

First Session – Forty-Third Legislature
of the
Legislative Assembly of Manitoba
DEBATES
and
PROCEEDINGS
Official Report
(Hansard)

*Published under the
authority of
The Honourable Tom Lindsey
Speaker*

MANITOBA LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
Forty-Third Legislature

Member	Constituency	Political Affiliation
ALTOMARE, Nello, Hon.	Transcona	NDP
ASAGWARA, Uzoma, Hon.	Union Station	NDP
BALCAEN, Wayne	Brandon West	PC
BEREZA, Jeff	Portage la Prairie	PC
BLASHKO, Tyler	Lagimodière	NDP
BRAR, Diljeet	Burrows	NDP
BUSHIE, Ian, Hon.	Keewatinook	NDP
BYRAM, Jodie	Agassiz	PC
CABLE, Renée, Hon.	Southdale	NDP
CHEN, Jennifer	Fort Richmond	NDP
COMPTON, Carla	Tuxedo	NDP
COOK, Kathleen	Roblin	PC
CROSS, Billie	Seine River	NDP
DELA CRUZ, Jelynn	Radisson	NDP
DEVGAN, JD	McPhillips	NDP
EWASKO, Wayne	Lac du Bonnet	PC
FONTAINE, Nahanni, Hon.	St. Johns	NDP
GOERTZEN, Kelvin	Steinbach	PC
GUENTER, Josh	Borderland	PC
HIEBERT, Carrie	Morden-Winkler	PC
JACKSON, Grant	Spruce Woods	PC
JOHNSON, Derek	Interlake-Gimli	PC
KENNEDY, Nellie	Assiniboia	NDP
KHAN, Obby	Fort Whyte	PC
KINEW, Wab, Hon.	Fort Rouge	NDP
KING, Trevor	Lakeside	PC
KOSTYSHYN, Ron, Hon.	Dauphin	NDP
LAGASSÉ, Bob	Dawson Trail	PC
LAMOUREUX, Cindy	Tyndall Park	Lib.
LATHLIN, Amanda	The Pas-Kameesak	NDP
LINDSEY, Tom, Hon.	Flin Flon	NDP
LOISELLE, Robert	St. Boniface	NDP
MALOWAY, Jim	Elmwood	NDP
MARCELINO, Malaya, Hon.	Notre Dame	NDP
MOROZ, Mike	River Heights	NDP
MOSES, Jamie, Hon.	St. Vital	NDP
MOYES, Mike	Riel	NDP
NARTH, Konrad	La Vérendrye	PC
NAYLOR, Lisa, Hon.	Wolseley	NDP
NESBITT, Greg	Riding Mountain	PC
OXENHAM, Logan	Kirkfield Park	NDP
PANKRATZ, David	Waverley	NDP
PERCHOTTE, Richard	Selkirk	PC
PIWNIUK, Doyle	Turtle Mountain	PC
REDHEAD, Eric	Thompson	NDP
SALA, Adrien, Hon.	St. James	NDP
SANDHU, Mintu	The Maples	NDP
SCHMIDT, Tracy, Hon.	Rossmere	NDP
SCHOTT, Rachelle	Kildonan-River East	NDP
SCHULER, Ron	Springfield-Ritchot	PC
SIMARD, Glen, Hon.	Brandon East	NDP
SMITH, Bernadette, Hon.	Point Douglas	NDP
STONE, Lauren	Midland	PC
WASYLIW, Mark	Fort Garry	Ind.
WHARTON, Jeff	Red River North	PC
WIEBE, Matt, Hon.	Concordia	NDP
WOWCHUK, Rick	Swan River	PC

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF MANITOBA

Wednesday, October 16, 2024

The House met at 1:30 p.m.

The Speaker: O Eternal and Almighty God, from Whom all power and wisdom come, we are assembled here before Thee to frame such laws as may tend to the welfare and prosperity of our province. Grant, O merciful God, we pray Thee, that we may desire only that which is in accordance with Thy will, that we may seek it with wisdom, know it with certainty and accomplish it perfectly for the glory and honour of Thy name and for the welfare of all our people. Amen.

We acknowledge we are gathered on Treaty 1 territory and that Manitoba is located on the treaty territories and ancestral lands of the Anishinaabeg, Anishinewuk, Dakota Oyate, Denesuline and Nehethowuk nations. We acknowledge Manitoba is located on the Homeland of the Red River Métis. We acknowledge northern Manitoba includes lands that were and are the ancestral lands of the Inuit. We respect the spirit and intent of treaties and treaty making and remain committed to working in partnership with First Nations, Inuit and Métis people in the spirit of truth, reconciliation and collaboration.

Please be seated.

ROUTINE PROCEEDINGS INTRODUCTION OF BILLS

Bill 40—The City of Winnipeg Charter Amendment and Planning Amendment Act

Hon. Ian Bushie (Minister of Municipal and Northern Relations): I move, seconded by the Minister of Sport, Culture, Heritage and Tourism (Mr. Simard), that Bill 40, The City of Winnipeg Charter Amendment and Planning Amendment Act, be now read a first time.

Motion presented.

Mr. Bushie: I am pleased to introduce Bill 40, The City of Winnipeg Charter Amendment and Planning Amendment Act, to reduce the frequency of delays to local zoning amendments by establishing higher and more reasonable thresholds for items being referred to the Municipal Board.

This bill represents our government's commitment to speeding up planning approval timelines, while making sure that local voices are respected. Amendments proposed in the bill will balance local decision-making

autonomy with the value of public participation in the land-use planning process.

I am pleased to present this bill to the House for its consideration.

Thank you.

The Speaker: Is it the will of the House to accept the motion? [*Agreed*]

Speaker's Statement

The Speaker: Before we proceed to committee reports, I have a statement for the House.

I am advising the House that the Hansard volume from the morning of Thursday, October 10, has been reprinted as the original volume was inadvertently missing some text. Corrected versions can be found at the back of the Chamber, and that volume has also been corrected online.

Thank you.

* * *

The Speaker: Committee reports?

Tabling of reports?

Ministerial statements?

MEMBERS' STATEMENTS

Clubhouse Winnipeg's 25th Anniversary

Hon. Lisa Naylor (Minister of Transportation and Infrastructure): I rise today to celebrate Clubhouse Winnipeg's 25th anniversary.

Clubhouse Winnipeg is an essential program that provides supports for adults living with serious mental health diagnoses to empower them through life skills, occupational skill development and community.

Clubhouse is a safe and welcoming space providing between 40 to 45 visits per day for over 200 active members.

Through recreation and arts programs, Clubhouse facilitates friendships and resiliency. Staff help members navigate social service systems. Health and nutrition are supported through a low-cost breakfast and lunch program while members gain skills by working in the kitchen preparing and serving meals. A space enhancement program is offered to assist members with their

personal goals for cleaning, cooking or decluttering their living spaces.

Clubhouse Winnipeg's story began in the early 1990s, when family members and community stakeholders recognized the major gap in services available for adults with severe and persistent mental health challenges in the Winnipeg region. Through years of advocacy, government funding was secured, and Clubhouse Winnipeg, as part of the Clubhouse International network, opened its doors on Sherbrook in July 1999.

I want to welcome the Clubhouse members, staff and board members who are in the gallery today. Honourable Speaker, I ask leave to include all my guests' names in Hansard.

And I also want to highlight three early champions of this program. These parents of adults with severe mental health diagnoses have been involved from the very beginning and are so dedicated that they still serve on the board today, 25 years later. These three remarkable board members are Eleanor Webb, Michael Mercury and The Right Honourable Ed Schreyer.

Thank you, Clubhouse, for being such a valued part of the Wolseley constituency for the past 25 years.

Daniel Horne, executive director; Taylor Gosnell, generalist; Leonard Harapiak, board member

Members: James Adamson, Brian Bartlett, Terry Broza, Lori Penner

Jim Gaynor

Mr. Richard Perchotte (Selkirk): A hero is a person who is admired or idealized for courage, outstanding achievements or noble qualities.

Mr. Jim Gaynor is a true hero. He is joined here today with his wife, Betty Anne, and his family, Tom Gaynor, Richiel De Guzman Custodio, Eileen Gaynor and Richard Mraz.

Jim called Canada home in 1954. Upon settling in Manitoba, he began a great career in the grocery industry. In 1975, Jim fulfilled an ambition and became the owner of his own grocery store. The store operated under his namesake Gaynor Foods until he retired in 1999.

Throughout the years, he served his customers as—exceptional service, affordable prices. In the process, he created a legacy of connections, empowerment, hope, respect, generosity and philanthropy.

Jim's unwavering dedication to the community has impacted all the people of Selkirk and the surrounding communities; not just the employment opportunities he gave the community, the respect he gave every single employee, treating them like family, the affordable prices he ensured for his customers. He did much more.

He has donated millions of dollars, making life better in Selkirk. His generosity can be seen throughout the city, including the Selkirk library, appropriately named the Gaynor Family Regional Library.

The Gaynors continue their generous support through the Selkirk community foundation. Recently they have donated \$1 million to assist in Inclusion Selkirk's dream of building a living centre for persons with intellectual disabilities to live independently.

Please rise and join me as I honour this true hero.

* (13:40)

United Church in Meadowood

MLA Mike Moyes (Riel): It is a privilege to rise in the House today to highlight the United Church in Meadowood for their environmental leadership in my constituency of Riel.

Led by Minister Caryn Douglas, the United Church in Meadowood serves as a vital hub for community members. It is because of this that the church wanted to be a good example of environmental stewardship for people across our province by reducing their carbon footprint as much as possible.

As a result, when it was time to replace their heating system, the United Church in Meadowood sprang into action, demonstrating their commitment to addressing climate change.

The church formed a committee and immediately began educating the congregation on the importance of climate action. Once a consensus was reached and it was decided that a geothermal heat pump was the best option, the committee arranged meetings with members of all three levels of government and across party lines.

Simultaneously, the congregation began collecting donations and fundraising by hosting a variety of different activities. The money raised, along with a grant from Efficiency Manitoba, ensured the construction of the geothermal heat pump could be installed this summer, with the finishing touches about to take place.

The geothermal heat pump will ensure the building is heated in the most environmentally friendly way, and for the first time, the church will also have the benefit of cooling during the summer months.

Additionally, the church continues to make other environmentally friendly decisions including installing an electric vehicle recharging station.

The decision to take climate action was made not only as an investment for their current congregation, but for future generations. This was done out of the dedication to the children in our community so that they can inherit a Manitoba full of opportunity and hope.

I am grateful to be part of a community filled with forward-thinking and environmentally friendly individuals, whose efforts serve as a model for the broader province.

Our government recognizes the importance of climate action and will continue to take strong steps in protecting our environment.

Honourable Speaker, I ask all members to join me in thanking the United Church in Meadowood for their exceptional leadership in addressing climate change.

Acknowledging Farms in Southeastern Manitoba

Mr. Ron Schuler (Springfield-Ritchot): Fall is one of Manitoba's favourite thing—times of the year and we are always left impressed by the resilience and dedication of our farmers, including those who have deep roots in Springfield-Ritchot constituency.

With fall harvest under way across the province, our farmers here in southeastern Manitoba have been making steady progress finishing up their field work.

Many may not know that Niverville was home to the very first grain elevator in western Canada, which was built in 1879 by Wilhelm Hespeler, who also served as an immigration and agriculture agent for Manitoba, and later as the MLA for Rosenfeld and Speaker of the Legislative Assembly.

It was from this great round grain elevator that the first western Canadian barley was shipped to markets overseas—the start of significant agriculture industry in Manitoba. Today, Hespeler Park in Niverville commemorates Wilhelm Hespeler and his role in the settlement of western Canada and developing our incredible potential.

Nearby, the Springfield Agricultural Society commemorates pioneering grain growers with a special

monument in Dugald, and the first shipment of western Canadian wheat in October of 1876. Purchased at 85 cents per bushel, the wheat was shipped by Red River steamer for use in Ontario as seed.

And in the quiet hamlet of Glenlea, the Bruce D. Campbell Farm and Food Discovery Centre continues to educate our youth, offering them interactive exhibits that trace the journey of how food is made in Canada, from the farmer's field right to their kitchen table. Here students learn about every aspect of food production and how today's sustainable practices are positioning Manitoba farmers for the future.

Producing quality food for Manitobans and the world remains a cornerstone of our economy. We are proud to be part of Canada's breadbasket. And while not everyone is a farmer, many of us find joy in gardening and nurturing the rich soil of Manitoba. Community gardens keep us connected with our neighbours as much as they keep us connected to the land.

In all of this we say a very big thank you to all of our farmers.

Keira's Law

MLA Cindy Lamoureux (Tyndall Park): I rise this afternoon to provide an update to the House about Keira's Law, Bill 209.

I'm thrilled to share that Bill 209 passed through committee this past Thursday after an evening filled with heart-filled testimonies and shared experiences. A big thank-you to all of the survivors, women's shelters, resource centres and physicians for presenting.

Some of the key takeaways included the importance of timeliness, the fear of not being able to protect children, the feeling of being unheard by the justice system and the financial burden of legal representation.

Since committee, I have met with our Justice Minister and was advised that the government did not have any amendments on the legislation.

Further, I appealed specifically to our Premier (Mr. Kinew) yesterday in Estimates and he assured me he will be having a conversation with the Justice Minister about Bill 209.

Honourable Speaker, back on April 16 when we were debating this bill during second reading, members of both the government and official opposition shared supportive messages. For example, a government MLA from Kirkfield Park said introducing sexual assault training will contribute to the creation

of culture within our justice system that encourages survivors to come forward. An official opposition MLA said providing judges and JJPs more tools to work with will only help to strengthen our Manitoba judicial system.

Honourable Speaker, the government supported Bill 209 through second reading. They supported it through committee and to be reported back to the House. There is no reason, other than playing political games, that they would not support it going to third reading and to a vote.

I am appealing to this government to do right by Manitobans. They owe it survivors and to those who are currently struggling.

Thank you.

ORAL QUESTIONS

Government Spending Financial Management Concerns

Mr. Wayne Ewasko (Leader of the Official Opposition): Honourable Speaker, yesterday Estimates is definitely heating up, and today we already see that the Premier is dodging that process. One day into Estimates, he's dodging that process.

Yesterday during committee, Honourable Speaker, the Premier refused to elaborate on where he plans on cutting in the upcoming year.

To recap, the NDP, in their first year, they cut schools, daycares, summer programming for kids, parks budgets, the forest fire budgeting—fighting budget, economic development efforts, surgical options and task force that reduce wait times and much, much more, Honourable Speaker.

The Speaker: The member's time has expired.

I stand corrected. The member still has time left.

Mr. Ewasko: Do I start over?

Honourable Speaker, so the question I have for the Premier is: Can the Premier please identify what he's going to be cutting in the next few weeks?

Hon. Wab Kinew (Premier): The only thing we cut in our first year was the size of the PC caucus when we won Tuxedo for the first time in Manitoba history.

That's right. The member opposite is going to go down on his Wikipedia page as the only PC leader in the history of this province to lose the great constituency of Tuxedo. Congratulations to our newest MLA.

For those who watched Estimates committee yesterday, do you know what they saw? They saw an opposition who ran out of questions. A mere 80 or so minutes in, the member opposite had no more questions; no questions about health care, no questions about education, no questions about the economy.

And who can blame him? Things are going so much better under the Manitoba NDP than they ever did under the PCs.

The Speaker: The honourable Leader of the Official Opposition, on a supplementary question.

Mr. Ewasko: The Premier is going to be the only Premier to go down in history with a Wikipedia page that says that he was the only Premier charged with intimate violent partner assaults.

Yesterday, during committee, the Premier refused to answer many of the questions. We've already seen their inability to balance the budget.

* (13:50)

The previous PC government delivered real tax relief for all Manitobans, invested to heal health care, building education for the future, improving social services, growing the rainy day fund, attracting businesses and jobs and delivering a \$373-million audited surplus in 2023.

The failed Finance Minister is moving ahead with the Premier's mentor's plans, Greg Selinger's plans, of the—of deficits and higher debts moving forward.

Honourable Speaker, why is the Premier unable to find the balance without cutting Manitoba's services that they—

The Speaker: Member's time has expired.

Mr. Kinew: Week after week, day after day, the member runs out of questions.

Yesterday, he yielded the floor in Estimates. That's supposed to be opposition time. Couldn't think of a question.

That's right, he had no questions to ask about public safety. I guess they think things are going great with our team when it comes to public safety. No questions to ask when it came to taxes. I guess they think our tax policy is great on this side of the House. No questions even about the ag industry or rural communities because even the PCs know, good times are here for rural Manitoba under the Manitoba NDP government.

My question for the member opposite is: Week after week, he runs out of questions, Estimates session after Estimates session, he runs out of things to ask us. Why does he feign indignation at the start of question period? Why doesn't he just admit we're doing a great job?

The Speaker: The honourable Leader of the Official Opposition, on a final supplementary question.

Mr. Ewasko: Honourable Speaker, so why is the Premier dodging Estimates process? Why is he dodging it? He's not—too much heat yesterday in Estimates, so he's not, you know, taking part in that process today.

The NDP have chosen deficit spending instead of balanced budget because they overpromised. Now they're underdelivering. They're making government more expensive while cutting in other areas.

Honourable Speaker, it's the worst of both worlds. No one in the—Manitoba runs their own budgets this way, but look at the NDP. Under their failed Finance Minister, they have chosen ballooning deficits, higher interest payments and rapidly escalating debt.

The NDP, while also cutting schools, personal-care homes and other projects to fund their expensive promises and fuel their own popularity.

Honourable Speaker, one more time for the Premier: Because, the NDP mismanagement, where's the belt-tightening going to occur and which taxes are going to be increased on Manitobans?

Mr. Kinew: I invite the rest of the PC caucus to read Hansard from Estimates yesterday afternoon.

What their leader said was very telling. What he said in his opening statement is that he was going to give time to independent members and then, direct quote here: Maybe some people in his caucus would be able to ask some questions.

Why would a leader of a political project so disregard the hard work of his fellow colleagues? You know, my heart really goes out to MLAs for constituencies like Lakeside and Selkirk and Agassiz, because week after week, the member for Lac du Bonnet (Mr. Ewasko) gives more time to somebody who was elected under the NDP banner to the—these backbenchers who were elected under the PC banner.

So, again, we know that there is a leadership contest under way, which the Free Press says is completely devoid of rural content.

But my question for the members opposite is: Why do you say you support somebody who was elected under our banner instead of theirs?

Phoenix School Renovation and Expansion Request for Project Update

Mrs. Kathleen Cook (Roblin): In June 2022, a major renovation and expansion of Phoenix School in Headingley was approved. The project included a new gymnasium, multipurpose room, an updated library, two new classrooms and space for 74 school-aged child-care spaces.

The St. James-Assiniboia School Division proceeded to the design phase of the project. This project has been the No. 1 capital priority for the St. James-Assiniboia School Division for many years because Phoenix School is full to bursting.

Can the Minister of Education and Early Childhood Learning (MLA Altomare) please advise my constituents in Headingley: What is the status of this project?

Hon. Wab Kinew (Premier): Our government is investing in education.

We have delivered a message loud and clear to those on the front lines in the classrooms with our kids, and that is this: There is a future for you here in Manitoba. You can stay right here in our province and build a great career.

We're building new schools. We're hiring new teachers. There are 630 new educators working in the classrooms this year, and for the first time in Manitoba's history, there is a universal school food program so that no child has to go to school hungry.

Now, of course, all of these important educational initiatives mean one great thing, which is that there's so many students out there asking important questions: Why does the world work this way? Why can't the world work that way in the future?

And, of course, the member opposite from Lac du Bonnet should take inspiration from these kids and come back and start asking some questions.

The Speaker: The honourable member for Roblin, on a supplementary question.

Mrs. Cook: The Premier clearly doesn't know what's happening with Phoenix School in Headingley, so I'll advise him. His government cancelled it.

