations at the school, as with any qualified independent school, we work with them and we have the expectation that the resources, the 50 per cent rate, the provincial resources that are being provided to them are used on supporting students and providing that education.

In terms of the situation that you hypothetically put forward, I guess, you know, if any qualified or certified independent school were to cease operations, obviously we would be working with our legal counsel to understand what our responsibilities and rights were as the ministry and as the provincial government.

Mr. Love: — Do you support Flex Ed in classifying their teachers as contractors instead of as employees?

Hon. Mr. Cockrill: — How an employee would be classified at an operation like that, you know, that's a classification decision made by Canada Revenue Agency. And we certainly respect the decision, the decision and the judgment of the Canada Revenue Agency in that context.

Mr. Love: — Have any of your officials in the ministry, those who oversee operations of Flex Ed, have they ever brought any concerns to your attention that you can share with the committee this evening?

Hon. Mr. Cockrill: — Regarding what specifically?

Mr. Love: — Teaching, instruction, finances — anything that might be of concern of those who, through your ministry, provide oversight for independent schools.

Hon. Mr. Cockrill: — During my time as minister, you know, I have met with the leadership of Flex Ed and had a couple of conversations with them. No concerns have been brought forward to me from our ministry in regards to any quality concerns around what Flex Ed is delivering. Obviously, you know, conversations that I've had with Flex Ed and that our ministry has had with them, just kind of normal course of business of independent schools, helping them navigate obviously the increased oversight and regulation and helping to answer any questions in that regard.

Mr. Love: — Minister, when it comes to oversight of independent schools, do you know if this textbook that has been raised in the past in this Assembly, published by Bob Jones University . . . it was referenced in this Assembly in the past with your predecessor as it teaches that humans and dinosaurs coexisted and in fact they still do, citing the Loch Ness monster as proof that dinosaurs are on the earth today. Is your ministry still providing funding for schools, taxpayer dollars, that use this textbook to teach biology in Saskatchewan?

Mr. Gabel: — The textbook in question that you're talking about, the sections specifically are not actually referenced in any of the materials used so the students don't actually use that part of it. That is not a core resource. It is used as a reference at best.

Mr. Love: — Is it still available to students in classrooms that receive taxpayer dollars?

Mr. Gabel: — There are no banned textbooks that I'm aware of in qualified independent schools.

Mr. Love: — So your position is that it can be — and I'd appreciate it if the minister would answer — that this textbook can be in a classroom that receives public dollars, taxpayer dollars, but since it's not being referenced, that that would be considered safe material in the classroom?

Hon. Mr. Cockrill: — We obviously expect, you know, any certified or registered independent school to teach the Saskatchewan curriculum. That is a requirement of certified teachers to do so, and we expect that they would be judicious about the resources they use. Again, my understanding is that this particular textbook is not a core resource, and there's other portions of the book different than the one you referenced that are used to support the delivery of Saskatchewan curriculum in

certified independent schools. As Mr. Gabel said, we're not aware of any banned textbooks in certified independent schools in Saskatchewan.

Mr. Love: — I have several pages of questions on the SDLC [Saskatchewan Distance Learning Corporation]. I don't think I'll get through very many of them tonight but I'll ask a couple.

Briefly, Minister, can you update the committee on how many course registrations — you mentioned some of this in your opening comments — how many course registrations, number of teachers, number of online facilitators . . . I'll ask my follow-up question now too. If you could answer this quickly: how many dollars, what are the dollars that have flowed from school divisions to the SDLC, and what happens when a course is dropped? Are those dollars refunded to the school division, or if a student registers in a course and those dollars are paid out, is that just . . . A student drops a course; does anything come back to the school division?

Hon. Mr. Cockrill: — Sorry, Mr. Love. I just had a few officials switching in and out. So number of registrations? You asked for number of teachers?

Mr. Love: — The teachers, online facilitators.

Hon. Mr. Cockrill: — Okay.

Mr. Love: — Dollars flowing from school divisions to the DLC. And then that scenario, what happens when a course is dropped?

Hon. Mr. Cockrill: — Okay. Thank you. Okay. Again I will attempt to make sure I get all your answers here for you. Let me know if I do miss anything though, please.

[21:15]

So as of mid-March, and I'll . . . I got some different time frames for answers, so I'll try and specify when I change time frames. As of mid-March there's about . . . there's 6,800 students — I mentioned that number in my opening comments — 2,500 full-time K to 12 students and 43 part-time students with the Saskatchewan DLC. This is, you know, there is a significant enrolment of about 1,300 students since the end of November of the school year.

In terms of the number of courses, as of mid-March there's been more than 17,000 grade 10 to 12 courses registered, and then our K to 9 [kindergarten to grade 9] students have taken more than 4,900 courses for this school year.