I'll table a statement from the school board chair that was published in the Headingley Times this week,

stating, and I quote: This past July, we received deferral correspondence from the Province when the project was at 99 per cent project stage. There is no guarantee if or when the project will move forward.

And I'll also table a letter from the school division that states: The expansion project continues to be listed as the No. 1 priority on our capital projects list. The top priority of the St. James school division, ignored by this NDP government.

Will the Premier reverse this reckless decision today and commit to the residents of Headingley that the much-needed renovation and—

The Speaker: Member's time has expired.

Mr. Kinew: The No. 1 priority for every parent in Manitoba is the one-on-one time that your child gets with a teacher, an educator, a clinician when needed. And that's exactly what we're delivering.

For years under the PCs, education was cut, services were denied, clinicians in rural areas had to drive further and further across school divisions, and what was the long-term plan? The long-term plan of the members opposite: They wanted to eliminate school divisions entirely.

So it's a little rich, after being handed their walking papers, that the members opposite want to be the champions of the school divisions that they themselves wanted to eliminate, but such is the nature of the PCs. Plain hypocrisy does not shame them.

We, on the other hand, are always committed to education. We are committed to your kids, we are committed to your grandkids. That's why we've hired 630 new educators in our schools. We've brought in a universal school food program, and we're building schools right across the province of Manitoba.

The Speaker: The honourable member for Roblin, on a final supplementary question.

Mrs. Cook: Phoenix School is over capacity, and as of this fall, students are now in portables. Although, I suppose they should just be grateful that under the NDP they're not in the hallways.

Daycare space is in critically short supply in Headingley. Over 700 children are on a wait-list. I'll table a letter from the mayor stating that the daycare operator has been told they will have space in Phoenix School for this school year only. Quote: This means that many families will not have access to daycare.

Cutting school expansions, cutting daycare spaces for families that need them, that's what this NDP government is doing.

I'll ask the Premier again: Will he reverse this decision and commit to the constituents in Headingley that the Phoenix School expansion and renovation will go ahead as planned?

Mr. Kinew: Well, perhaps the member opposite would like to turn to her right, because if you wanted a school online this year, construction would have had to start under the PC government. So why did they not build? Why did every single year they cut education funding in Manitoba? Because they put dollar signs ahead of people.

We're different. We put the kids first. That's why we've hired 630 new educators that are working in classrooms this year, right now, as we speak. Another thing that's happening at schools right across Manitoba and every single community: hungry kids are being fed for the first time.

So I appreciate all the heckling that's going on to the members opposite, but if they want to advocate for their constituents, perhaps they'll ask their leader: Why does he yield their question period and Estimates time day after day, week after week? Maybe they could be using that to advocate for their constituencies instead. *[interjection]*

The Speaker: Order. Order.

* (14:00)

Green Valley School Expansion Concern for Status of Project

Mr. Konrad Narth (La Vérendrye): With students now a month back to school and the days getting colder, the Green Valley School in Grunthal is feeling the full effects of this NDP's cut to their school expansion. With parents feeling helpless, they have obtained over 1,000 signatures on a petition, calling on the government to immediately reinstate their expansion project.

Will the minister responsible commit today to tour the Green Valley School during constituency week to see first-hand the urgency they are in for space?

Hon. Tracy Schmidt (Acting Minister of Education and Early Childhood Learning): Thank you to the member opposite for raising this important question about our province's education system. If the member would like to reach out to our office and extend an

invitation for such a tour, I'd be more than happy to visit that school and schools across our great province.

Our government—the NDP government recognizes the importance of well-funded, predictable funding, when it comes to school capital. We also believe in providing quality learning environments for students in schools and children in our school system.

Honourable Speaker, as I've updated the House very recently, there are currently four new schools in construction, three kindergarten-to-grade-8 schools located in Winnipeg and one kindergarten to grade pool–grade 4 school in Steinbach in the Hanover School Division, which the member is referencing, which helps—

The Speaker: The member's time has expired.

The honourable member for La Vérendrye, on a supplementary question.

Mr. Narth: Honourable Speaker, the invitation has been proposed to her department. The minister can stand in her place and repeat talking points, but it doesn't change the fact that her government is failing the students of the Green Valley School.

Each of the communities within the Hanover School Division is growing. Our region is growing, putting further strain on the limited space within the schools. This is a time to build and not cut.

Will she put her staff's script aside and join me in meeting with staff and parents so she can see how badly this project is needed?

MLA Schmidt: When it comes to education, Honourable Speaker, Manitobans know who they can trust. In fact, they've elected a government full of educators, and I'd just like to take a moment to shout out our bench.

The MLA for Transcona, the MLA for Seine River, the MLA for St. Boniface, the MLA for Riel, the MLA for Point Douglas, the MLA for Brandon East, the MLA for Kildonan-River East, the MLA for River Heights, the MLA for Lagimodière, all educators in our system.

Manitobans elected a government that understands the education system, and we are going to get the work done.

Some Honourable Members: Oh, oh.

The Speaker: Order, please. Order, please.

Do I have to remind everybody again that when the Speaker's standing, they're supposed to remain

silent? I was going to call the government bench to order because they were clapping and cheering so loudly I couldn't hear what the minister was saying, so tone it down a little bit, please.

Mr. Narth: That further disappoints me that a caucus full of educators is not able to fulfill the obligations to schools across the province. Maybe the NDP should've elected one building contractor instead of a complete caucus of educators.

This minister needs to step up. I table an article that outlines that the government's failure is all-encompassing. As one school trustee put it, three new teachers do not have space to teach this fall because the Green Valley School was counting on classrooms within this project.

What does this minister have to say to this trustee?

MLA Schmidt: I thank the member opposite for bringing up the role of trustees because our government benches also have two former trustees. We've got the MLA for Wolseley and MLA for Fort Richmond, who had experience in that role.

Members opposite don't believe in school trustees. Their memory is so short, they don't remember bill 64, which they would've eliminated the position.

So, Honourable Speaker, all we get from the other side is hypocrisy and division; on this side, they're going to get real work and honest answers.

Vocational School in Neepawa Construction Commitment Inquiry

Ms. Jodie Byram (Agassiz): Honourable Speaker, according to Stats Canada, Neepawa has experienced the third highest rate of population growth in the entire province. There has been a boom in commercial, industrial and residential sectors. This has contributed to significant growth in the student population that has current schools exceeding their capacity limits.

This NDP government has been silent about the vocational school that was planned for the community.

So I ask the minister: In her new role, will she confirm for the House that plans to build a new vocational school in Neepawa will proceed?

Hon. Tracy Schmidt (Acting Minister of Education and Early Childhood Learning): I'm pleased to update the House that, you know, our government is continuing to review our capital projects plan. We're going to do so in a transparent—in a responsible way that puts us on a path to balance.

We are currently absolutely examining enrolment trends, existing schools' capacity and space utilization across the province.

So again, happy to work with the member opposite in service to Manitobans, which was—we were elected to do here in this room.

Unfortunately, as the Premier (Mr. Kinew) has mentioned, on the other side of the House, they're more interested in ceding their time to independent members for political gain. On this side of the House, we're interested in working for Manitobans. That's what Manitobans elected us to do, and that's what we're going to do.

The Speaker: The honourable member for Agassiz on a supplementary question.

Ms. Byram: Honourable Speaker, Neepawa has nine portable classrooms. Let me repeat: that's nine portable classrooms that have reached their capacity limits. Common areas are being utilized as makeshift classroom space to meet the needs of the surging student population.

These conditions put stress on students, educators and administrators and are not ideal for learning. The school has far exceeded its capacity.

So again, I ask the minister: Will she commit to building the new vocational school in Neepawa today?

MLA Schmidt: I'm committed to working with school divisions, with school boards, with trustees, with families and with kids to make sure that the educational needs here in Manitoba are met.

There's a saying that I've learned from some educators, I think all of us have heard this saying before: two stars and a wish. The failed PCs had a failed plan on schools. They had a failed plan on child-care space. Our wish is that they perhaps should have budgeted for these things when they had the chance, when they were in government. Seven and a half years, couldn't get the plan off the ground.

We're going to do it, Honourable Speaker, and we're going to do it in a way that's transparent and responsible.

The Speaker: The honourable member for Agassiz, on a final supplementary.

Ms. Byram: This new vocational school would serve not only students from Neepawa but also three First Nation communities in the area, as well as many Hutterian colony schools.

Again, I ask: Will this minister commit to the construction of the Neepawa vocational school, or is it one of the projects from this NDP government that they've cut?

MLA Schmidt: I urge the member opposite to have done her homework. Here in Manitoba when it comes to education, they cut and we build. That's the truth.

We spent all of our bench—I'm not sure what they did in the last election. I don't think Manitobans understood what they did in the last election.

On this side of the House, in the last election, we spent days and weeks and months on the doorstep. And we heard from families, we heard from their parents, and we heard from educators that on the other side of the aisle, their education plan got an F.

That's why Manitobans elected this NDP government, a government they know that they can trust on education.

Thank you, Honourable Speaker.

Parkview Manor Residents Security Concerns

Mr. Richard Perchotte (Selkirk): Honourable Speaker, I have received letters from concerned constituents that I table for the Minister of Housing, Addictions and Homelessness.

No Manitoban and no senior should ever worry about the safety of their home. But the residents of Parkview Manor are left feeling that way every day. Some have written to my office to say they are scared to leave their homes in the evening and that is simply not acceptable.

So I ask this minister: What is she going to do for residents of Parkview Manor?

Hon. Bernadette Smith (Minister of Housing, Addictions and Homelessness): I want to thank the member for that question.

* (14:10)

Well, on this side of the House, we take safety in our housing very seriously. That's why we've increased tenant services. We've been working with all of the tenants. We've been making sure that we're listening to those tenants' concerns; something that members opposite didn't do.

Members opposite, you know, put their fingers in their ears, they pretended like nothing was happening, they sold off housing, they cut maintenance. We're not going to do that. We're actually listening.

We're working on the front lines and we're ensuring that people have housing: safe, affordable housing; something that members opposite never did when they were in government.

The Speaker: The honourable member for Selkirk, on a supplementary question.

Mr. Perchotte: Honourable Speaker, as one resident put it, quote: We were promised cameras and pass cards over a year ago, to find out recently they went to another building in Winnipeg because we didn't complain enough. End quote. It is appalling that a senior living in a Manitoba Housing facility should be made to feel less than.

Will this minister commit to rectifying these security concerns today, yes or no?

Ms. Smith: Again, we're investing more than ever—more than ever than they did on that side.

But see, Heather Stefanson and her government refused to prioritize safety in any of their buildings. They slashed 'maintenan' budgets in Manitoba Housing. Common spaces in Manitoba Housing fell into disrepair, leaving Manitoba Housing feel—residents feeling unsafe.

Under their watch, Winnipeg saw a 12 per cent increase in violent crime since 2021 and a 22 per cent increase in robberies since 2022, which disproportionately impacted residents of Manitoba Housing.

We're not taking that approach. We're working with residents. We're working on the front lines and we're investing in Manitoba—

The Speaker: Member's time has expired.

The honourable member for Selkirk, on a final supplementary question.

Mr. Perchotte: Honourable Speaker, these seniors have given so much to make our province the amazing place that it is and now they ask for the most basic level of safety in their homes.

According to residents, Manitoba Housing staffed are being barred from even removing active drug dealers from the property.

Will the minister commit today, on the record, that such illegal and anti-social behaviour is not permitted in Manitoba Housing facilities?

Ms. Smith: Again, the 'priety' of our government is to ensure that we provide safe, affordable housing—something that the prior PC Stefanson government never did.

What we've done since coming into office is we've completed numerous physical-security upgrades to Manitoba Housing, including \$1 million in security upgrades. We've invested more than \$1 million to expand wraparound supports for housing—those in housing. We've budgeted in our twenty-four-'24 budget \$116 million; this is to house Manitoba's most vulnerable.

We're investing, we're maintaining and we're not going to take the approach that they took. We're not leaving people out in the cold. We're not leaving people unsafe and we're going to continue to support Manitobans—something that Manitobans sent us here to do.

The Speaker: If I could get the clock stopped for a minute, please.

Introduction of Guests

The Speaker: I just want to take a moment to recognize some students in the gallery who have to leave before we'll be done question period.

We have seated in the public gallery from Springs Christian Academy 30 grade 9 students under the direction of Brad Dowler. This group is located in this constituency of the honourable member for St. Boniface (MLA Loiselle).

MRI Services Portage la Prairie

MLA Jeff Bereza (Portage la Prairie): Honourable Speaker, I have given the Minister of Health countless opportunities to address their concerns with locating an MRI in the new Portage hospital, but the minister can't come up with a single good reason.

I know this because the minister's office deletes emails without opening them, refuses to commit to attending a town hall next week to speak to the 'residents' directly.

If this minister is committed to reducing the diagnostic backlog, why are they refusing to put an MRI in the new Portage hospital?

Hon. Uzoma Asagwara (Minister of Health, Seniors and Long-Term Care): Honourable Speaker, that member needs to ask his friend Brian Pallister why he refused to establish a hospital and have plans for an MRI.

That member needs to ask his colleagues who were in government for seven and a half years when that proposal came forward, why did they refuse to have an MRI?

Honourable Speaker, that member needs to look in the mirror and ask himself why he ran under a PC campaign that was committed to not having an MRI in that very hospital. Then he should probably look in the mirror and ask himself again: Why am I running under a banner, under a party that wants to cut health care, close more emergency rooms, fire health-care workers?

It's a lot of questions that member should look in the mirror and ask himself. But he should really ask himself today: Why is it they continue to still not listen to experts here in Manitoba who are guiding us on our—

The Speaker: Member's time has expired.

The honourable member for Portage la Prairie, on a supplementary question.

MLA Bereza: Honourable Speaker, let's deal in facts. The hospital is currently under construction, and now would be the cheapest time in the facility's lifespan to add an MRI. Doctors in the area have written to both the minister and I advocating for this project. The Portage district hospital foundation has pledged how much: \$5 million.

I will always stand by the advice and recommendation of doctors and medical professionals who know their community needs best.

Will they commit today to come and speak with the residents in Portage on the 22nd, yes or no?

MLA Asagwara: Honourable Speaker, on this side of the House, we listen to the experts, who look at the evidence and have the data and the information that help guide and inform the investments we make in the health-care system, including expanding MRI capacity, which we're doing in the North, which has never had an MRI.

Now that member has some questions he has to answer to. Why is it that he's sharing this information in his community? Why is he telling people that \$5 million would put an MRI and establish it and solve all their problems?

Honourable Speaker, while that member talks to companies that sell MRIs, on this side of the House, we're talking to the experts who staff them, who run them, who operate them. We're making decisions to make our health-care system stronger.

I encourage that member to do the same. Get on board, join our side in terms of making health—

The Speaker: Member's time has expired.

The honourable member for Portage la Prairie, on a final supplementary question.

MLA Bereza: Honourable Speaker, I'd love to talk to the experts if the minister would let me.

Money is not an issue here. To quote from the foundation's release that I table for the minister: The board is confident if additional funds are required, the community will rally behind the Portage district hospital foundation's efforts.

Residents need it. Doctors advise in favour of it. The board has raised \$5 million and stands to raise more. Everyone in our community stands united.

Why is this minister personally standing in the way of diagnostic services to the residents of Portage la Prairie and the 24,000 people waiting?

MLA Asagwara: Honourable Speaker, I am deeply concerned. I am deeply concerned to hear that member stand up and admit to this House and to Manitobans that he is, in fact, only listening to people who sell MRIs, and he is not listening to experts.

Honourable Speaker, that is a pattern we saw under the previous PC Heather Stefanson government. They ignored experts. They fired front-line health-care—*[interjection]*

The Speaker: Order.

MLA Asagwara: —workers and they cut the services that Manitobans count on.

We're listening to experts. We're working with the front lines, and we're investing in making health care stronger. Not only that, we have a plan to expand and enhance MRI capacity in this province.

There's more work to do. We're doing that work every day for Manitobans.

International Students

Request to Reinstate Health-Care Coverage

MLA Cindy Lamoureux (Tyndall Park): A few Manitoba students, a provincial lobbying group for post-secondary students, have joined us here today.

Unfortunately, the previous government cut health-care coverage to Manitoba's international students. And even though we are a year into this NDP government's mandate, health-care coverage has not been reinstated.

* (14:20)

The students have shared that they have requested a timeline from this government but have yet to receive one.

Will the minister share with the House today when they plan to reinstate health-care coverage for international students?

Hon. Renée Cable (Minister of Advanced Education and Training): I thank the member for the question and her advocacy for students, especially international students.

I want to take this moment to publicly congratulate her. I know that the days are narrowing that we'll be able to do this in the Chamber, so congratulations on the pending birth of your little one.

And I just want to say that I am grateful for the work and the advocacy that the students up in the gallery are doing on behalf of other students in Manitoba. It is a voice that is very needed, and when the PCs cut international student health care in 2018, I know that they were there then, and they continue to advocate. And I thank them for the relationship they have together and the work that we're doing together.

The Speaker: The honourable member for Tyndall Park, on a supplementary question.

Access to Safe and Affordable Housing

MLA Lamoureux: Access to safe and affordable housing for international students is a critical issue. There's a massive shortage of housing which has drastically driven rent prices up.

Unfortunately, as a result, housing for international students has reached highly unaffordable levels. We have had—heard stories, including large numbers of international students having to share one- or two-bedroom apartments, and how some international students are being exploited by private landlords.

What does this government—what plans does this government have to ensure international students have access to safe and affordable housing?

Hon. Bernadette Smith (Minister of Housing, Addictions and Homelessness): I want to thank the member for that question.

Well, as a government we've invested \$116 million and we're continuing to invest and build. We are in fact partnering with other people that want to partner: the business sector has come to the table and is willing to build as well.

And, you know, non-profits as well, and you—we had—we came out of a government, seven and a half years, that cut maintenance, that sold off housing, that refused to invest and build housing. So we are going to continue to invest and ensure that there's safe and

affordable housing for folks that want to live here in our great province of Manitoba—something that the Stefanson government never did.

So I want to again thank the member for that question, and we'll continue to—

The Speaker: The member's time has expired.

The honourable member for Tyndall Park, on a final supplementary question.

Birth Control Program—Qualification Inquiry

MLA Lamoureux: This month the Province rolled out a very vague free birth control program, indicating that it was for all Manitobans. However, there has been a lot of confusion amongst international students if they qualify.

Can the minister please clarify, yes or no, do international students currently qualify for the free birth control program?

Hon. Uzoma Asagwara (Minister of Health, Seniors and Long-Term Care): I thank the member for that question. Yes, our government was proud to launch, on October 1—in the history of this province it's a first—the birth control program that is free for all Manitobans. All Manitobans in this province have access to free birth control.

We know that access to free birth control can be game-changing for families, for those who are family planning, for women, gender-diverse folks across this province. It's also important to note that our partners across the health-care system, post-secondary community health clinics, et cetera, also have ways in which folks can access free birth control to meet their health-care needs.

Happy to provide more clarity to that member if there's anything about our roll-out or our plan that seems vague to her. I'm always here and happy to answer any questions—

The Speaker: The member's time has expired.

Respiratory Virus Season Government Preparation

MLA Mike Moroz (River Heights): Respiratory virus season is the most predictable occurrence that impacts our health-care system. Like clockwork, it happens every single year.

Yet in spite of that predictability, the previous PC government did no planning for it over their seven and a half years in office. Even after lessons ought to have been learned from the pandemic, the Stefanson PCs

still took no action, and we saw severe outcomes increase during last year's season.

Can the Minister of Health please tell the House about their announcement this morning and what steps our government is taking to mitigate respiratory virus season?

Hon. Uzoma Asagwara (Minister of Health, Seniors and Long-Term Care): Thank you to my wonderful colleague from River Heights for that great question.

I'm glad to say that the PC era of unpreparedness is over in Manitoba. We have added ICU beds, acute-care beds. We've introduced a protocol for surge capacity. We've launched our vaccine ad campaign reminding folks of the importance of getting themselves and their loved ones vaccinated. This, alongside many other investments, including net-new health-care workers on the front lines of our health-care system as we prepare for this season.

And, of course, I have to make one quick plug: go out and get vaccinated. Get your COVID shot, get your influenza vaccine and make sure that you get your shots in the same place. One visit, two shots. Go out and get vaccinated.

Together we can keep Manitoba, our loved ones and our communities—

The Speaker: The member's time has expired.

Are there no further PC members wishing to ask questions at this time? Then we—

Some Honourable Members: Oh, oh.

The Speaker: Order. Order. Order. Order.

If there are no other members at this time from the PC party, then I will go to the next member in rotation.

Food Prices and Grocery Store Chains Government Plan to Address—Update Request

Mr. Mark Wasyliv (Fort Garry): Low-income Manitobans have been hit hard by price increases in the cost of groceries. Harvest Manitoba found that 40 per cent of people accessing their food bank are employed, and that's a 60 per cent increase from the year before.

Manitobans are working harder and getting farther behind. At the same time, grocery store chains are making record windfall profits.

The Premier (Mr. Kinew) claimed that he would take further steps against the grocery-store chains if costs of groceries didn't come down.

How has the Premier called the bluff of the big grocery stores and lowered Manitoba grocery bills?

Hon. Adrien Sala (Minister of Finance): I'd like to start out just by talking about some really fabulous news we saw from Stats Canada in recent days. First of all, we're seeing average hourly wage growth in Manitoba growing by 1.6 per cent. We created 5,300 new jobs. And really importantly, we know that the gas tax reduced inflation by 0.4 per cent. These are just some of the bits of good news we're seeing come in in response to the important work that our government is doing.

The gas tax, which, of course, we brought in shortly after we come—came into government, is helping Manitobans across the province, but that's just one of many ways that we're helping to reduce costs for Manitobans, including: a homeowner affordability tax credit of \$1,500; we've doubled the Fertility Treatment Tax Credit; increased the renters tax credit—something that we know the members opposite raised taxes on renters.

We're making a more—we're—

The Speaker: The member's time has expired.

The time for oral questions has expired.

Petitions?

Grievances?

ORDERS OF THE DAY GOVERNMENT BUSINESS

Hon. Nahanni Fontaine (Government House Leader): In accordance with rule 78(9), I am tabling a revised sequence for the consideration of departmental Estimates for today only. And can you please resume Committee of Supply. *[interjection]*

The Speaker: Order, please.

It's been announced there's a revised table of Estimates to take place for today, and we will now resolve into Committee of Supply.

COMMITTEE OF SUPPLY (Concurrent Sections)

ROOM 254

TRANSPORTATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE

* (14:40)

The Chairperson (Rachelle Schott): *[inaudible]* and Infrastructure.

Does the honourable minister have an opening statement?

Hon. Lisa Naylor (Minister of Transportation and Infrastructure): Good afternoon. As the Minister of Manitoba's Transportation and Infrastructure, I am honoured to lead this department in delivering many important programs and initiatives. Our work highlights the importance of the entire transportation network as a key driver of our economy while also ensuring the safety of Manitobans on the roads.

We have faced significant challenges in recent years, particularly due to increasing frequency and intensity of extreme weather events which directly affect our infrastructure and service delivery. The 2024 wild-fire season was a clear reminder of just how vulnerable we are to climate change. Significant flooding events do not just threaten our infrastructure; they greatly affect our communities and our way of life.

To address these challenges, we're focusing on resiliency as a priority for our capital investments. That is why our strategy emphasizes not only repairing, but also designing infrastructure to withstand future climate impacts. Programs like the disaster financial assistance and the Mitigation and Preparedness Program are helping municipalities to build back better.

The department is also committed to ensuring Manitoba's infrastructure supports both economic growth and safety. Over the last year, I've had the pleasure of meeting with more than 100 municipalities, First Nations and the Manitoba Métis Federation in order to reset our relationships and improve service delivery. This collaborative approach allows us to focus on major routes while sharing responsibilities for lower traffic roads to ensure that we meet the diverse needs of Manitobans.

Our government is investing in projects to upgrade existing infrastructure across the province from roads, bridges, ferries, northern airports to water infrastructure, these investments support our broader goal of fostering economic development and maintaining a better life for Manitobans.

Flood protection is the top priority, and Manitoba has a robust network of flood mitigation infrastructure to protect communities from potential flood impacts. This network includes over 1,000 culverts, 900 agriculture drainage structures, ring dikes, river diversions and critical structures like the Shellmouth Dam, Portage Diversion and Red River Floodway.

One large-scale project within our flood protection strategy is the proposed Lake Manitoba-Lake St. Martin outlet channels project. The Manitoba government has been working hard to build a collaborative relationship with the potentially affected Indigenous

communities and groups involved in the project. The department will continue taking the time needed to address concerns raised and move forward together with flood mitigation for this area of the province.

Looking further ahead, we're developing a long-term vision for Manitoba's transportation network. Our 2024 multi-year infrastructure investment strategy document, set to be released soon, will outline our approach to infrastructure renewal, economic development, climate resilience and innovation. It will also guide us in considering future projects that build on existing initiatives.

* (14:50)

This vision supports Manitobans' connections to national and international markets, ensuring our infrastructure can drive economic growth for decades to come. The multi-year infrastructure strategy will provide valuable information to our blue-ribbon panel, which is working diligently to develop a vision for transportation routes to better support economic development.

Our infrastructure improvement plans go beyond any single community. My department is working on improving the safety and efficiency of Manitoba's most critical trade and travel corridors, which includes a design study for the twinning of the Trans-Canada Highway to the Ontario boundary.

Resilience is also a cornerstone of our strategy. Through the mitigation and preparedness program, we support municipalities to proactively reduce risks and enhance the resiliency to future weather events or emergencies. My department is focused on improving service delivery. We continue to review the department's management practices to best meet our winter levels of service. This includes strengthening our maintenance program and actively hiring staff to support its delivery.

This year, we're continuing to provide funding and support to the Arctic Gateway Group for the Hudson Bay Railway and the Port of Churchill through the current \$30-million funding agreement as part of a larger \$60-million partnership with Canada. This investment will help improve both the Hudson Bay Railway and the Port of Churchill, making the gateway system more reliable and attractive for investment.

We're also supporting CentrePort Canada with a \$250,000 grant and have provided 665 acres of Crown land to facilitate its ongoing development as a unique and vital inland port.

As minister, I have been determined to change the relationship between First Nations and government, which historically has been challenging. For over 25 years, governments have made commitments to build an airport for Wasagamack First Nation, but our government is determined to move this project forward. We have been collaborating with the community on a multi-phase project to build an airport and an all-season road, which will improve access to services and enhance opportunities for people living in the area.

My department is focused on addressing the deficit created by previous years of neglect with infrastructure renewal, increasing our staffing complement, modernizing project design for improved safety and climate resiliency to take this department into the future.

Finally, I would be remiss if I did not reference the drastic cuts that were implemented by the previous government. The department endured a significant and painful reorganization based on advice from an outside consultant. The results were felt deeply. Regional maintenance yards were closed, equipment was sold off and FTEs were eliminated. The average vacancy rate was over 30 per cent in this department when I became minister, and it was far higher in the North.

We have started the heavy lifting of rebuilding the department, deepening our focus on road safety with new initiatives and reducing vacancy rates, which will have a positive effect on service to Manitobans. I have met with so many staff in our department, and I deeply value the work that they do every day.

I want there to be a positive work culture in the department of MTI. We need to attract new talent, while also retaining the significant talent that we already have. We're dedicated to ensuring that Manitoba roads are safer, our infrastructure is sustainable and our investments provide long-term value for all Manitobans.

Thank you, Chair.

The Chairperson: We thank the minister for those comments.

Does the critic of the official opposition have an opening statement?

Mr. Konrad Narth (La Vérendrye): My opening statements are going to be concise, as I'd like to move on to asking questions of the minister.

The role as minister for Infrastructure, I recognize as one of the most important roles in fulfilling the role

of government in Manitoba. Nothing in our province is able to move and progress and thrive without efficient and effective infrastructure. That includes the building and expansion of our infrastructure, as well as it does the maintenance.

I'd like to thank the minister for being here today to answer the questions. I'd like to thank her department staff for also being here to assist in this process.

And, yes, I welcome the conversations that we have today.

The Chairperson: We thank the member.

Under the Manitoba practice, debate on the minister's salary is the last considered item for a department in the Committee of Supply. Accordingly, we shall now defer consideration of line item 15.1.(a) contained in resolution 15.1.

At this time, we invite the minister's staff to join us at the table, and we ask the minister to introduce the staff in attendance.

MLA Naylor: I'm absolutely delighted to introduce the senior leaders in the Transportation and Infrastructure Department, whose expertise and commitment are essential in this work. And these folks are a delight to work with every day.

So I would like to begin with my deputy, Ryan Klos. I will—across the table is also Ciara Shattuck, the director of ministerial affairs. And then around the table we have Amber Zhang, the executive financial officer and assistant deputy minister of Finance and Administration.

You didn't sit in the same order as my paper, but I'm going to figure it out.

We have Blair McTavish, the assistant deputy minister of transportation and operations. Ed Policarpio, assistant deputy minister of Corporate Services division. Cynthia Ritchie, assistant deputy minister of Infrastructure, Capital Projects. Russ Andrushuk, assistant deputy minister of Engineering and Technical Services. And Christine Stevens, assistant deputy minister of Emergency Management.

The Chairperson: Thank you.

Accordingly to our rule 78(16), during the consideration of the departmental Estimates, questioning for each department shall proceed in a global manner with questions put separately on all resolutions once the official opposition critic indicates that questioning has concluded.

The floor is now open for questions.

Mr. Narth: So I'm going to try to keep the questions structured and start with just getting a better understanding of the organizational structure.

So my first question being, if the minister would please confirm that the organizational chart in the supplemental Estimates is complete and also up to date.

MLA Naylor: I'll get the hang of this.

Yes, there are a couple of changes because at the time this was published we had two acting ADMs. So under Corporate Services division, where it has the acting ADM Erin Russell, that role is now filled as I introduced; Ed Policarpio is now the ADM of Corporate Services. And then Emergency Management, we had an acting ADM—was Barbara Crumb, but we now have our permanent ADM which is Christine Stevens.

The Chairperson: Thank you, Minister.

Mr. Narth: What political staff work out of the minister's office or within their purview?

* (15:00)

MLA Naylor: There are three political staff. I have a special assistant, a director of ministerial affairs and an executive assistant.

But just to clarify, I—because I have two portfolios, those three political staff serve two departments—myself and two departments as the role of two different ministers.

Mr. Narth: Can you maybe once again clarify which ones those are again that were shared? Just—I didn't catch that. Just to get the structure.

MLA Naylor: All three of the political staff who work for me—the special assistant, the director of ministerial affairs and my executive assistant—serve me as minister, but I serve two different departments so they—all of them are also serving two different departments.

Mr. Narth: Could the minister provide a breakdown of salaries as well as what the pay scale is on those?

MLA Naylor: So I believe the question was for the salary ranges for each of those positions. So the executive assistant, the salary range is \$62,167 up to \$74,253; the special assistant range is from \$79,530 up to \$97,421; and the director of ministerial affairs has a salary range of \$130,198 up to \$156,562.

Mr. Narth: Would the minister be able to further break that down onto which level of the pay scale each of those employees are on?

MLA Naylor: Yes, I've got that information here. This all comes from public-facing documents, OICs that are available online, but we were able to look up that information.

So, the—my executive assistant's current salary is \$64,021; my current special assistant salary is \$84,334; and my director of ministerial affairs is \$130,198.

* (15:10)

Mr. Narth: Great. How many, if any, are on the executive salary schedule?

MLA Naylor: Yes, the director of ministerial affairs—again, he serves two departments—is the only position that is at the executive level.

Mr. Narth: In September, the minister's office reported additional technical officer positions in orders-in-council.

Can the minister break down exactly how many technical officers work for her office in the non-represented and executive salary schedules as well as each individual role—each individual's role, I should say.

MLA Naylor: Just to clarify, this September? Like, that just went by?

An Honourable Member: That's right.

MLA Naylor: Okay.

So these two roles are staff that don't work in the minister's office but support the minister and the department. One of those positions is as a tour officer and one is an assistant press secretary.

Mr. Narth: Thank you for providing those answers.

Does the minister have any staff who are on secondment, and if so, would the minister please disclose the salary and benefits that are associated with that and any potential severance terms, and if so, where are they seconded?

MLA Naylor: Just to clarify the question. You've been—the critic's been asking questions about political staff. Is this question pertaining to political staff or to the entire department of hundreds of staff within MTI?

Mr. Narth: More than likely political staff. It would be regarding it—I would assume be unlikely that it

would be maintenance staff that would be seconded to another department or elsewhere.

* (15:20)

MLA Naylor: Yes, there is none.

Mr. Narth: The title of director of ministerial affairs is new. Can the minister explain the duties of this, as well as other staff in their office?

MLA Naylor: Yes, so I believe the question is the role and the responsibilities of the director of ministerial affairs. So I understand this is perhaps a new title, but similar types of support that previous political staff have offered ministers in the past, but maybe at a little more of an elevated position.

There is—I'm able to delegate some of my work to my DOMA, as we call them. She has signing authority on certain things; acts as a political adviser; manages stakeholder relations; certainly attends every meeting that I'm in; has a role in speechwriting, editing documents.

There's also an important role working across departments, so working with DOMAs in other departments when we—you know, a lot of the policy work; or things that we're doing in government may involve two or three or four other departments.

And so while there's a cross-department that happens at the public servants' level, there's also this important work of DOMAs across departments to co-ordinate our efforts, and that also includes working with—she's management—with our policy department.

One of the roles is renewing Treasury Board and Cabinet submissions; working with the ABC committees; and—yes, I think—oh, and also managing the other political staff in the office.

Mr. Narth: Thank you for that response—thorough explanation.

How do these political staff fit into the organization structure that we had discussed earlier and have been discussing?

MLA Naylor: Sorry, are you asking how they fit in with the org chart of political servants? Is that—I'm not sure what you mean when you say what was discussed earlier.

Mr. Narth: Yes, we had discussed the structure, the organizational structure and the different political staff.

How do these that we had just mentioned, the new political staff, how do they fit into that organizational structure?

I guess, on the role of director of ministerial affairs, you had explained that, but the new positions that we had outlined, where exactly would they respond to in the—or, who would they be accountable to in the organizational chart?

The Chairperson: Before that—I acknowledge the next member, a reminder to everyone during Estimates to put questions and answers directed through the Chair, not directly to one another.

MLA Naylor: Thank you, through the Chair.

The—so, political staff under our government, and I'm going to hazard a guess, under every previous government, are not a part of the political—or, of the organizational structure of public servants. That the—you know, those are non-political roles, the operation of government.

Political staff are, I mean, directly accountable to me, but also directly accountable to our whole senior government. They're accountable to ministers and to Cabinet for the political part of this project, that, you know, of running government. So that's the accountability. They do not oversee anybody who is a public servant and they are not accountable to the public servants.

Mr. Narth: Thank you to the minister for that response. So we've outlined that the new positions announced in September for technical officer as well as the new position of director of ministerial affairs has been added.

Could you clarify to us how many net-new staff members—political staff members are in your office directly reporting to you—or, directly reporting to the minister? Sorry.

MLA Naylor: I guess it's safe to say that net-new, all political staff are new since our party came into government.

You know, when I was sworn in October 18, 2023, and became minister in this department, we began to staff up our political staff as any previous government would have done. So all of those roles are new as of that time, for the purpose of serving this government.

* (15:30)

Mr. Narth: Would the minister know how many additional staff members have been added from the previous government within her department?

MLA Naylor: Yes, I can honestly say I have no idea how many political staff that either of my departments previously had.

It's—but it's a different government with different responsibilities and we're staffing up for the needs of our government, and I will remind—through the Chair, I will remind the critic that my department's actually pretty understaffed given that I am managing two very large government departments with kind of skeletal political staff, I would say.

Mr. Narth: Would the minister, then—and thank you for—I'd like to thank the minister for leading into my next question.

That being said, are there any vacancies or is the minister anticipating adding any new positions? Or would she consider that the department is fully staffed?

MLA Naylor: Through the Chair, I feel like the critic might be confusing department with political staff. There's no relationship between the two, so in terms of political staff, there's no such thing really as a vacancy. There is—we staff as needed for what a minister requires to support them in their work, and I'm not in the habit of predicting the future.

Mr. Narth: I appreciate that, honourable Chair. I wasn't confused as the difference between the organization itself and the department and political staff; I may not have outlined it clear enough.

Right now, I'm just wanting to get an understanding of the political organization's structure. So specifically speaking to political staff in office 203, maybe if I was to get more specific, directly reporting to political capacity, does the minister feel that there is a vacancy?

Obviously, the minister has said that vacancies don't exist. Is there need for expanding positions within the department at a political capacity in time to come?

MLA Naylor: I am very well served by the political staff that work in room 203 at this time.

Mr. Narth: I promise that I will move on from the political staff. I'm just wanting to build a picture of what the organizational structure looks like.

So I'd like to ask the minister: Are there any additional political staff that work with the minister that may also serve roles outside of not only the department, but further within the government, such as communication staff or issues management and other

support roles—or are those roles now fulfilled by the new technical officers?

MLA Naylor: So there are a number of political staff that work to support the Executive Council and that, in terms of working with communications department, I'm pretty sure my DOMA's in hourly contact with communications. All of my staff would be frequently working with staff in other departments and, I mean, so far we've spent quite a lot of time on the political staff structure, so I am going to take the opportunity to thank my staff.

I have incredible folks working in my department and who've been learning this file along with me over the last year, who work long, long hours, lots of weekends, lots of evenings and spend an enormous amount of time supporting the work of not only the MTI Department but also CPGS Department supporting my work as minister in those departments. So I am glad for the opportunity to express my appreciation to the incredible political staff that we have.

Mr. Narth: That flows quite nicely because, yes, I've gotten the answers that I've wanted to on political staff and realize that they do incredible work for the department, so this was just to build an understanding of the structure of the organization.

So moving on to the department itself and staff within the department, we realize that it's—you know, it's the front-line workers in infrastructure, whether it be new maintenance or engineering that fulfill the important roles of building and maintaining the highways and the greater infrastructure landscape of our province.

So I'd like to ask the minister, honourable Chair, what the vacancy rate is across the department currently.

* (15:40)

MLA Naylor: Yes, the topic of vacancy rates is one that's very close to my heart.

Certainly, coming into this role, it was in my mandate letter to build the infrastructure we need to grow our economy, but also to start to re-staff departments. You know, we know the vacancy rates were very low across all of government, but MTI was especially dramatic.

I can report that as of September 30, we—MTI was reporting 458.20 vacant FTEs, or 25.1 per cent of the approved 1,825.30 full-time equivalents. But this is also historically low over the last number of years and under the previous government.

So, you know, in March 2022, the department had a 36.5 per cent vacancy rate, and at the time that I became minister, we had a 30 per cent vacancy rate in this department, and it was much higher in certain regions of the province. So that was an average across the province.

And, you know, that vacancy rate was attributed to a lot of decisions made by the previous government not to fill positions, to not—you know, to cut the Infrastructure budget for many years and as well as the maintenance budget. And so some of those—but the—what I wanted to say there is that the—you know, it's been a priority of our government in general to build up the public service. We understand the very valuable role of public servants and, you know, there was—it wasn't just about the cuts of the previous government, it's also the kinds of things that staff reported about how they were treated and not respected working for government.

So it's been delightful for me to start to build relationships with staff across the province, to visit different MTI yards, to hear some of the relief that these positions are finally being filled so that people can feel like they can actually do the work of government, do what they're expected to do.

And so, yes, I'm very pleased to report that we've managed to move from 30 per cent vacancy rate last—in March of 2023 down to a 25.1 per cent vacancy rate. So we've covered a lot of ground in the past year and I really look forward to continuing to focus on this issue in the year to come.