In terms of the staffing numbers, the overall head count for the Sask DLC is 327 as of mid-March. FTE is 273, and in that we have 125.06 teachers and 62.47 online learning facilitators across the province.

Now in terms of dollars that are provided from divisions to DLC to cover the tuition cost, the number for the first semester of the school year was \$6.9 million.

And just in terms of your course-drop question, you know, as of this year there are refunds provided to school divisions within 15 days of a course being registered. Obviously after that point the

DLC, Sask DLC has staffed to provide those courses and support to students, so there isn't a refund at that point. I will say though, I've had ongoing conversations with several school divisions who have just expressed some concern: is that sufficient time? You know, especially for a student that it might be their first time taking an online course and maybe it just doesn't work out, or they just would prefer to kind of, to have more in-person learning. So we are reviewing if that's the appropriate time frame, but as it stands today, 15 days is the add/drop deadline if you will.

Mr. Love: — I may come back to SDLC questions. Just a one-off question here, Minister. I noticed that the SPTRB [Saskatchewan Professional Teachers Regulatory Board], that there is a vacancy in the board of directors. Have you appointed anyone to that position?

Hon. Mr. Cockrill: — We are currently in the process of appointing one individual and then there's a couple of other positions as well. That appointment has not yet gone through the cabinet process, but we are working on that.

Mr. Love: — And can you confirm that you will not be appointing any individuals, as has been the case at the Sask Human Rights Commission, that you as minister won't be appointing any individuals who have sought a nomination for the Saskatchewan Party?

Hon. Mr. Cockrill: — Anybody that I have spoken with about the SPTRB, I'm not aware of them seeking any nomination for our party.

Mr. Love: — Minister, I'm going to move on to a few questions about Indigenous education. What is the budget for Following Their Voices? And what are the key measurements of success used to evaluate the effectiveness of the FTV [Following Their Voices] program?

Hon. Mr. Cockrill: — So in regards to FTV, I'll just provide some high-level comments, and then I'll actually pass it over to one of my officials, Tim here, who will provide a little bit more about metrics and kind of how we evaluate the program.

Obviously Following Their Voices — part of our strategy on how we better engage with First Nations, Métis, and Inuit students across the province — this year again a grant of \$2.285 million that's provided to Saskatoon Public and then distributed to all the divisions that have FTV schools. We currently have 39 FTV schools in divisions around the province. And certainly, you know, I know the schools that I've been in that are FTV schools around the province, heard positive feedback from those teachers and school staff and school administrators on the program and, you know, how that has improved their school environment and, you know, affecting how they work with their students every day.

But maybe I'll just ask Tim — don't forget to provide your name — to provide a little bit more colour.

Mr. Caleval: — Good evening. Tim Caleval with the priority action team, Ministry of Education. Following Their Voices intends to change relationships between teachers and students, the interactions between teachers and students in the learning environment to improve outcomes for Indigenous students in

participating schools.

So some of the measures we pay attention to, our long-term measures would be graduation rates, both three- and five-year graduation rates, and credit attainment as well. We also track the impact in terms of attendance, and we also look at student engagement in those schools through surveys that are done that are linked to the program itself and through the OurSchool survey as well. So those are some of the measures and metrics that we track regularly.

We also work very closely with the schools to ensure that they use the set of tools that we have and they use them according to the schedule that we've set out.

Mr. Love: — I spent a short amount of time in an FTV school just prior to the 2020 election, so I have some understanding from a classroom teacher perspective of what you're trying to accomplish.

Minister, what progress . . . So your official just mentioned the desire for FTV to see an increase in graduation rates for Indigenous students, of course something that the Provincial Auditor flagged as something that we have not seen an improvement in. So my question is, what progress in implementing the auditor's recommendations have you made specific to improving assessment practices? And if you can provide specific details on the progress that's been made to date, please.

Mr. Caleval: — So when the audit was undertaken on Following Their Voices, we experienced a dip in outcomes due to the pandemic. Following Their Voices heavily relies on interactions between teachers and students, and they were really interrupted due to COVID. And so that was part of the recommendations that were made. Since then we've been able to see returns to all of the pre-pandemic trend lines that were established for all the metrics that I'd mentioned earlier.

Mr. Love: — Okay. I was, at least in my former school division, I was quite excited to go work at an FTV school. They asked for teachers to apply, and I had made that change. So for all those Mount Royal Mustangs watching from home, go Mustangs. I don't think anybody's watching.

But just a couple more questions before we wrap here this evening. Minister, it's not about FTV. So, Minister . . .

The Chair: — I'll just . . . One more question, and then we'll wrap up for the night.