Mr. Narth: As I look through the budget, it looks as though there are cuts to the budget for staffing, so I'd like to ask the minister: Is the vacancy rate impacted by the cuts to staffing budgets throughout her department, or is the minister utilizing vacancy management to accomplish that?

MLA Naylor: Yes, there have been no salary cuts in the department. There are salary adjustments made across departments. This has to do with people being in different classifications.

We've had a number of retirements in the past year, so often when folks are retiring they have been in the field a long time, they may be at the very highest level of their pay scale, but we may be replacing that person with someone coming in at a first or second—you know, third year—third level of the pay scale. So it's just salary adjustments across the department to reflect those classification changes, but there are no cuts to positions.

Mr. Narth: So, my question would be, as we see in the budget, it looks like a decrease in the budget line for staff, so—not a cut in salaries or potentially positions, but there is in fact a cut to the budget for staffing.

Is that correct?

* (15:50)

MLA Naylor: I believe I've already answered that question. This is overall—it reflects—it's salary adjustments that reflect the overall staffing levels and classifications of staff. *[interjection]*

The Chairperson: Sorry, didn't say your name.

The honourable member for La Vérendrye.

Mr. Narth: So, honourable Chair, just to clarify again, I'd like the minister to clarify that the budget for staffing from the previous fiscal year to the current fiscal year has been decreased.

MLA Naylor: Yes, so I'd acknowledge that there was a decrease in that budget line. But to confirm again, the—what we had budget for reflects what we need for the salaries for the staff in our department. We are not cutting any positions.

This accounts—salary adjustments and changing classifications accounts for that decrease, and we are funding what is required for a staffing complement.

Mr. Narth: Honourable Chair, when we look at engineering and technical services, so I think it's section 15.5 in the Supplement to the Estimates of Expenditure for the Manitoba Transportation and Infrastructure budget, there are cuts across the board.

Is the minister using vacancy management to keep her budget restrained, and how would the minister build those important staff positions with a reduced budget?

MLA Naylor: You know, in looking at the budget, it's very clear that the total number of FTEs in 2023-24 is the same as in 2024-25. So I've already explained that there is a difference in the—what's being listed as the cost of those FTEs, which can be explained by salary adjustments with people in different classifications; as people have retired, new people have come into roles.

The engineering services and environmental services of this department is critical to the functioning of our department, so in no way are we making any kinds of reductions in this area of service.

Mr. Narth: Yes, the highway engineering services is of vital importance to our province. Those highways

are the links that connect communities and thousands of Manitobans and the services that they rely on.

Is cutting corners and understaffing those positions the responsible answer, and does the budget allow to staff those positions to a no-vacancy rate?

MLA Naylor: Well, I think the opposition member and I agree that this is a critical service of government. It is why we actually have increased our budget for highway engineering services, we've increased our budget for water engineering and operations and we have been actively recruiting.

As I previously mentioned in another—in an earlier question, this department was at a 30 per cent vacancy rate—30 per cent—when I came into this role. Unbelievable to me.

* (16:00)

I have no idea how folks survived within that department trying to get the work done, trying to keep Manitobans safe across the province with such an extreme vacancy rate. And to know that at one point it was at 36 per cent vacancy rate is very alarming.

I am thrilled with the fact that we have managed to reduce the vacancy rate from 30 to 25 per cent in the last year. In a department this size, that indicates a significant amount of recruitment effort and hiring effort on—that the department has done on behalf of government.

And so there's no concerns about our government not taking these roles seriously. We will—we are still actively recruiting. It is certainly my goal to continue to close that gap on our vacancy rate. And I'm excited to be able—I hope to be excited to be able to report an even lower vacancy rate at this time next year.

Mr. Narth: Thank you to the minister for that response.

We have outlined that much of the budget is impacted by losing many senior and experienced staff to the point that it's noticeable on budget allocation.

Can the minister explain what that impact has been and the challenges—how the challenges of that will be answered moving forward through the next fiscal year?

MLA Naylor: It's fascinating to me how the opposition is so interested in the vacancy rate now, given that in the department it's at the lowest level that it's been in a very, very long time.

You know, under the previous government there was a substantial amount of outsourcing. There was

some very painful and frustrating reorganizations that happened. There were staff that quit out of sheer frustration or disappointment in how things were being operated. An enormous amount of damage was done in the past, and, you know, I've had the opportunity to hear about that. We observed a lot of that when I was in opposition.

Our—my mandate is to rebuild this department, and I'm very focused on that. I'm not sure if the member opposite is—understands the scope of a department with over 1,800 FTEs and with, you know, 1,400 people currently working in those roles.

So the discrepancy in, you know, what he's seeing as a concern in terms of reduced salary and salary adjustments and retirements and new people coming into roles, with a scope of 1,800 positions, this isn't a concern. It in—is, in fact, really, our vacancy rate is an area of celebration at this point.

And I'm so impressed with the work that the department has done over the last year to be very creative and work very hard to fill the vacancies that were created previously.

Mr. Narth: As I can appreciate those comments, honourable Chair, I'm sure I don't understand the scope of running a department quite that size, but I've spent my entire adult life in municipal government with years of meeting with the various departments and rallying and supporting for maintenance of Manitoba highways and infrastructure throughout my corner of the province in rural Manitoba. I've also spent numerous years in and out of different departments of the government of Manitoba, through different governments. So I'm sure that I may not have the same capabilities of the minister at this point because of the minister fulfilling that role for now a year.

But I think it's still important to paint the picture, and that's what the committee process is for. Manitobans are entitled to this process, to paint a picture of the situation of each department. So this, if it's a celebratory time, honourable Chair, I think the minister's able to take the opportunity to celebrate during this committee time, but in the meantime, or as a result of that celebration, answer the questions that Manitobans are wanting to hear.

With that being said, my next question would still continue on vacancy and hopefully the minister will find this an opportunity to celebrate.

My question would be: Reducing the vacancy rate by 5 per cent, 25 per cent vacancy currently, what is the goal for Manitoba Infrastructure in the next three

years? Is there a projection on the vacancy rate and is there a desire and a need for additional positions to the current slate of staff?

MLA Naylor: Again, it is in my mandate to staff up this department. It is absolutely my intention that we will continue to fill our department with the best and the brightest people who can step into these roles. But, you know, certainly we have a lot of very, very technical and skilled roles; those are credentials that don't grow on trees, so it can take some time to put people into the positions that we want.

* (16:10)

We have done—the department has done a very impressive recruitment strategy to move the vacancy rate from the original 36 per cent under the previous government, then 30 per cent a year ago to where it is now at 25 per cent. And I'm excited for them to continue with that pace to fill the positions the best that we can.

Mr. Narth: Just to clarify, the height of the vacancy rate for the department of Infrastructure was at 36 per cent. When the current minister had assumed her role, it was at 30, and now we are at a 25 per cent vacancy rate.

MLA Naylor: I didn't hear [*inaudible*] but if the member's wanting me to repeat again that at the height of the vacancies in the department under the previous government, it was just over 36 per cent. At the time I came into government, it was at 30 per cent and it is now at 25 per cent.

Mr. Narth: Honourable Chair, that's exactly what I was asking.

Going to move on from vacancies and specific staffing within departments as I'd like to move into capital projects, capital investment, first at a higher level and then break down into specific infrastructure projects throughout the province.

But as we do that, I will be going back to get a clearer picture of the departments that are responsible—or departments within Infrastructure that are responsible for either overseeing, supervising, carrying out the technical work or basic maintenance. I will ask some more of those staffing-related questions.

But I'd like to move on to some fairly significant capital projects, some of the most important that were politicized over the years and are also very important to the province of Manitoba.

So the first one is, if I'd be able to ask the minister, honourable Chair, to update us on the status of the Lake St. Martin channel project.

MLA Naylor: I'm really happy to get to speak to this issue. Certainly the Lake St. Martin—the channel project, I'll say, has been something that's been talked about and on the books for many years under previous governments.

And you know, so coming into this role, it was very clear that the appropriate work had not been done with First Nations regarding their contributions to this project, their involvement in this project. Over and over again, I've had meetings with First Nations who did not want to see this project proceed and certainly those meetings were also happening at other—in other departments.

And you know, as a listening government, that has been our—you know, a priority—a political priority of our government to listen and hear and to rebuild the relationships that were so badly damaged under the previous government with many, many First Nations across the province.

And so where we're at right now with this project is there are, you know—what is not an option is flood mitigation. Flood mitigation needs to happen in this region of the province. Whether that looks exactly like the old project that was visioned or whether that looks like something else, we will move forward on flood mitigation.

But we're doing this in the right way. And so I'm sure the member is aware that the federal government has—had publicly stated that there were adverse environmental effects of this project—not specifically on the environment, per se, but on the Indigenous use of land. So there were very strong cautions from the federal government. They had not yet passed, and may not have passed, the environmental—like, the legislation that would be required for us to proceed with this project.

And so at this time, for an update, we have asked the federal government to put a pause on the environmental assessment because we want to address those problems first.

Ultimately, we want the federal government to be able to give us a go-ahead on the environmental assessment. They may not have, and we think that the concerns that they raised about the impact on Indigenous people was a substantial priority. And so we've asked them to pause. So that is not currently being, you know,

looked at or considered at the Cabinet table of the federal government.

* (16:20)

And at the same time, we have been able to really begin some collaborative work with First Nations. We're having conversations, of course, with the Manitoba Métis Federation as well as the local municipality nearby.

And, you know, you likely read—you may have read in the media, because it was spoken about by some of the First Nations involved, about this collaborative approach, about the fact that we've discussed a memorandum of understanding to work with some of the First Nations. And so, while that is still in the works, I feel like I can speak about it because IRTC spoke about it themselves to the media.

So we're in that process right now. I mean, it's such an advantage that we have some incredible Indigenous folks who are very experienced in this collaborative way of working and in a reconciliation approach who work at the most senior levels of our political staff at government.

And so, they're helping us work on this—these relationships, helping with the language around a memorandum of understanding, and I'm not sure if the member knows that, you know, there are over—there are 40 Indigenous groups—First Nations groups impacted by this flood mitigation project.

And so there's a lot of work still to be done.

Mr. Narth: Would the minister be able to tell us today if there is a plan in place currently to address flood mitigation for Lake Manitoba and Lake St. Martin, if we were to encounter in the next year or two, or in the near future between now and when that can be developed, what that mitigation plan would be if we were to experience a 2011 flood event.

MLA Naylor: Yes, thank you for that question.

The—so, we do certainly have contingency plans in place. You know, some of the things that have—there's things that have changed since the initial plans around—well, since the flood of 2011. There is—you know, we're always monitoring. I get regular—weekly forecasts.

But some of the changes are—there is a lower risk, there's been some smaller flood mitigation projects in the area, some folks most at risk have—don't live there, in the same place where they lived before. And so—and in addition, there are contingency plans of how to

deal with a flooding situation if we—you know, and we can probably predict what would come based on the monitoring that takes place.

But it's important to understand that it is, in fact, the failing of the previous government why we are at this point, that we literally had to start again with building relationships with the affected nations. Hearing from them, working together, understanding these nations as governments of their own and rights holders to hunting and fishing in the area, nations who are very concerned about burial grounds and other factors that will be impacted by any kind of massive construction project done in that area.

Even if the federal government had approved the project today, and even if there was support by and from surrounding communities, it would be at least a four-year construction project. So at this point, we're working with a contingency plan within the department and we are working on resetting those relationships so we can go forward in the future.

Mr. Narth: I just wanted to ask the minister if she was aware that under the previous NDP government, the Selinger government, there was an emergency channel which would have gone through these same properties, same lands in the past. Whether that is recognized, that a study was done or not done at that time. And further to that, would the minister please be able to elaborate on her commitment to flood mitigation?

Budget 2024 sees your department cutting that budget for flood mitigation and water resources by over \$100 million less than the—cutting it by over \$100 million from the 2023 budget. So aside from monitoring—which I think as the minister had mentioned in her opening comments that weather is becoming more and more unpredictable—so I'm not sure that Manitobans are comfortable with monitoring being the solution to flood mitigation in our province.

So if the minister could please elaborate on some of the commitments to immediate flood mitigation.

* (16:30)

MLA Naylor: So just back to the contingency plans, I want to start there.

The work being done in the department on—in that area of flood mitigation is exactly the same as was being done under the previous government. We're not doing less of that work. We're—the work, that is a very critical part of the department. Obviously, we're in Manitoba, we built our lives on a flood plain. So planning for floods—it's true—planning for floods and

monitoring weather, monitoring water, monitoring everything that could impact flooding in the province is very important.

I'm glad to know it was important under the previous government. We have made no changes to how that work happens in the year that I've been a minister in this department.

I will add that we are ready for emergencies and continue to, you know, to focus, to protect Manitobans. But the question about the \$100 million that is not in Budget 2024, this is a great opportunity for me to explain the importance of transparency to the Manitoba taxpayers.

So the previous government carried forward \$100 million year after year for four or five years. That was money that was in the budget to start work on the channels project. That work didn't happen. That \$100 million was carried forward year after year.

We know that we will not start building the channels project this year because everything that I outlined: the federal government was not prepared to issue an environmental license at this time, and the First Nations affected by these decisions were not prepared to support this project as it stands.

So there is still money in the budget for—there's—for—in consultation, for communication and collaboration to work with First Nations towards a solution. But we did not budget, in Budget 2024, to build the channels, which is why that \$100 million is not there in this budget year.

So this is just about being transparent and honest and not carrying forward money in the budget with no intention of spending it like the previous government did.

Mr. Narth: I would just, honourable Chair, like to say that, as someone who had served many years, 12 years on a municipal council in a region that was susceptible to flooding, I saw first-hand the devastation that that brings.

It surprises me and disappoints me as well, and I would think that it disappoints many Manitobans who have seen the effects of and devastation that floods have on their communities, those both being numerous Indigenous communities as well as communities across our entire province, especially in the flood-zone plain where the most dense population exists.

So it's disappointing seeing that the minister calls preparedness for a large-scale project of \$100 million not being forthcoming with the intentions of the

budget. I would think that many Manitobans as myself had viewed that as forward, progressive and responsible planning to safeguard investments, infrastructure and assets of individuals that have worked hard for those across our province. It's a tremendous expense to the taxpayers of Manitoba and a tremendous expense to the individuals who need to carry the burden of the aftermath of a flood.

With \$57 million cut from the highway infrastructure budget, how does the minister plan to fulfill the current five-year capital investment plan?

* (16:40)

MLA Naylor: So our highway budget is very, very important. Obviously, some of the most important—well, it's the most important infrastructure in the province, in my opinion—and it is what gets people health care, it's what gets people other services that they need, it gets people to have the opportunity to visit family and friends and it is the economic driver for our province. So clearly, our highway budget is critically important.

What the member refers to as a cut is—he's referring to a carry-over amount from a previous budget year. It seemed like the previous government was in the habit of carrying over their unspent amounts from year to year and, you know, looking back on the last few years, there was, you know, \$347 million spent on the highway budget, then 336, 322, 397.

And in the final year before the election, about \$414 million spent by the previous government; so always setting up a carry-over, never spending—first of all, never budgeting enough for what was required and then always creating a carry-over into the next budget.

Our government has decided that's not responsible. It's not a responsible way to manage the budget. It's not a responsible method of accounting for the—what we're doing.

Again, back to transparency: so we have budgeted \$500 million and we will spend \$500 million. And so that we're really a net gain, a substantial net gain, over the amount of money spent on highway infrastructure by the previous government in most of the years that they were in government.

Mr. Narth: Honourable Chair, could the minister please tell us: How many of the 2024 infrastructure capital projects that were outlined in the current five-year capital investment plan have been undertaken?

And then, second part to that: How many are going to be completed in the 2024 construction season?

MLA Naylor: So there's a lot in that question in terms of wanting to hear a list of projects that are being worked on and projects that are being completed.

I guess I will lead by saying there's over 1,000 projects right now that are being—that are at some point of the process, whether they are in the project planning phase, you know, whether it's land acquisition, whether we are designing, tendering, construction, post-construction cleanup.

So I don't think we have four and a—in four and a half minutes that I can read out those 1,000 projects, but if that is important to the member, we can certainly come back another day and he can keep asking the question so that I can—oh, yes, he can also just look on the website, because it is outlined there.

In terms of the projects going forward, we are continuing to complete projects across the province, to start new projects. We—it's been very exciting appointing our blue-ribbon panel to give us advice from all regions of the province on, you know, regional priorities, municipal priorities, northern priorities, First Nations priorities, to bring those together and look at that through an economic development lens, a regional development lens. So that group has been giving good advice to myself and will continue to do so as we move forward with our capital plan.

And, I don't know—so again, I will, if the minister wants me to begin to—or, sorry, if the MLA wants me to begin to read a list of 1,000 projects, I'm prepared to start. But I'll put that question back to the critic.

Mr. Narth: We can circle back to that. I'm just wanting to get a picture of where we're at with infrastructure investment in this year and then moving forward through the next term. So in relation to the five-year plan.

So my question to the minister would be: Have any of the outlined in the current five-year—any of the outlined projects in the five-year plan been completely taken off the list of priorities for this government that previously would have been on the five-year capital investment plan?

* (16:50)

MLA Naylor: So I believe the question was regarding the previous government's five-year capital plan. And so I am excited to let folks know that our new capital plan will be launched later this fall, and I believe this was, you know, probably the intention of the previous government, too, that this is obviously a living document that will change and evolve as priorities change and evolve. So that's the richness of our blue-ribbon

panel who can provide advice and recommendations based on changing needs across the province.

We had a really good example in Brandon this year. I know the previous government had planned to work on—not highway—18th Street in Brandon, but that would've been a couple of years down the line. However, that road did deteriorate faster than expected and so the previous government couldn't have known that, but it did deteriorate faster than expected, and we were able to work with the municipality for them to complete some work that had to happen under the road. So working together with the municipality, we made a decision to move up that project. So that was a project committed to in the previous five-year plan that moved up and took some priority.

So you will see those kinds of changes as we go through, certainly, with weather conditions, deterioration happening at different places, at different times, new economic opportunities for the province. Sometimes there has to be a priority if there's going to be a new mining development or some other business coming into the province.

And so there's lots of reasons that there may be adjustments in timelines or that one priority—one project may be bumped up and another project stepped back a little bit in the queue. But there are no substantive changes other than looking at what's new because it's a new five-year plan so it looks ahead an additional year than the previous plan.

Mr. Narth: Could the minister tell us what the dollar value is of the awarded infrastructure projects for the 2024 fiscal year?

MLA Naylor: So I believe the question was how many tenders have been awarded. I think I want to stay focused on our budget of \$500 million, which is what we plan to spend in this budget year. And that is our budget; that is what we're going to spend.

And back to the previous question, I'll just add, I don't—I had mentioned that all the projects are online. So if the member would like us to provide him with that link and the information, we can do that. It is—every single project that is under way can be—and it's good for all Manitobans to know this—you can search by highway name, by community and a number of other factors. It's a great little search engine to see exactly the status of any projects that we're working on through this department.

So whether something's in the design phase or if the design is planned for next year, if we're working on land acquisition, if there's going to be shovels in

the ground, what—the—it's such a great feature on the MTI website.

And so, you know, I think this is really important information for Manitobans who often are reaching out to find out the status of projects. It's completely transparent and available to them and to you—and I mean, and to the MLA across the aisle, Chair.

Mr. Narth: So, just a bit of a clarification. My question—my original question, which the minister had advised to go online, was to outline the projects, the infrastructure capital projects, that are currently undertaken in comparison to those in the five-year capital investment plan for this year.

If the minister could list how many of those projects were undertaken and how many weren't that are in the current plan. And I realize that it may take time, so I was, honourable Chair, wondering if the minister would take that under advisement and get those numbers to me at a later time.

* (17:00)

The Chairperson: The hour being 5 o' clock, committee rise.

ROOM 255

EDUCATION AND EARLY CHILDHOOD LEARNING

* (14:50)

The Chairperson (Robert Loiselle): Will the Committee of Supply please come to order. This section of the Committee of Supply will now resume consideration of the Estimates for the Department of Education and Early Childhood Learning.

Questioning for this department will proceed in a global manner.

The floor is now open for questions.

Mr. Grant Jackson (Spruce Woods): I just want to welcome the minister to her new role as acting Minister of Education and Early Childhood Learning. I had a couple of days—a day or a couple of days back in the spring with the minister, the member for Transcona (MLA Altomare), and so looking forward to getting into the details with the acting minister.

Just—somebody said to me that I should start off nicely, so I will ask if the new acting minister could

introduce the staff that she's brought her—with her today and what their titles and responsibilities are.

* (15:00)

Hon. Tracy Schmidt (Acting Minister of Education and Early Childhood Learning): Thank you very much to the member for Spruce Woods for that kind welcome. I appreciate it, and I hope that we can continue in that spirit for the rest of the afternoon.

Because I want to make sure I've—get everyone's names right, I know everyone on a first name basis, but because it's been about a week, I'm going to ask if it's okay for our deputy minister, Brian O'Leary—okay, never mind, I've got—so today, we have with us our deputy minister, Brian O'Leary.

We have our acting executive financial officer—he is not acting; he is the executive financial officer for the department, Andrew Henry. We have the ADM for Early Learning and Child Care, Sarah Whiteford—Whitford [*phonetic*]? Whiteford. We have the ADM for System Performance and Accountability, Mona Pandey. And we have the director of ministerial affairs for the department, Rylan Ramarace? Ramarace [*phonetic*].

I appreciate the opportunity to introduce them.

And I just want to take a moment also to send—extend my heartfelt sincerest wishes to the Minister of Education and Early Childhood Learning (MLA Altomare), the MLA for Transcona, who is on a temporary medical leave of absence from this role.

The MLA for Transcona, the Minister of Education, has dedicated his entire career to the students and staff and children that are educated and cared for in our province. I know that our team is incredibly proud of the work that the minister has done so far in this portfolio, as we come up on the one year anniversary—or, I think we just passed the one-year anniversary of our government.

So I just wanted to take a moment to reflect on the work he's done; not just as Minister of Education and Early Childhood Learning (MLA Altomare), but also as a teacher and a principal and a colleague to so many students and children and teachers and educators across this province.

I run into folks in the community all the time. Minister Altomare spent his career as an educator in the River East-Transcona School Division, which is the school division in which my constituency resides.

So I'm very lucky to have met so many of Minister Altomare's colleagues and students, people in our province who he has impacted during his time as a teacher and as a colleague and as a principal.

When I'm out door knocking in the great constituency of Rossmere, I—it's rarely a day that goes by where someone doesn't mention, oh, you work with the MLA for Transcona, you work with the Minister of Education, and they proceed to tell me a heartfelt story about how he has touched their lives and has contributed to their education or the spirit of collaboration in their workplace.

So I just want to speak to the Minister of Education, the MLA for Transcona, and tell him how proud I am to be able to support his work for a limited amount of time, that our whole team has his back and that we wish him all the best. We miss him greatly, and we can't wait to see him return to the Legislature and continue on in the incredible work that he's done as—in his role as Minister of Education.

Thank you.

The Chairperson: Before we continue, and just as a reminder, we'll be referring to everyone with their titles, so either minister, honourable minister or member for. And we'll refrain from mentioning last names, and I apologize if I already did.

Mr. Jackson: Certainly echo the minister's comments with respect to the member for Transcona (MLA Altomare). He shared with me on his last day here the current circumstances that he is in and the fact that he would be undergoing a personal health journey, and we certainly wish him well in that and hope that our colleagues from the other side will keep us updated as to his condition and progress, and—yes, certainly, we wish him well.

He did—after he shared with me his condition, he did tell me that I had a job to do and to continue doing that job in spite of his absence, and so that's what we will continue to do here today.

So my question to the minister is—and I understand this is becoming a popular topic today—but her government committed to new legislation regarding P3s.

And so I'd like to ask her: What is the status of that new P3 legislation?

The Chairperson: Before we continue, just a quick reminder, and I'd like to thank everyone for the warm wishes in regards to the Minister of Education, but that

we are to refrain from referring if members are absent or present.

Having said that, the honourable minister.

MLA Schmidt: Thank you to the member for the important question about what was in the minister—what is in the Minister of Education's mandate letter, and that is to legislate, to ensure that there is accountability on P3 projects.

And I would imagine that this would be a non-partisan issue; that accountability, when it comes to public dollars, is something that all members of the House should agree on; shouldn't be controversial.

I look forward to the members opposite supporting accountability legislation when it comes forward. But I wanted to reflect a little bit about serving the public interest. That's what accountability legislation would—that's what the goal of accountability legislation would be, would be to ensure that we're acting in the public interest.

And that's what we were all elected to do, every one of us. I spent a lot of time on the doorstep speaking to Manitobans about what their priorities are, and I don't think I'm alone in what I hear.

And what I hear—one of the most common themes I hear after that Manitobans are concerned about the health-care system that was left in a really dire state, after we hear about public safety concerns that went out of control in the last seven and a half years—one of the more common themes that I hear—and I'm sure members in this room will agree that they hear—is that there just—there's not a lot of trust left in the political system. They say, well, I don't know if we can trust these politicians to do what they say. It's all politics; it's all posturing.

* (15:10)

And we saw some of that just a few minutes ago in the Chamber today in question period, and we saw it yesterday at Committee of Supply, and we saw it last week in question period and we saw it the week before that, which is the opposition ceding their time.

The opposition has a tremendous job to do and what they propert to do is to hold government to account. And they have the opportunity to do that in various ways. They have the opportunity to do that here at committee and they have the opportunity to do that in question period. And it's their job. That's what Manitobans elected all of us to do, was to serve their interests, to work on behalf of Manitobans.

An Honourable Member: Point of order.

Point of Order

The Chairperson: Point of order, the member for Fort Whyte.

Mr. Obby Khan (Fort Whyte): While I appreciate the minister's comments, it's been three minutes and the minister has not once addressed the question which is in regards to triple P. So I cite the relevance of the minister's answer in regards to simply asking question and—on triple P, not on the three and a half minutes of nonsensical comments.

Thank you, honour—or, Mr. Chairperson.

The Chairperson: So this is not a point of order. The Chair doesn't rule on the quality or quantity of answers.

* * *

The Chairperson: And I will now yield to the honourable minister, with two minutes left in her answer.

MLA Schmidt: And again, when we're talking about P3 legislation, we're talking about accountability and we're talking about serving the public interest.

I can absolutely appreciate why the member for Fort Whyte is uncomfortable in discussing what is in the public interest and discussing about accountability. His party was held accountable on October 3 of 2023 after a disgraceful, failed election campaign that was run on the backs of trans children and on murdered Indigenous women.

So I can appreciate that talking about what's in the best interest of Manitobans is not in the purview of the MLA for Fort Whyte. So I apologize that this makes him uncomfortable, but when we're talking about P3 legislation, we're talking about accountability. We're talking about what's in the public interest, and rather than hold this government to account, what the members opposite did today in question period, and they've done in Committee of Supply, is cede their time, cede their power to ask the government questions, to play some sort of internal politics.

So I can appreciate that this discussion about what's in the public interest makes them uncomfortable, but that's what we're here to discuss when we're talking about P3 legislation. I can advise the committee that the minister of CPGS is leading the work on developing that P3 legislation, because clearly, that type of legislation is not legislation that would only impact the department of Education, would impact across government.

And happy to take more questions.

Mr. Jackson: Despite the minister's initial comments, it didn't take us very long to get to partisan shots, and that's okay.

And that's okay, and I appreciate that she's focused on what's going on in other people's Estimates and in question period. But I would just encourage her to stay on topic with the Estimates that she's here to discuss and assure her, if she has concerns, that I have no issue with accountability and I have no interest or intention to yield any of my time today to other independent members.

And so I'll come back to the question on P3s. I appreciate her eventually getting to the answer, sort of, about the P3 legislation and it being developed. And so I respect that it may be being led by another department.

Does the minister have any idea or indication as to whether that legislation may be introduced this fall? Or is it more likely to be developed and introduced in their second year in office?

MLA Schmidt: I thank the member for the question and for the opportunity to talk more about accountability.

We inherited quite a mess, our government did. There's a lot of questions that we had about the planning and the procurement processes that the previous government was engaged in. And, in fact, I mean, their government had questions about it as well, about P3 procurement.

I seem to recollect that the former premier Brian Pallister had questions about P3 procurement and resoundingly rejected P3 projects under the auspices that, on occasion, those projects are problematic; that they don't necessarily always are in furtherance of the public interest; that on occasion they have proven to cost more in the immediate and in the long-term, which is not in the interest of Manitobans and the Manitoba taxpayer.

It was in 2018 that Brian Pallister rejected a P3 plan, saying it was too costly. But again, as the previous government did, they flip-flopped, and then in 2023 they decided that P3s actually were a great plan. And they announced a plan that was written on the back of a napkin to build nine new schools under this procurement process.

But we know, now that we've—that the NDP have come into government and we've taken a look at the plan, taken a look at the books, that there was no real dollars and cents attached to these plans. That these

plans were developed by a government in their dying days in a desperate attempt to convince voters that all of a sudden they had a plan to build schools.

And they gave Manitobans false hope. And that's unfortunate. And that's something that our government is not going to do.

We are assessing the procurement process. The—as I stated already, the minister of C-G-P-S is leading that work. That legislation will be forthcoming and is being developed in a deliberate and responsible and transparent way to make sure that Manitobans receive value for dollars when it comes to building public assets like schools.

We—sorry, honourable Chairperson. We are continuing to assess our existing space and where the need is the greatest.

* (15:20)

And we will make sure whatever procurement process that our government follows is done in a responsible and a transparent way, in a real way, with real dollars and cents attached to those projects; and in a way that charts our government back to balance after being left with a nearly \$2-billion deficit, driven largely by what I talked about before, which were campaign commitments written on the back of a napkin, without any real budgeting, without any real funding plan or dollars or cents attached to them, in a desperate attempt to buy votes.

Luckily, that plan failed. Luckily, Manitobans saw the truth and decided to go in a new direction. We're very proud of the direction that our government is moving in and we're proud of the legislation that will be brought forward in the public interest, to make sure that there is P3 accountability.

Mr. Jackson: There's a bit of revisionist history going on from the minister. Unfortunately, today, she calls the plan on the back of a napkin and yet the P3 Manitoba Schools Project was posted on the government's website MERX for a number of months. Professional companies who do this for a living had lots of time to put in a bid, assess the requirements that were posted as to what they were being required to build by the government, and then submit a bid, which closed either the day of the election or the day after the election.

Now it is at that point, once an RFQ has been responded to that then these applications go to Treasury Board to have funding allocated. That's how the process works. I know the minister knows this.

And so their government walked in to a closed RFQ that had successful companies, who do this for a living, submitted bids to build the nine new schools and their government said: No thanks, we're not interested.

And now, on top of that, the MERX website now states that the RFQ is just closed. No other justification given. And it's my understanding that no responses are being given to proponents when they email in to ask what's going on and why has this happened.

So revisionist history aside, why was it not a priority of this government to take those nine schools that had closed bids from successful companies that do this for a living to Treasury Board and have a discussion about funding them properly?

MLA Schmidt: Yes, thank you for the question. So what we know, and what Manitobans know now, was that there was no real fiscal plan to get these schools built. Certainly not a responsible fiscal plan. The previous government claims that they were good fiscal managers. We know that's not true.

Our government, in the early days, commissioned an independent group to look at the books, and what they told us, unequivocally, was that the previous government were making high-risk decisions. And I would argue that this plan was exactly that. There was no plan on how much these schools, these nine schools were going to cost. Half a billion? A billion? We don't know. And we don't know because this plan was developed without assessing existing space. Without assessing need. Manitobans saw right through this.

The previous government had seven and a half years to improve the education system, whether we're talking about those public assets, whether we're talking about outcomes, and they didn't do it. And Manitobans know that, and Manitobans chose, thankfully, to move in a different direction—in a direction to elect a government full of educators that understands the needs of the education system, whether we're talking about capital plans, whether we're talking about supports for those schools in the form of educators. We know that some school divisions are really suffering right now with a workforce shortage, which is another mess that we have to clean up from the previous government.

We're going to do that planning work. We are already doing it. We're going to continue to assess the need. We're going to continue to assess the procurement process to make sure that Manitobans are getting value for money.

We are not just going to announce schools to give people false hope. That was a strategy of the previous government in their dying days. We're going to make sure that our plan is achievable, that it's fiscally responsible, that there are real dollars and cents attached to these programs. And not just real dollars and cents—yes, you can announce schools. You can go to Treasury Board and get approval. And you can also leave the Province in a \$2-billion deficit, and that's what the previous government did.

So we have a lot of work ahead of us to advance our goals of supporting kids. That's really what Manitobans want. Manitobans want one-on-one time between their kids and their teachers. They want safe spaces for their kids. They want to make sure that there is a fulsome curriculum and space is a necessary part of that equation, but there's a lot more that goes into running a fulsome and productive education system than just capital space.

We are doing the work. Our department is doing the work. They're doing fantastic work of doing that real planning work that is necessary in order to build schools in a fiscally responsible way that sees value for dollar and that serves Manitobans' interest.

Thank you.

Mr. Jackson: Of course, when the minister puts it on the record that no needs assessment was done, she's just wrong. Each of the nine schools in the Manitoba Schools Project were identified and put forward by school divisions in their respective areas as their most urgent priority to get built.

She can ask the Brandon School Division, et cetera, whether they feel that those schools in the nine-school project were just made up by the Progressive Conservatives or whether they were actually consulted about them being their most urgent need. I know what the answer will be, and I think Manitobans do, as well.

However, what's most interesting about the minister's most recent response is she said that it's not a responsible fiscal plan to build these nine schools. Which sounds a lot to me that this NDP government is admitting that they are trying to meet their commitment to balance the budget on the backs of building new schools in this province.

So for the record, is the Manitoba schools P3 project completely dead in the water, or will this minister be reviving it in some portion?

* (15:30)

MLA Schmidt: Yes, I certainly don't dispute that there's need out there. I don't dispute that the school divisions, as they do, put forward and prioritize their lists. That's not what's in dispute here.

What's in dispute is the failed plan of the failed PC government which, I will reiterate, was virtually written on the back of a napkin. There were no dollars set aside for these nine schools that the previous government announced and had no real plan to actually build, and that's irresponsible.

That's playing politics with Manitobans and with Manitoba kids, and that's not something we're going to do. Our government is committed to making commitments that we can follow through on, making commitments that are done in the best interest of Manitobans. Our commitments are going to be funded with real dollars attached, real plans.

The previous government made commitments that weren't budgeted for, and that's irresponsible. And that's what's left Manitoba in the mess that we're in now. We have a huge mess to clean up not just in this department but in departments across government.

But Manitobans have elected the team to get the work done. We're rolling up our sleeves, we are working with school divisions to assess their need. We're a listening government. That's something I'm really proud about and something that surely the previous government can't claim.

The previous government acted in really a sort of father-knows-best sort of way. They didn't listen to Manitobans. They didn't listen to their senior public servants. They didn't listen to teachers. They didn't listen to school divisions. They made plans and promises that were politically driven, and that's not the way that our government does business.

We are listening to school divisions, we are listening to parents, we are listening to communities. We know that the need is great. I absolutely do not dispute that. The need out there is great. But we're getting the work done one school at a time, one build at a time, one hire at a time.

Our government, since getting elected, in only one year, our government has added six—more than 630 net-new positions in our school system, and that's something to be so very proud of. Because you can build nine schools, you can build 900 schools, you can build 9,000 schools, or you can announce them, anyways. But if you don't have the workers in the

buildings to serve the kids, then you're still at square one.

Because ultimately, that's what our public education system is designed to do. It's to serve kids, it's to serve families and to serve our province. A good education is the foundation of a good life.

Our government recognizes that, we value the workers that work in our education system, and we're going to get these schools built. We're going to do it in a fiscally responsible way, one that helps Manitoba get back on a path to balance, something the previous government did not care about. They blew the bank on their way out the door, made promises that they knew they couldn't keep, giving false hope to Manitobans, something that they're still trying to capitalize on here today, unfortunately.

But that's okay. Manitobans have a new government, and a government who is going to build schools. We built this province—the Manitoba NDP built this province; we'll continue to build.

Mr. Jackson: At the beginning of the minister's answer, she agreed that the nine schools were the priorities of school divisions. She said: I do not question that they are the nine schools that were the priorities of school divisions, i.e., the previous government was listening to school divisions and their priorities.

And then at the end of her answer, she says that the previous PC government ignored school divisions completely throughout their tenure in government.

So, which is it? And this is just an example, folks, of the convoluted logic that the NDP has tied themselves in knots with to justify why they cancelled nine new schools at their first Cabinet meeting.

So, and another quote that the minister just said on the record here today is that these plans for these schools were done on the back of a napkin and that there was no real plan for them to get built.

And so I'd like the minister to reiterate that comment for all the companies that submitted properly tendered, properly laid-out applications and proposals to the Government of Manitoba on MERX, that she believes that their work on those applications was poorly done and that it was done on the back of a napkin and that they were not real plans to build those schools in this province.

I'd like her to reiterate that for the record, because that is what she just said.

* (15:40)

MLA Schmidt: So yes, so we agree that schools—new schools are needed, that more space is needed. We couldn't agree more.

We don't agree with the previous approach of the previous government. We are not cutting schools. We are building schools, and we're going to create more jobs in the process, as we've already done and our government is very proud of.

And I think, perhaps, one of the issues that we're having here today that is causing our disagreement is, perhaps, the definition of the word plan and what exactly a plan needs.

So making announcements, putting out RFPs, having those RFPs be bid on ostensibly could be called a plan. But if there's no money allocated in a budget, then I would argue that that's not a plan.

So I think that's some of the disagreement that the member opposite and I are having today.

The previous government wants to continue to try to make the point that they had a plan to build nine schools, because they simply put them out to tender. If you don't have a plan on how to, in a fiscally responsible way, actually build those schools in a way that's not going to bankrupt the Province, then you don't have a plan.

Our plan is going to be done in a responsible, transparent way. We are working with school divisions to assess need. That work is ongoing. We are doing a space utilization study, something the previous government didn't do. We're going to make sure that Manitobans are getting value for dollar. And most importantly, we are going to make sure that children are supported in their education, and that we're meeting the needs of communities all across the province.

One way that we're meeting the need in Brandon is with an addition to the Maryland Park School. Additions are another way—sometimes a more fiscally responsible way—to achieve the same result of a big, new capital project. We're meeting the needs of that community with an addition, which will meet the needs of the community and will also hit the mark on accountability and fiscal responsibility.

We understand that the need is great, but I can assure Manitobans that the NDP government is listening. We are on the ground. We have a government bench full of educators that understand the school system, that understand how to meet the needs of families and children and communities.

Our plan is going to be done in a way that considers existing schools' capacity—pardon me—is going to consider the space utilization assessments and enrolment trends throughout all the school divisions in relation to the needs across the province.

So again, very proud of our capital plan. Really excited about heading into our budget planning process for the '25-26 year, and excited about producing results for kids and families and communities in a way that they can trust, in a way that they can rely on, in a way that they know are going to produce actual results.

The results of the previous government are clear. We've all been living them. It's a new day in Manitoba. We're going to produce results that folks can count on.

Mr. Jackson: The minister and I agree that a financial component of a plan is necessary. And that's why the RFQ closed the day after election day, so that whoever won that election could take the proposals from the businesses and the companies that were going to build those schools forward and ensure that they were included in the budget for the upcoming fiscal year.

And who wrote that fiscal budget for the upcoming fiscal year? That's right, the NDP government did. And they refused to include any financials with respect to funding the construction of these schools, which means the decision not to fund these schools rests entirely on the government's shoulders despite their endless efforts to throw accountability backwards.