Mr. Love: — Okay. Minister, do you believe it's the job of local trustees to engage in government messaging? And part of my question is, on April 5th you sent a letter to trustees in this province asking them to repeat government messaging on the current contract situation with teachers.

Do you think it's appropriate for you to send that message to all trustees instead of going through boards? And do you think it's the job of trustees to engage in partisan Sask Party messaging on behalf of your government?

The Chair: — Could you please tie that question to the

estimates?

Mr. Love: — Yes, Madame Chair. The teacher contract dispute is throughout these estimates. We've discussed it at length over the last five hours. There's \$66.6 million in these estimates for the teacher contract and so the messaging battle that's really going on out there, in this letter the minister asked trustees to engage in this work for him.

The Chair: — Do you wish to answer, Minister?

Hon. Mr. Cockrill: — Yeah, Mr. Love, thank you. I'm happy to answer the question. Yeah, I sent a letter on Friday to all trustees, all elected trustees in the province, about 240-some trustees around the province. You know, a letter was sent to board Chairs, and I asked board Chairs to disseminate the letter to their respective boards.

[21:30]

What was asked in that letter, you know . . . In that letter there was no mention of any political party but what there was, a request, is that for those people who put their name on a ballot or put their name forward to run for a locally elected school board, I think it's really important that the discussion that we're having is around who gets to make decisions in a local school division.

And I know you and I probably have a different opinion on that. That's fine. However we believe that with the 27 boards that we have around the province, that those people were elected by their constituents, by their community members to stand up and do a job and make decisions based on what's best for their community and their school division.

Do I expect that I personally agree with all 240-some school trustees around the province? I don't and I've seen that as I've visited school boards around the province. You could pick 240-some people off the street and you probably wouldn't agree with all of them and I wouldn't agree with all of them.

But what I was asking school division trustees to do is to, if a locally elected voice in the education system in this province is important to them, it's time to stand up and say something. And certainly I felt it was appropriate. These are exactly the discussions that I've had at the board tables all around the province, from La Loche to Weyburn to Swift Current to North Battleford. Board trustees understand that they have a fairly significant role to play in terms of making decisions on how their school communities operate and are resourced.

And you know, I'd say that if I could characterize the discussions that I've had with school boards around the province — and many of my colleagues have joined me for those meetings — those are very frank meetings and opportunities to have real conversation about what's needed in schools, and how government and trustees and parents and teachers can all work together to improve that system.

So you know, my letter on Friday to school trustees was a message to say that if local voice in education is important to them, they should stand up and say something. Because unfortunately a lot of the narratives that are out in the public right now, they do come at cost to local voice in education. And I

believe that our constituents, the constituents that elect local trustees, need to be aware of that and should be engaged in that discussion as well. That's why I sent the letter.

The Chair: — Thank you, Minister. Having reached our agreed-upon time for consideration of these estimates, we will adjourn consideration of the estimates and supplementary estimates no. 2 for the Ministry of Education. Minister, do you have any closing comments this evening?

Hon. Mr. Cockrill: — I'd just like to thank all my officials who have come from near and far to help support me and my team here in terms of answering questions from Ms. Conway and Mr. Love. Thank you to the staff here, Hansard, and the Clerks' Table as well. Thank you to you of course, Madam Chair, for Chairing these proceedings. And thank you to Mr. Love and Ms. Conway for another good discussion here tonight.

The Chair: — Thank you, Minister. Ms. Conway or Mr. Love, do you have any closing comments?

Mr. Love: — I'll join with the minister in thanking everyone who's joined us this evening, all the committee members, all the officials who are here and public servants — thank you again for your service to this province — Hansard and broadcast and Clerks' Table and everyone who puts in so much work to make these committee meetings. This is the first of many over the coming weeks as we spend 75 hours in committees here and in room 8 discussing and asking questions about this budget. That's our democratic process that we all value so much.

And I'll take a short opportunity to thank all of our teachers, all of our school trustees, all of our parents that trust that system when they drop off their beloved young ones at school in the morning. The work that we do here is in support of that, and I know as a new parent and myself as a parent, that we share that concern. And whether we're parents or grandparents or neighbours, we all have a role to play in ensuring that our education system is the best it can be. So I thank everyone for engaging in that process here this evening.

The Chair: — Thank you, Mr. Love. I too would like to thank the minister and his officials, the committee members, and all staff in the Legislative Assembly for being here this evening.

That concludes our business for today. I would like to ask a member to move a motion of adjournment. Mr. Nerlien has moved. All agreed?

Some Hon. Members: — Agreed.

The Chair: — Carried. This committee stands adjourned until Tuesday, April 9th, 2024 at 3:30 p.m.

[The committee adjourned at 21:35.]