And so, my next question for the minister is: Does she have an estimate on how much each of—the cost of each of those nine schools will increase for every year that construction is delayed from starting?

MLA Schmidt: Surely, we all understand how inflation works. Manitobans thankfully elected an NDP government that is fiscally responsible. We are so proud of the work of our Premier (Mr. Kinew) and our Minister of Finance (MLA Sala) in delivering real results for Manitobans that they can count on.

And what that means is that Manitoba has the lowest inflation rate across the country, and has now for how many months? Eight, nine, many months now, Manitobans have enjoyed the lowest inflation across Canada thanks to the actions of this NDP government, who they know have their back, who they know will take real action, action that the previous government could have taken when they had the opportunity, when they were in government. But they didn't. They let inflation run rampant.

Inflation during Heather Stefanson's time in Manitoba—we were one of the highest rates of inflation under the Heather Stefanson government. I remember reading about that every day in the newspaper. Not only was she the least popular premier, but we also had one of the worst inflation rates under the leadership of Heather Stefanson.

But, luckily, Manitobans elected a new government and we're moving forward. Again, our government understands inflation and understands that certainly inflation goes up every year. But I also understand that to build those schools, if we're talking about, you know, how inflation will increase the cost of building schools, we can all agree that will happen. We're committed to building schools every year, and we understand that inflation will make that more expensive every year.

But every year, we need to build new schools. That's what we do here in Manitoba. But do you know when these schools would have been cheaper to build? In 2016, in 2017, in 2018, in 2019, in 2020—[interjection]

The member from Fort Whyte wants to heckle me here at committee and that's unfortunate, but he needs his time in the spotlight, we all understand. But it's coming. It's coming. It's coming. We'll all have to put up with the PC's disaster of a leadership race over the next few months. We understand that he always needs a spotlight.

* (15:50)

The Chairperson: Order.

I'll just remind all members that, unless you have the floor, that we'll keep our comments to ourselves.

Back to the honourable minister.

MLA Schmidt: Again, these schools would've been cheaper to build, certainly, during the opposition's time in government. They failed to provide results for Manitobans which is why Manitobans are moving in a new direction.

We also know that not just here in Manitoba, but across Canada, thankfully, inflation rates are starting to come down and so costs will come down. So we know that our plan is achievable. We know that we're going to make sure that new schools are constructed every year. We're going to make sure that the needs of Manitobans are met, and we're going to do so in a way that is transparent to Manitobans, that gives Manitobans real hope and not false hope, and is done in a way that's achievable.

Very proud of the capital plan that we've put forward. Very proud of the work of the department in their planning exercises that they've been doing over the past year, under new leadership. They're doing great work. We understand the need is great. There is a mess to clean up after seven and a half years of austerity and negativity and divisiveness under the previous government.

Manitobans can have hope. Manitobans can have hope that they have a listening government. Happy to meet with members opposite—I had a few requests today in question period to meet. I'm happy to do that, happy to meet—our government's doors are open to everyone, the opposition included, the department stakeholders. But I can't tell you how often that I've heard from folks in community about their ability—inability, pardon me, to have the ear of the previous government.

Very recently, I was at an event and was speaking with a card-carrying member of the Progressive Conservative Party; someone who's very influential and had a lot of advice to offer the previous government. And they let me know that, in seven and a half years, they could not get a meeting with a minister of the previous government, so that's unfortunate.

I'm happy to take a meeting with that community member, happy to continue working with all members of this committee and with our community.

Mr. Jackson: The minister references that it was cheaper to build schools prior to her tenure in office, so that's why we built 14 of them across the province. You know, the member for Seine River (MLA Cross) was heckling me when I brought this up in question period last week. She'd forgotten, I guess, how many we built because she was saying: Where are they? Where are the schools you built?

Well, they're in the constituencies of the member for Waverley (MLA Pankratz) and the member for Brandon East (Mr. Simard) and the member for Morden-Winkler (Mrs. Hiebert) and the member for La Vérendrye (Mr. Narth) and the member for McPhillips (MLA Devgan), to name just a few.

And so, I almost offered for the member for Seine River, I—if I could draw her a map to find these schools if that would help them be a little bit more informed about the reality of the seven and a half years and building schools that we had seen.

But I digress. Those are facts. Those schools were built. The minister can take a tour. She mentioned getting invited out to constituencies. I'm sure that the

member for La Vérendrye, when he's taking her to the school in Grunthal, could also tour her by the new school we built in St. Malo while she's out on the road outside the Perimeter Highway. Her colleague, the member for Brandon East, I'm sure would be glad to take her by Maryland Park School that we built, but I digress. I digress.

And so, Chairperson, the minister has put a lot of comments on the record about how proud she is of her government's record on inflation, and so if she is so proud of this record, will she go to—we know that she has no interest in proceeding with the P3 model to build schools. So if she's so proud of her government's record on inflation, will she go to Treasury Board and ask the Province to borrow the money and fund the build of these nine schools that are included in the Manitoba Schools Project?

MLA Schmidt: Thank you to the member opposite.

It's no surprise that members opposite so far have only been interested in talking about the physical structures that kids learn in. And that's important. That's important dialogue, and it's one that I'm happy to continue having and I'm sure we will continue to have.

And that's because their record on what happens inside the school is so dismal that they have to focus only on the structures—again, which is important. We are here—our government is here to support school divisions. You know, school capital and the physical structures are important, but they are only one of several components that goes into supporting the educational needs and outcomes that Manitobans are looking for.

So I'd like to talk a little bit about that, because I think it's really important. It is important to talk about capital. It's important about—to talk about building new schools, but that is only one part of the equation. And, again, I'm not surprised that the members opposite want to focus on that because of their record on what happens inside the schools, which is, again, why Manitobans elected a new government.

This government was won on a few issues. This election was fun—was won, my apologies. This election was won on a few very important issues, health care being far and away the No. 1 issue that Manitobans are thinking about and continue to think about but also public safety and also the failures in the education system.

So I'd like to talk a little bit about some of the work that our government has done and is doing to

make sure that the needs, the fulsome needs, of kids and families and communities are being met.

So one of those is a small-class-size initiative. We know that kids need more direct access to their educators, to their supports in schools, something the previous government did not care about at all. The previous government had no concern about class size. Let's get rid of rules about class size. Let's pack as many kids as we want into the classroom.

That's not something—that's not a value that our government has. Our government is assessing what's going on in classrooms today and is going to make sure that small class sizes are a priority for schools going forward.

* (16:00)

Another thing we've done that will really be transformational for our province is the introduction of a school nutrition program. It is a legacy project that will serve Manitobans for years to come. We are already hearing from educators and school divisions about the impact that our school nutrition program is having on students today. It's bringing kids into the classroom, kids that, traditionally, maybe haven't always been there. It's attracting kids to the classroom. It is going to create systemic change over society for decades to come. I am so proud of our school nutrition program.

And we know it's something the previous government didn't believe in. They said it. They said it was a bad idea. That's a direct quote. They said that there might be unintended consequences.

What might be the unintended consequences of introducing a nutrition program? The unintended consequences are that kids aren't hungry, that they're coming to school, that they're getting an education.

You'd think it would be a non-partisan issue, but unfortunately—and, again, I rarely try to understand the reasoning on the other side of the House, and it's a real head-scratcher how anyone could think that a school nutrition program is a bad idea. It's such a good idea, in fact, that the federal government decided to introduce one as well.

So I have more to say about the good work we're doing in our school system.

I look forward to more questions.

Mr. Jackson: Once again, Chairperson, the minister is unfortunately wrong. We were, of course, concerned about classroom sizes. That's why we were actually

building new ones. Fourteen schools' worth of new ones, in fact, during our time in office, but I digress.

The minister commented on the nutrition program. And these are questions that I asked the previous Minister of Education earlier in Estimates back in the spring, but I'll just ask her for the sake of the fact that she brought it up, if she believes that 52 cents a day per student in our public school system is enough to adequately feed students.

MLA Schmidt: It's unfortunate the characterization that the member opposite has made about our wildly successful, transformational, historic school nutrition program.

If you wanted—he knows better. He knows that this program wasn't rolled out in a—in the way that he's presenting. Our program was rolled out in a very intentional way that was needs-based, so not every school gets the same amount of money. Not every student gets 52 cents. And he knows that's the case. He knows that's not true.

It's a political way for him to try to, again, still follow his party line and say that feeding kids is a bad idea. It's nonsensical. Manitobans don't understand it. I don't understand it. But that's how he chooses to characterize it.

The department, again, assessed need across the province. And where the need was greatest, the most amount of dollars flowed. There are plenty of schools where the need is not great.

And don't get me wrong, this program is available to every single school. But where there isn't as much need, not as many dollars flowed. Where is there is greater need, more dollars flowed.

Manitobans are smart. Manitobans understand that. Manitobans support our school nutrition program. I wish the members opposite would get on board and agree that feeding hungry kids is the right thing to do.

I am incredibly proud of our school nutrition program, of the intentional, needs-based way in which it's being delivered. And we're going to have to continue. This is our first year. We're going to continue to assess that need, we're going to make adjustments where they're necessary.

But the need is not distributed equally across our province. We all know that. Need is not—apologies. If we're familiar with our own constituencies, we know that there's different need in our own constituencies. And we should all be able to agree that the need is different across the province and across schools.

So where there is the highest need, students in those schools will get a breakfast, a lunch and a snack program. In schools where there is not as much need, maybe there is only a snack program.

But Manitobans and students can rest assured that this program is universally accessible. And that means, even where perhaps the need is not as great, there will be a snack program available in that school, in the unfortunate circumstance that a kid who maybe doesn't have the need, maybe forgot their lunch on the counter that day.

So this is a universally accessible program. It is not delivered in the way the member opposite is presenting, at 50-some cents a student. That's crude, basic, averaging math. But he knows it's disingenuous, and he knows that's not our program is rolled out.

We've committed \$30 million, which is a fantastic start, one we know—an investment; no better investment. There's no better investment than investing in our kids, investing in our education system, and that's what the school nutrition program does.

And we have no doubt that this \$30-million initial investment will pay dividends for years to come. It's going to make sure kids are in the classroom. It's going to make sure that they have access to the educational programming and opportunities that are available in our school system. And it's going to set them up for success in the future.

So happy to discuss in greater detail our school nutrition program. And I wish that the members opposite could agree what they—could state what they know to be true, which is that feeding hungry kids is the right thing to do.

Thank you.

Mr. Jackson: Once again, the minister is wrong. This is becoming a bit of a theme today. She knows that I have no issue with feeding hungry kids. I never have and that's never been the position of our party or our caucus, so those were disingenuous comments.

The members opposite are laughing, but they can look at any document supporting the PC Party platform, and it has never been the position of this caucus that feeding hungry kids is wrong.

I'd love for the minister to quote the individuals and table the documents she was quoting them from. Those individual comments do not reflect this PC caucus's position, so her characterizations are false.

Which shows, you know, a lack of briefing perhaps on this file. I'm not sure.

But what I am questioning about this platform and program that the NDP has rolled out is their abject failure for—of this minister and government to budget an appropriate level of funding to make this program successful.

And I have heard from school divisions all summer long that they are very concerned that the funding allocated in Budget 2024 was not sufficient to successfully deliver this program and concerns about in the following budgetary year, what funding is coming forward and whether this will be looped in with their overall operating grants that they receive from the department of Education or whether it will continue to receive separate funding from the department and the government.

* (16:10)

And so, the question is not whether we agree with feeding hungry kids or not, it's whether this NDP government is appropriately funding the program which they have promised to Manitobans to be successfully delivered.

Can the minister confirm whether or not this funding will continue to be included—or I'm sorry in—continue to be separated as a separate budgetary line or whether it will be rolled in to the overall operating grants, delivered to school divisions and whether or not she believes that this level of funding is enough to successfully deliver this program?

MLA Schmidt: What I can say about our \$30-million historic investment is that it's \$30 million more than the previous government ever invested in feeding kids in schools.

They claim to agree that this is a good program, but they consistently vote against our budgets, \$30 million more than the previous government ever invested. I'm glad to hear them admit that it's a good idea. I'm so glad that we can finally agree that feeding kids is a bad idea.

But the member opposite is patently—[interjection] Did I misspeak? The member opposite is telling me that I misspoke. Thank you, member from Spruce Woods, I appreciate your assistance and your collaborative spirits. I apologize to the committee if I misspoke. I'm not even sure what I—[interjection] We can agree it's a good idea. Did I say that we agree it's a bad idea? I misspoke.

I'm glad that we can finally agree here today at this committee that feeding hungry kids is a good idea, but the member opposite is incorrect when he says that that's always been his party's position. He knows that the former leader of his party said that it was a bad idea. And he knows that the interim leader of his party today, the member for Lac du Bonnet (Mr. Ewasko), just a week or two weeks ago, in the House, said that sandwiches, fruits, vegetables, milk and more is not a real meal for kids, when the interim leader stood up to criticize our school nutrition program.

It left everyone in the House scratching their heads. It was quite a wild moment actually, and I think even members opposite would agree that they were scratching their heads about what in the world the interim leader of the PC caucus was talking about when he was criticizing our government providing sandwiches, vegetables and milk to children; that it was not a real meal. I think he used the word dishonest, that it was a dishonest lunch.

We're all still scratching our heads as to what that means, but I digress. I am glad that here today in this committee that we can all agree that funding nutrition programs in school is the right thing to do.

And, again, the member asked whether or not the amount was sufficient, and as I've said, the \$30-million investment we made this year is \$30 million more than the previous government ever made to feeding kids in school.

The previous government, in fact, left it to the non-profit sector and thank goodness for the child nutrition council of Canada, for the Breakfast Club of Canada, to Manitoba Harvest; all of these folks were doing this work of providing meal programs in schools prior to the election of our NDP government. The non-profit sector was filling that gap, a gap left by the previous government, who never provided a nutrition program; now agrees that it is the right thing to do. They applaud the NDP government, I'm hearing, for introducing a nutrition program. I'm glad to hear that they are on board and they support it.

I'm glad—I can't wait to see them support next year's budget which will, in fact, include a separate budget line for the nutrition program, and that's to ensure that school divisions and schools continue to earmark and use that money for what it's intended, which is to feed hungry children in our schools.

But it wasn't only the non-profit sector that was doing this work, and I want to shout-out and lift up educators in our system who I know were doing this

work. And I know that because I am the daughter of two schoolteachers; both my parents taught in the Winnipeg School Division for their whole careers. My mom still teaches; 50-plus years she's been teaching. And I can't tell you how many times that my parents came home hungry because they shared their lunch with a student that didn't have.

That's regrettable, it shouldn't happen. That's why the NDP introduced nutrition programs. But I just want to acknowledge the sacrifices that teachers and educators have made in the absence of the school nutrition program in order to make sure that their students are fed.

Mr. Jackson: And thanks to the minister. I think we're an hour and 20 minutes in today, and that might be the first black-and-white answer we've got.

So here we go, let's try for two. The minister made a lot of comments in a couple of previous answers about the fact that we're not concerned about what's going on inside schools, which is, of course, ludicrous. And so to build on that vein, I would ask her to please update all Manitobans on the student information system and where the development of that project is at.

To be clear, the current minister—member for Transcona (MLA Altomare)—is quoted in a CBC article as having said that he wants an information system so that he can log into it—or he, being the department of Education, the government—can log into it and know what student attendance rates are, et cetera, right from a very accessible digital portal to increase availability of that data.

So can the minister update this committee and all of Manitobans on the status of the development of that project?

* (16:20)

MLA Schmidt: Thank you to the member about an important question about data and information.

Our government absolutely, wholeheartedly believes in making decisions and designing policy based on data. It's important to how we design our health-care system, something the previous government abjectly failed at. Failed at listening to the experts, failed at assessing the data, and that's why we're in some of the health-care mess that we are today.

When speaking about data in the education system, we understand that divisions are already doing some of this work. So we don't want to replicate or duplicate work that's being done, but we do want to streamline

and make sure that there is something accessible for use to assist in our planning and our policy development.

I can share with the committee that the scope of the information system has shifted from one that was costly and time consuming and didn't make a lot of sense, quite frankly. And that was the plan of the previous PC government.

And what we've shifted towards is a focus on outcome indicators and a system that leverages existing data and systems. It's going to enhance our ability to make data-driven decision making with ultimately the aim of improving educational outcomes and creating a cohesive and effective approach to monitoring student achievement.

Our initiative will leverage existing data and local student information systems to strengthen the process through which schools and school divisions assess, monitor and report on student achievement to the Province, to parents and caregivers and to the public.

Our government's committed to continuing to work with school divisions who will be involved in this planning through continued engagement and collaboration to ensure that the data collected and reported on is used purposefully, minimal disruption to the system. I think we all can agree that data is very important in our decision-making process and our policy development moving forward. And I'm glad to share with the committee that our project and our data dashboard is scheduled to be up and running for this—for the next school year.

Thank you.

Mr. Jackson: So, just seeking some clarity from the minister, then.

So the decision has been made by this government to proceed. Rather than a universal system that all school divisions would feed information into, they're going to incorporate the school divisions' systems that are pre-existing and then develop for the student-school divisions that don't have, into some kind of universal dashboard that the department of Education will monitor, rather than creating a new system that's universal for all school divisions.

Am I understanding that correctly?

MLA Schmidt: So our government is—recognizes the need to streamline and be able to collect universal data, but there's other ways to do that other than rehauling and mandating a new system onto all school

divisions, many of which—all of which are already doing this work.

So what our project purports, or plans to do, is to get the existing systems that are already working, that school divisions are working with, to work together and to be able to coalesce that data into a system that is cohesive and is universal. What we need to implement is a common data standard to achieve the results that we're seeking, rather than implementing a brand new, very costly, fiscally irresponsible new system, which was the plan of the previous government. There's better ways to do things.

* (16:30)

So putting—the plan that the previous government—the previous government's data information systems overhaul would have taken far too much time, would have been far too costly and presented a whole host of other risks. So that's not what we're going to do. We're not going to mandate a common provincial student information system. We're going to make sure that the existing systems are designed in a way that they're producing a common status standard.

Some other reasons why we're doing this is because 28 out of 37 school divisions are currently using—or in the process of converting to—a system called PowerSchool, and so we believe that for the remaining nine divisions, with consideration for contract expiry dates, et cetera, there may be an opportunity for those other divisions to consider PowerSchool as their vendor, again, creating a common status standard.

We also recognize that school divisions have made significant investments in acquiring, implementing and customizing their current student information systems. And there's already been investments made to integrate other complex systems such as transportation, financial and human resource information systems. So we want to support the work that the divisions have been doing already.

We agree there's work to do in order to make sure that the divisions are producing a standard set of common data that can be integrated into one user-friendly system. But I think that we can do that with existing resources and with existing information systems in a way that makes sense, in a way that doesn't waste a bunch of time, waste unnecessarily—unnecessary dollars and would waste the investments that school divisions have already made in data collection systems.

Thank you.

Mr. Jackson: The minister has outlined that there is going to be a provincial dashboard, I believe is the term she's using, that will translate data from all of the various school divisions in the ways that they're currently being collected.

Is this dashboard being developed internally by department and government staff or is the development of the dashboard—and I'm talking about the technical website development of it, the portal, if you will—or so is that being developed by department and government staff or has that work been contracted out?

MLA Schmidt: Thank you to the member opposite for the question.

We're proud of our public service and our public servants, and I'm proud to share with the committee that this work is being done internally by department staff, by using existing resources and existing IT platforms.

Mr. Jackson: In respect to the minister's new role, is she aware that an RFP was posted and closed in early summer of last year, 2023, for bids to create a universal data system in the province of Manitoba, including a bid from a company that successfully operates a universal data system for schools in Saskatchewan, British Columbia and Ontario?

Is she aware of that?

MLA Schmidt: To answer the question directly—yes. We're aware that that was issued by CGPS, but I also understand that there were issues with that tender, and my understanding is that that contract was not awarded.

In the meantime, the government changed, and because that contract was not awarded, it gave our government the opportunity to re-examine the project and reassess what the needs were to accomplish the goal at hand, which is to create an accessible sort of universal information system to access data. And during that reassessment, we decided to move in another direction.

As I said in my previous answer, we are proud of our public service, we are proud of our public servants and we have no doubt that they're going to be able to deliver on this project.

It was, I think, essential to reassess the plan of the previous government, consider other—considering other contracts that were awarded during their time in government. Manitobans know the issues and the cost to them from one product in particular, named Project

Nova, that the previous government bungled and which continues to cost Manitobans.

So in light of some of those failures and in light of the historic deficit that our government was left with by the previous government and their irresponsible spending on their way out the door, leaving Manitobans on the hook for a nearly \$2-billion deficit, we reassessed the scope of this project, and we're going to work on it internally. We're going to use the department staff—the incredible department staff that we have—and we're going to produce a result that will meet the goals of the program and that will not cost Manitobans unnecessarily.

Our government believes in accountability. We believe in serving the public interest. And we believe that there's a real need to assess all projects that were initiated under the previous government to make sure that Manitobans are seeing value for dollar and to make sure that these projects are completed in a way that protects the public purse and that serves Manitobans' interest.

Thank you.

* (16:40)

Mr. Jackson: You know, I'd like to thank the minister for confirming that they are not proceeding with the universal student information system.

You know, I've been contacted as the critic by some individuals who were—who had bid on the project, of course, and haven't heard anything from this government since they took office. So I'll be relaying the clips of this exchange today to those individuals to inform them that this is the decision put forward by this government.

I would have thought, you know, perhaps not from the department of Education but the Government Services and Consumer Protection department would have relayed the government's decision to them but, alas, they reached out to me looking for answers. And so now we have that on the record today.

With respect to class sizes, the minister made some comments regarding her government's commitment to reduce class sizes. Meanwhile, they aren't building any new schools.

So my question to the minister is: What is an acceptable class size to her?

MLA Schmidt: I thank the member opposite for the question, which I can only interpret as meaning that

he supports another one of our great initiatives, which is promoting smaller class sizes.

So I appreciate the question, and I appreciate the opportunity to talk about it. Just like we agree that the universal nutrition program is a great thing, I'm glad to hear that we agree that small class sizes and a great thing—is a great thing, and I'm glad to talk about it a little bit more.

So we know that improved student-to-teacher ratios in those early years help, that Manitoba's youngest learners get the individualized support that they need to reach their full potential. We're not specifying targets right now. We're providing reasonable guidance and having a reasonable dialogue with divisions about what that looks like.

And what that looks like, what the data shows us, what science tells us, is that for the K-to-3 grades, around 20 kids per classroom is what's reasonable, and above grade 3, around 25. It's not a mandate; it's a discussion, and it's some guidance. And schools know this. Educators know this. They know that those are reasonable ratios, and they know that those ratios best serve students, which at the end of the day is what we're all here to support, is students and educators in our school system and producing the best outcomes that we can.

So while there isn't a mandate today, we have introduced some accountability by asking school divisions to report average class sizes to make sure that there is adequate student-to-teacher ratios. And one of the ways that we can support divisions meeting those reasonable guidelines that we've been discussing with them is with operational funding.

Not only have we committed and earmarked specifically \$3 million in this school year to—for school divisions to address the challenges of large class sizes for K-to-3 learners, we've also increased the entire K-to-12 education funding by \$104 million this year, which is an increase above the rate of inflation, which is something the previous government never did during their time.

Operational funding was stagnant under the previous government, which only makes class sizes grow, what's 'putch' pressure on educators and ultimately puts pressure on students. So that's why our government invested over \$104 million this year for operational funding.

All school divisions saw an increase in their funding. And that's because our government recognizes that stable, predictable funding for schools is the

best way to have schools meet their enrolment and address student need.

Another thing we've done is we've restored divisions' ability to generate additional revenues based on their own local priorities. We've given freedom back to the school divisions is what we've done in our first year in government. And we're very proud of that work.

So the \$104 million that we've increased funding this year includes more than \$51 million for operating support, \$11.3-million increase in capital support, \$30 million for our universal nutrition program and a almost \$11-million increase in funding to independent schools.

So again, I'm glad to hear that we agree that decreasing class sizes is a good thing. I'm glad that we have the support of the opposition on this—

The Chairperson: Order.

The member's—minister's time has expired.

Mr. Jackson: No targets could be a theme across government departments for this new NDP government, but I won't get into that.

The minister mentioned that they've required school divisions report in the size of classes across divisions. Will the minister table those reports?

* (16:50)

MLA Schmidt: In our discussion and dialogue with school divisions about this goal that we all agree is a good goal, which is to reduce class sizes here in Manitoba, what we've asked the school divisions to do is to report—to make this reporting available on their websites so the member opposite and all Manitobans will be free to access that data. But certainly, it's something I'm willing to consider compiling and tabling for the House, if that's of interest.

And, again, I'm so glad to hear that we agree that this is a positive step forward; that reducing class sizes is a good idea, as is feeding kids in schools. Our department and our government has been doing great work in both those regards, and I'm glad for the member opposite's support.

Thank you.

Mr. Trevor King (Lakeside): Honourable minister, in July of 2023, with funding provided under the Canada-Manitoba and the Canada-wide early learning and child care, Manitoba announced the allocation of

\$132 million across 36 public schools to create child-care spaces for children under seven.

Almost 3,000 new child-care spaces were planned, so—one of those plan's projects was actually in my constituency. The Warren Elementary school is to receive 40 new spaces through the Woodlands Child Care program.

So could you tell me when those spaces are set to open?

MLA Schmidt: I thank the member for Lakeside for the in very—for the very important question and for his advocacy for his community. It's commendable.

I'm excited to share with the committee that our government is committed to supporting the growth of early learning and child care here in the province, so that parents can pursue education and participate in the workforce. That's something that has been sorely lacking in this province. As a parent myself, over the past seven and a half years under the previous government, I felt this pinch and I heard stories about this on the doorstep all the time.

I recollect meeting a mother who shared with me her decision to not go back to work after a parental leave because she could—simply could not find child care for her kids, and she also shared with me that frankly, even if she could have found a child-care space, that she wouldn't have been able to afford it.

So, lots of work to do, but we're committed to doing that work.

And in partnership with Canada—the member mentioned the Canada-Manitoba child-care agreement—so in partnership with Canada, I'm proud to share with the committee that we are 40 per cent of the way to meeting our goal of 23,000 new child-care spaces for children under seven in the province of Manitoba. Proud to share that over 3,200 of those spaces have already opened.

We have committed to another 6,000 spaces and certainly with thousands more on the way. In addition to those preschool-age spaces we have also managed to open—or, committed to more than 4,400 school-age spaces through strategic investments for a total of nearly 13,000 new child-care spaces throughout Manitoba.

But similar to the dialogue about schools in this province and the need to not just build the physical structures or create the physical spaces, we also have to make sure that we have the workforce to support those spaces, and that's something that, again, has

been sorely lagging under the leadership of the previous failed PC government.

Our government, in the first year, have already increased wages to early childhood educators by 2.75 per cent, which should assist in recruitment and retention. We have continued with the tuition reimbursement program. We've expanded post-secondary ECE programs including the establishment of two new diploma programs.

So there's a lot of work to do, not just in creating the spaces, but to make sure that we have retained and recruited the folks that need to work in those spaces.

And before we run out of time, to answer the specific question: I'm pleased to share with the member that my understanding is that the Warren Elementary School project has been approved and will be proceeding.

Mr. Jackson: I just want to confirm in the minister's response to my last question that she indeed will be taking the matter under advisement to compile the data requested and table it for all Manitobans.

The Chairperson: Order.

The hour being 5 p.m., committee rise.

CHAMBER

ADVANCED EDUCATION AND TRAINING

* (14:40)

The Chairperson (Tyler Blashko): Will the Committee of Supply come to order. This section of the Committee of Supply will now consider the Estimates of the Department of Advanced Education and Training.

Does the honourable minister have an opening statement?

Hon. Renée Cable (Minister of Advanced Education and Training): I do.

The Chairperson: The honourable Minister of Advanced Education and Training.

MLA Cable: I am so pleased to be here as Minister of Advanced Education and Training to talk about the department and the programs we're delivering on in this year's budget.

But before I get started, I want to extend a heartfelt thank you to all of the legislative staff, the Clerk staff, House leader, Opposition House Leader, everybody who made this time possible, worked through negotiations and set this up. It's a really important part of the process, and I appreciate your work very much.

I will have some of my department staff join me in a few minutes, and before they come in, I will just let you know that they'll be Jan Forster, deputy minister; Carlos Matias, executive financial officer and assistant deputy minister of our finance division; Kate Bolton, assistant deputy minister of Student Access and Success; and Colleen Kachulak, assistant deputy minister of Advanced Education.

My director of ministerial affairs, who keeps everything afloat and who I owe immense gratitude to, will be watching from another room. Ruth, you are adored.

My department's purpose is to ensure a high-quality adult education and advanced education system that supports student success and research excellence in innovation leading to economic growth and new opportunities for all Manitobans.

Manitobans elected us to fulfill a mandate of improving health care, affordability, education and advancing reconciliation. And each day, we approach the work of governing through a lens of equity, inclusion and collaboration. Education in all its forms helps us build a healthier society.

I've been honoured this past year to meet with so many individuals representing provincial and national organizations on issues that are key to our government's priorities of health care, again, affordability for families, growing our economy and creating safer and healthier communities.

The Premier (Mr. Kinew) has given me a strong mandate to move forward on these priorities and I'm so proud of the progress we've made this year.

We have more students in health-care training. Budget 2024 adds \$32.9 million to post-secondary institutions for 111 more training seats for critical front-line professionals like doctors, physician's assistants and nurse practitioners.

In addition, more of the health-care training is happening closer to home for students. We've moved forward on our commitment to create new doctor training seats at Brandon University. We're partnering with University of Manitoba, Brandon University and Prairie Mountain Health to train physicians in Brandon and surrounding regions. This will help facilitate retention of critical health-care workers in rural settings. We know that when students study closer to home, they're more likely to stay at home and offer their services and their community engagement to their home community.

We're working in partnership with our colleges and universities to ensure that Manitoba has a high-quality post-secondary system while respecting their autonomy and independence. We increased funding to our universities and colleges by 6 per cent across the system.

We provided a greater level of support to institutions outside of Winnipeg, addressing a challenge from the previous year that saw inequitable distribution of funding to colleges and universities.

We quickly responded to the federal government's cap on international students to minimize disruption and impacts on the system. We came up with a balanced plan to allocate the cap across institutions, focusing on our public institution and needs in our labour market.

We quickly developed a secure and efficient online portal to issue over 18,000 Manitoba provincial attestation letters for prospective undergraduate international students, and we were of the first in Canada to roll this out, minimizing disruption.

We restored dedicated staff for international education, previously cut under the former PC government. We brought in new amendments to legislation to strengthen sexual violence policies at our post-secondary institutions to better protect students and keep them safe wherever they choose to study.

We also increased funding for Research Manitoba. We're committed to making Manitoba a research centre of excellence, attracting talent to our province, growing our economy and supporting health-care advancements. We know there is much work to do in this sector and we're committed to doing it.

Budget 2024 increased support to Research Manitoba by \$250,000, which will help leverage provincial and private-sector funding.

We have also increased financial supports for Indigenous students. Budget 2024 added 500,000 to the Manitoba Scholarship and Bursary Initiative budget, increasing support to the Indigenous Education Awards provided by the Business Council of Manitoba.

We want every student to be successful and we know that not every student has the same pathway through and to post-secondary education. And we're doing all we can to help as many students be successful as possible.

Students from Yellowquill University College can now access the Business Council Indigenous Education Awards through the MSBI program. And smaller

colleges and universities who were previously exempt are now receiving a set floor or minimum amount through MSBI regardless of fundraising capacity, so that students can access scholarships and bursaries anywhere.

For example, this helps Northern and Indigenous students at UCN, ensuring that they can be supported financially while they study.

We are also recognizing Indigenous-led higher education consistent with Truth and Reconciliation commitments, as well as UNDRIP.

We introduced a new regulation providing Yellowquill University College degree-granting status for its First Nations bachelor of education program. This will certify their graduates to teach in any school across the province. This is transformational and it is just one of the many steps that we'll be taking as a government to advance reconciliation.

We also provided Yellowquill University College a one-time grant of 250,000 to support work to further recognize its program.

And one of the things I'm most proud of is how we've made it easier for students to access student aid and post-secondary education. Students are at the centre of everything we do.

*(14:50)

More Manitoba students are now accessing Student Aid, and we are processing their applications faster than ever, getting them the money they need sooner. We have prioritized this important area by adding staff.

Budget 2024 is providing \$95 million in student loans, \$15 million more than last year, and \$31.7 million in administrative costs, up \$9 million from last year, to continue to offer student loans at zero per cent interest.

As of August 31, 2024, we have received 9 per cent more applications from students that—at the same time last program year we have disbursed \$61.3 million in funding, a 65 per cent increase in funding disbursed compared to the same time last year; 6,569 students received at least one payment from MSA, which is 53 per cent higher than the same time last year. We've increased the shelter allowance rates in Manitoba Student Aid to accurately reflect housing and rental costs, and this will put even more money in the pockets of students.

We have heard from our partners at colleges and universities, who have been taking the time to email and call, to note how they are seeing tremendous improvements in our service to students, including: sharp differences in service and application processing compared to previous years; a drastic positive change at Manitoba Student Aid; staff morale sharply increased; and impressive service to students. And application processing times have decreased over last year and past years, and disbursements are ahead of the game for students.

We have made changes to make it easier for students with disabilities to apply for and receive financial support for their education. We've increased the number of staff trained to process files for students with disabilities from just two to six. We have introduced a new process to better share information with accessibility counsellors at education institutions so we can work more closely with our partners to support students. And we are starting a new project to look for ways our processes can be streamlined and improved to better support students with disabilities.

We are continuing to identify ways to make even more improvements for students so they can be successful in their education journey, wherever it starts. We've also ended the funding freeze for adult education, which had been ignored for many years. Budget 2024 increased funding by \$1 million for a total of \$22.15 million after a decade of a complete funding freeze.

And we are paying attention to this important sector and brought back legislation that ensures that supporting adult learning and literacy remains a priority.

Lastly, we replaced the GED with an improved tool to help job seekers in employment. We launched a new credential called the CAEC—Canadian Adult Education Credential. It's offered online and is reflective of Canada's diverse cultures.

The Chairperson: We thank the minister for those comments.

Does the official opposition critic have any opening statements?

Mr. Richard Perchotte (Selkirk): I want to thank everybody for taking the time today to go through these Estimates with myself and our staff as they come in.

This is my first time being in Estimates, so it's going to be a learning process for myself. I am here on behalf of everybody involved in the advanced edu-

cation and training, from the schools to the students to the parents that are hoping their children can succeed and do better in life.

I'm looking forward to getting some words on the record and getting some knowledge for myself, as everything that we do here is a learning process, and I'm looking forward to learning. Just like advanced education and training can further people's careers, this opportunity can further my knowledge in what is happening in the department.

And just to close off by saying thank you very much for taking the time.

The Chairperson: We thank the critic from the official opposition for those remarks.

Under Manitoba practice, debate on the minister's salary is the last item considered for a department. Accordingly, we shall now defer consideration of line item 44.1(a) contained in resolution 44.1.

This time, we invite ministerial and opposition staff to enter the Chamber, and I would ask the minister and critic to please introduce their staff in attendance.

MLA Cable: Thank you so much. I am so pleased to invite my department staff in today.

We have, to my right, in front of me, Jan Forster, deputy minister; she is one of the most experienced and knowledgeable deputies that the province has had the pleasure of hosting, and I'm incredibly grateful for her depth of knowledge and for her steadfastness.

I also have, to my left, Carlos Matias, executive financial officer and assistant deputy minister of our finance division. Like Jan, Carlos is a fountain of knowledge and if you ever have any questions about trivia of previous years in this building, Carlos knows everything.

I also have Kate Bolton, assistant deputy minister of Student Access and Success. And I want to take this time, again, to thank Kate for the amazing improvements we've seen in Student Aid. Thanks to Kate's leadership under Jan and Colleen, we've been able to really serve students well and I'm so proud that they're here with us.

And last, but certainly not least, I have Colleen Kachulak, assistant deputy minister of Advanced Education; again, another person with a wealth of knowledge who goes above and beyond to find the answer and is doing a tremendous job currently in doing consultations for the OAG recommendations.

So I would like to take this moment to thank Colleen for that great work.

Mr. Perchotte: Joining me today is Mathew Preprost, my researcher.

The Chairperson: In accordance with subrule 78(16), during the consideration of departmental Estimates, questioning for each department shall proceed in a global manner, with questions put on the resolutions once the official opposition critic indicates that the questioning has concluded.

The floor is now open for questions.

Mr. Perchotte: Can the minister confirm the organizational chart in the supplemental Estimates is complete and up to date?

MLA Cable: As of April 1, 2024, which was just a few short months ago—and April's a great month, my birthday's in April—this chart was accurate as of April 1, 2024. I don't believe there has been any changes since then.

* (15:00)

I believe that it is a fulsome organizational chart. And as with everything else, we are fully transparent and open, so should we have any major changes, we are happy to offer the member that information at any time.

Mr. Perchotte: Thank you to the minister for that answer.

Unfortunately, the way the chairs are here feels like we're going to be peeking around people. Unfortunately, we have backs to ourselves.

Yes, if that chart is not up to date, I'll take you up on the offer to send the corrected chart over.

Could you please tell me what political staff work out of the minister's office or within their preview?

MLA Cable: I thank the honourable member for the question because it gives me an opportunity to really sing the praises of the political staff that work in my office.

As an executive assistant, I have Serina Pottinger. She is an incredible human who is so dedicated and knows exactly the right thing to say and when to say it. I would trust her with my kids and my cats and all of the secrets that are tucked away in my bottom drawer. And I just really want to take this opportunity to thank Serina for all of the work that she does day to day and for the amount of support that she offers me every single day.

As another political staff, I have Ruth Shead. She is my director of ministerial affairs. And Ruth, we are so grateful to have Ruth come from an experience at the University of Manitoba. She knows the system very, very well and has been integral at helping me adjust to this role. She is an incredible relationship builder and also has a tremendous amount of experience in news media. So again, Ruth, I know you're watching. Thank you for all of your support and for your expert knowledge.

I think, as a former staffer myself, often political staff are put into a particular category, and sometimes they're not given the appropriate reverence. It is a really difficult job, and it takes a lot of courage and a lot of dedication, and you have to be able to weather good times and bad times.

And I think, you know, if I think about the staff in my office overall, I have a staff of all women, and that is by design. And I'm grateful for all of the women who work for me, and I'm grateful for the women that came before me and gave me the opportunity to rise to become my best self, and I hope that the work that my staff does day-to-day that they find it rewarding and that they find themselves in it and that they find their own voices in this because this space, I'm reminded, as we're in this big beautiful Legislature, has not had that many women occupy seats in here. And the halls have not had that many women walk through them, and I'm incredibly grateful to have a supportive team around me and to be able to give—to offer an opportunity to folks to be a part of this really incredible, incredible space and work.

Mr. Perchotte: Like to thank the minister for those comments. I can appreciate the importance of the people who surround you. In private business, it was to—the employees that made the owners and the management look good all the time. So I appreciate that.

Are you able to give us a breakdown of the salaries of people in the department as well as a pay scale that they are on?

MLA Cable: Can I kindly ask the member for clarification: Which staff and which members he's speaking of.

Mr. Perchotte: Yes, so just to be clear, I'm looking at all the staff that work directly in your office.

* (15:10)

MLA Cable: Anyone who is an order-in-council, that is publicly available, so they're posted as they always

have been, at least in the last decade or so, posted online once they are—they've gone through.

Other employees will all fall under the government of Manitoba general. So depending on their category and their classification, their salary is also publicly available. For folks who are non-represented, again, it will depend on classification. And anyone who makes over—I think it used to be 75 but I'm hearing now \$85,000, that is publicly available under the public sector compensation act.

So I know that, you know, all—not only government of Manitoba but our arm's-length agencies and other reporting entities are also subject to that. So sometimes, for a fun game, I like to look for my friends' names, just to see how much are you making over there, what are you doing? But that is all publicly available, and the administrative staff, the same, they follow the general classifications as the same as other ministers' offices. And so that's all available in the main contract as well.

It is interesting, though, when we look at salary and wage disparity and things like that, I'm heartened to see that we are moving closer to wage equity. We are, thanks to big strides in collective bargaining and big strides in different sectors, we are moving to a place where men and women and gender-diverse folks are played—are paid comparable wages, similar same wages for work of similar same value.

And that makes me, as a parent, feel so proud and hopeful for the future. I have a son, I have a daughter, and I want to know that they are going to be compensated in an equitable way, and that when they find their way into the world of work, that my son, as much as I love him—I don't have favourites—that he will not be paid more than my daughter. And also that our background, our cultural background, would not play into how we are paid. The fact that we have Métis roots, that my—would not pay—play into whether or not we get paid the same amount.

And so, as we're talking about salary and how folks are compensated, I'm grateful that folks in this building are compensated fairly, for the most part, and that we have good benefits packages for people, and that, when folks come to work here, we know that they're coming to a position that pays them a living wage where they can support themselves and their families.

Mr. Perchotte: Earlier you alluded to your staff and how you tremendously appreciated them. You also

said that you trust them with the secrets that you have in the bottom of your desk.

Is there a lot of secrets in your department we should be wary of? I wasn't even planning on asking these questions, but when someone says they're going to trust a staff with the secrets in the bottom of my desk, I have to ask.

MLA Cable: I thank the honourable member for the question, and I'm reminded that tongue-in-cheek responses don't play well in the Chamber.

This was simply to say that I think of her as a sister, and I think of her as somebody who is trustworthy and steadfast. Something as simple as knowing what I had for lunch is something that I would trust her with, whether or not I had my 12 glasses of water that my husband requests that I drink every day.

And I think that, especially in a time where it is difficult—we hear all of the time about, you know, employee shortages or challenges in workforce development. One of the things—we can train different skills, and there can be training programs for many, many, many different things.

But one of the things that I haven't found in my experience that you can train for is that sense of trust that—the culture piece is very difficult to instill in folks. Not that it's not worth trying; it's always worth trying. But that foundational trust between people, it's—I liken it to the football field. You know that everybody's got a position on the field that's valuable, and you have to trust that they know what they're supposed to be doing.

And when you don't have that, you see organizations struggle. That foundational trust is so important to functional work groups. And we've seen in recent history many very successful, productive organizations really struggling because that sense of trust has been depleted between employees or between employees and management. And it becomes very difficult to move forward on projects and initiatives when you don't have that foundational piece.

And, again, back to my beloved staff. You know, I know that if we're working on a play on the field, that they're there, and that if I'm playing quarterback and I'm tossing the ball that they'll be somebody there to pick it up. And I'm—again, I'm just so grateful that we have such a great team working together.

Mr. Perchotte: Thank you, Minister, for that. It does 'clare' up the—clear up the situation with the hidden secrets.

Does the minister have any staff who are currently on secondment, and if so, will they disclose those salary and benefit costs?

* (15:20)

MLA Cable: The individual I noted before, Ruth Shead, is on secondment from University of Manitoba, and like our other reporting entities, their public sector compensation is easily publicly available. So the most recent that they have posted is 2023, but that is publicly available.

And I was just reminded that October is Women's History Month, so it's funny that thinking about pay equity and representation was top of mind. The theme for this year is Women at Work: Economic Growth Past, Present and Future. And just thinking about the opportunities that exist for women and young girls now.

My own daughter has said that she would like to be a pro soccer player or part of the women's NBA. And it's striking to me that when I was growing up, that that was an option for boys, but not girls. And that when she says I might want to be a pro soccer player, that that's possible and that her wages would be comparable to that of boys and men in that space.

I think that's all I have on this one.

Mr. Perchotte: I just want to try and direct the minister to keeping her points relevant. I know that we're parents, and we're very excited about our children, but I'd like to just stay on track here without getting off—I'd just hate to call point of order when I know that you just love and cherish your family.

Are there any vacancies in the department or is the minister anticipating adding any positions? Or are they fully staffed?

MLA Cable: I thank the member for the question.

As of August 31, 2024, we had a total value of 35.00 vacant FTEs which, you know, in light of the last seven and a half years of budget cuts, blunt tools across the civil service, a mass exodus due to a really harsh management style and an unwelcoming environment for civil servants, I'm honestly surprised it's not a little bit more.

We value the work that civil servants do in a huge way. And, you know, any of the items that I listed earlier on as achievements in our department are achievements of our department. It is a collective effort and it's the work of hard-working civil servants who have weathered some really stressful, chal-

lenging times and stuck it out because they believe in building a better Manitoba.

And I'm incredibly grateful for their dedication and incredibly grateful for the skills that they bring, and the expertise. We know that these jobs aren't easy. And we know that the days can be long and you're spending time away from family, but if we are doing this thing right in government, we are giving people meaningful work—not counting regulations—giving people meaningful work to do that maximizes their skills and abilities and hopefully gives them something new to learn every day.

My great-grandfather used to say the day isn't done if you haven't learned something new. And it—not only to give them a sense of accomplishment and value in their lives, but for the rest of us, as citizens of Manitoba, to really reap the reward of that hard, hard work.

Mr. Perchotte: The staff that we spoke about earlier and that was listed—do they deal with the case work that comes into the office, or can you tell me if another person is responsible for that?

* (15:30)

MLA Cable: So in response to that question, there's a couple of different kinds of casework. So, in my constituency office, my constituency staff deal with casework and move it along.

In the department, it really is a student-centred department. So, you know, compared to when I took over this portfolio, which was about a year ago, where I would receive many, many emails about quality of service or time lag, I'll be very honest, we receive very few now. I would say, on average, one a week, which is fantastic.

And the response that we get back is that it was resolved quickly, in expedient—very expedient, efficient fashion, and nearly every time to the student's satisfaction. So that is depending on whether it has come through a Student Aid issue, a disability support issue, whether or not it is—those are the main ones, really.

However, if it has to do with an institution, so a complaint against an individual institution or professor or instructor or anything really related to an independent institution, we don't intervene. This is—institutions have autonomy and processes in place, and we trust that the institutions are going to fall back on those processes and that legislation.

And if they can't, this is when we are able to identify the gaps that exist in policy. So if, for ex-

ample, somebody comes to us with a challenge with an institution, and there isn't a remedy through their existing policies but we know that it is not reflective of the kind of education experience or system that we want for students, that's when we work with the institutions, usually, to come up with some additional measures together. But, really, if it is to do with the institution, that's for them to navigate.

I am—you know, I heard from one of your colleagues last week, actually, that he had forwarded on a concern—*[interjection]* Bless you—from a constituent about a Student Aid challenge. And it was remedied the same day, and I went to speak to with him and he said they're—they already texted me. They can't believe it's already been dealt with.

So again, I thank the—and really lift up the staff that work in Student Access and Success, Student Aid, because they really take to heart how much it meant to students. This is the difference between sometimes buying books, paying rent, buying groceries.

But, really, at the end of the day, it's peace of mind that things are being dealt with, because as you're—as you recall, when you're a student, you have many, many, many things to worry about. And one of the things that I would hope that many students don't have to worry as much about is those financial issues that are really foundational to folks being able to be successful.

The Chairperson: I'll just remind the minister that the responses should come through the Chair.

Mr. Perchotte: I can appreciate the comments of the minister. When I was attending post-secondary school, I was running a business. I was working full-time and attending school. So the challenges out there are massive.

And one of the challenges we recently seen was cybersecurity.

What can you tell us about the nature and scope of the recent cybersecurity attack on the University of Winnipeg? Was that attack a part of a larger co-ordinated effort or is it a stand-alone incident? And how soon was the government notified? And what immediate steps were taken?

The Chairperson: And before I pass it off to the minister, I'll remind the critic that the comments should come through the Chair.

* (15:40)

MLA Cable: I thank the honourable member for the question.

You know, it was a really serious attack, and as we know, cybersecurity issues affect all sectors now, and it is evolving, and the risks are large and they're constantly changing.

In some—we were notified quickly by the institution, and, you know, we're grateful to have good working relationships with all of our institutions and the support of the chief information officer in government, as well as DTS. We work closely with them to—anytime that there's a change made to Student Aid or anything on our websites, we work very closely with DTS to make sure that our security is as robust as it can be.

Every system, in every place, anywhere, none are infallible, and it is big money and big business for the folks who are in it.

And what we can do as a Province is to ensure that we're doing all we can in terms of best practices, ensuring that we give students the opportunity to learn about this evolving sector, to make sure that institutions know and understand their obligations around privacy.

During the U of W attack, Student Aid worked closely with University of Winnipeg to ensure that students weren't any more adversely impacted in the disruption. We know that the school year was extended to accommodate an exam period. We worked with—closely with U of W to ensure that students were covered for that period so that the impact on students was mitigated as much as it could be.

Their—U of W advised that their investigation into the breach is complete. They installed advanced security tools to provide strong protection against future cyberthreats and attacks.

But, really, I want to reiterate that this is a space that is constantly evolving, and one of the things that we can do is to ensure that we are finding partnerships with the most skilled and the most advanced tech firms, to trust the experience of the folks that we have working in this field and to really consider how we move forward when we inevitably change technology.

We are in a bit of a technology deficit in government, I would say. It's surprising to me how little was invested into the backbone of our technological infrastructure. We have—I inherited a system that is quite aged, and we're working to upgrade. There's a lot of data points that I would love to be able to look at and

share and analyze, but we just don't have the systems in place.

And again, when you think about years of reductions and restrictions on funding, you're going to feel it. And we feel it in our tech systems, in the lack of data and in, you know, some of the places that we would really want to be probably a little bit more ahead.

Mr. Perchotte: I'd like to find out a little bit more from the department as to this particular cyberattack.

Was it nefarious actors outside of the country that performed this attack, or was it in-house? Was it a student themselves, taking retribution for something they didn't like? Did we ever get to the bottom of where the cyberattack came from?

Those things help us to make sure that they don't happen again.

MLA Cable: On advice from experts, this is not information that we would share. This is information that the folks who need to know are in knowledge of.

* (15:50)

In the same way that we would not want to bring more attention to nefarious actors in other space, it is not in our best interests in terms of security to discuss who or where or how. It is simply inviting another attack and, frankly, the opportunity for groups to one-up each other.

Rest assured that our CIO has confidential conversations with all of the institutions, and there is a table specifically dedicated to cybersecurity where folks can discuss issues in a confidential way and learn from one another and really explore best practices.

I can appreciate the interest in getting to the bottom and the whodunitness, but the reality is that, in times like this and in spaces like these, that is not helpful to have in the public sphere. And I'm sure that you can appreciate that, with how complex and potentially damaging this is, that it's best left to the experts to discuss.

Mr. Perchotte: Honourable Chair, I wholeheartedly disagree.

There was a crime committed. There was victims of that crime. There's people that are demanding answers as to the—getting their data back and make sure somebody is held accountable. We need to know if the parties are involved have been caught, have there been charges pending? Is this—is there legal action taken from this government, or is this government hiding the information for unknown reasons?

This is paramount in our 'jujisaal' system that when somebody commits a crime, they need to be held accountable. And to have the minister tell committee here that they don't think it's in the public interest, well, that's how our system works. That—the public needs to know that when people perpetrate a crime, there's charges being brought forward and they'll be held accountable. And that, as a victim of that crime, you have a right to confront your—the people who perpetrated that and make sure that the courts know the damage that has been caused.

I'll ask the—for the department one more time to clarify why they would hide information. Students need to know that this government has their back and charges are being filed.

MLA Cable: I am confident when I am not an expert that I can say, I am not an expert. I know that law enforcement, that folks who are skilled in cybersecurity, that folks who work in 'digital' technology systems every single day are the experts in this case.

And their advice, as experts—again, as people who are skilled in this area, who we pay to have the expertise—they are the ones who are saying that we need not spread this information widely. And I think it's a dangerous precedence to begin questioning expert advice, especially with things as important as this.

There are many things that we can learn about and be knowledgeable about in our roles as legislators, and there are many things that we need to trust to other folks. The U of W is following the advice of police. And as I look around the room here, I don't see anyone else who is skilled in that, who is skilled in cybersecurity law, who is skilled in digital technology systems. And I trust that all of us have the utmost concern for the outcomes for this.

I have an individual sitting at the table here who is one of the people who has been affected, and she is confident in the response from the university. They have a website available for folks. This is not—I think it's very dangerous to start inserting ourselves into areas that really are best left to folks who understand the landscape and who are in direct communication not only with local police but national police services, international police services around this.

This is not a simple check the camera for a break and enter. That's not what this situation is. And I do not—I will trust the experts and not look to do more damage to students and potential damage to institutions by wading into areas that aren't for us.

Mr. Perchotte: I find that answer just shocking to begin with. I would've expected on this line of questioning that the minister would have said, thank you for the question. We have spoken to the law enforcement. We've talked to the universities. They do have—they've identified the source of this, they are dealing with it and we're moving forward.

So what we're getting here is nothing of that. We're saying, don't ask because you're not qualified to ask. Well, we are qualified to ask. It's my child who was a part of that. I paid that tuition, and I want to know that my information is safe in case I want to pay the tuition to another student.

I think that when we talk about student safety, finances become a big part of it. We didn't get the answer that I was hoping for that; to say, hey, we've got this under of control. We've got people being charged. We know the perpetrators of this event, and we're moving forward to make sure it never happens again. What I got is, we can't tell you if we got them or not, and don't ask. So let's move on from that.

Student safety. What can you tell—what can the minister's department tell us about the Palestine protest on the university campuses? When did they first become aware of them? What did they—what was their response? And what did they do to make sure that the safety of the students was 'paramont' during these protests?

* (16:00)

MLA Cable: The events that happened last fall and continue to happen are nothing that I would wish on friends and family anywhere. Not here, not in Gaza, nowhere would I wish the trauma on anyone.

If I were to say that it hasn't been a difficult year, that would not be true. It has been a very difficult year for folks here who have family members abroad, for Jewish students on campus, for Muslim students on campus. It has been a very, very difficult time.

And I can tell you that, since the beginning of the conflict, that I have had regular conversations with the Jewish Federation, with the Muslim institute—sorry, that's not correct, Manitoba Islamic Association. I have had meetings with student groups, I have had meetings with faculty, I've had conversations with groups from here, nationally, conversations with folks from many, many different places; and the primary concern is always student safety.

Students deserve to feel safe on campus, and every institution has been doing a tremendous job at

ensuring that that has happened. Universities are also places for respectful dialogue, and if we lose that ability in our society to have discussion, to have tough conversations with each other, we are in a much worse place than we are now. And it has been tremendously rewarding, working with different groups and bringing different groups together.

I know that members on both sides of the House have done their best to try to defuse the situation, to offer heartfelt thoughts, to offer compassion and support to community members, and I'm not—I won't stop doing that. We have a duty as legislators and, frankly, as good citizens, to do all we can to bring people together. And especially in the post-secondary space, I take that very, very seriously.

I had the privilege of attending the 10th anniversary of the Canadian Museum for Human Rights about a week ago, two weeks ago, and in just what seemed a little poetic, was having a lovely conversation with Jeff Lieberman at the CMHR. And a dear Muslim friend of mine walked up to say hello, and I was able to introduce them to one another. She's very involved in her community, he is incredibly involved in his community and was able to make the introduction and to witness conversation between two folks that everybody is telling us can't happen. And it can, and it needs to.

And we will continue to support students of all backgrounds and all faiths and oh—all socio and economic statuses to ensure that they get the best education possible, that they can arrive at and stay safe on campus, and we will not, at any point, fall victim to divisive politics around this incredibly important issue.

Mr. Perchotte: That did not answer the question as to when they heard or what they did to alleviate that, so I'm just going to move on to the next question.

There have been reports of violence, harassment or even intimidation stemming from the protest. Did the minister receive any direct complaints from students or faculty about feeling unsafe during these protests, and were law enforcement or campus security involved in de-escalating tensions between the students and protestors?

MLA Cable: So while I don't love receiving reports from students, I do take receiving them as a great honour, that folks trust that there are mechanisms in place and that there will—there are people that will act.

* (16:10)

We have recently done, in late spring, a scan, both nationally and with our own institutions in the province, around safe learning spaces, anti-hate policies, really took a good scan of all of the existing policies and supports in post-secondary. Every institution has some—again, respecting institutional autonomy—every institution has some level of policy. Some are unsurprisingly more comprehensive than others, but all of them respect academic freedom and respect the space that the institution occupies.

We also—just in September, Manitoba launched mandatory anti-racism training for government employees and the broader public sector; so that includes colleges and universities. It's mandatory training and it must be completed by the end of calendar year 2024. The department has been actively working with public colleges and university to promote student safety and mental health. We're actively following up with institutions to see where their employees are at in terms of doing that safe—that training.

It's—every student deserves to feel safe, and we talk a lot about personal safety in terms of health policy and different things, but there is a psychological safety that folks deserve to feel as well, and we need to honour the diversity that is in our communities. There's—I—one of the very first lessons that I learned in political theory was the freedom to versus freedom from. And we're free to express ourselves, up unto the point where we infringe upon somebody else's freedoms.

And I think it's—for some folks, it's difficult to navigate when exactly those—where that border exists, where that barrier exists, but we need to continue having the conversations and to continue creating a space where people can have difficult discussions. If we're not having them in spaces where there are protections and where they have historically been the place to have them, then they're happening in other spaces that are just far less safe.

Mr. Perchotte: Honourable Chair, I'd like to talk a little bit more about safety of students. That is paramount for me, as it's—as a parent who had children who went to two different post-secondary institutions, making sure that students are safe is very important.

When looking to their future, we can't have a blight on the education system, where they're assaulted or they're intimidated. So we need students to be engaged, excited, educated and enter the workforce after being trained.

So, my question is: What measures are in place to prevent and address sexual violence on university and college campuses, especially in light of Bill 10? How is the minister and the department tracking and monitoring sexual violence on campus? How are the universities being held accountable for implementing the policies that protect students from sexual violence and most importantly, what resources are being made available to the survivors of an assault?

MLA Cable: Again, I thank the member for the question.

And I'm heartened to hear that he's come around since debate on Bill 10 and has acknowledged that there needs to be good supports and measures in place to protect students, specifically—more specifically female and gender-diverse folks who are disproportionately affected by sexual violence on campus.

We have been working closely with our institutions to talk about improvements that need to be made and generally checking in because we value those good working relationships between our government and the institutions that provide quality post-secondary education for our students.

We are always working with our faculty and our institutions and students. We've also consulted with experts who work across the country on sexual violence policies. And really and truly, we're working on this collaborative relationship that will allow us to have an open conversation about the needs in our communities.

I'd like to put on the record while I can positive response from consultation with one of the national groups: It's heartening to see the Manitoba government propose to implement promising practice to address campus sexual violence. These legislative changes would create opportunities for post-secondary institutions to work alongside students, survivors, faculty, staff and community organizations to collectively build safer campuses.

This is from Anoodth Naushan, interim CEO of Possibility Seeds. I will table the document if I need to do so. I can see the Clerk's table conferring here. Do we have another copy of this? Perfect.

* (16:20)

The short answer is we are actively engaging with all institutions to ensure compliance. Again, I know the member opposite is a parent himself and, you know, again, as a parent of my own kids, I want for my kids, I want for everybody else as well.

And I will take a moment to thank the previous government for bringing in the original legislation around sexual violence policy. I know that the—one of the members was staff at the time who worked with the minister to get it done. And, you know, the change that we made ensured that we had additional tools for compliance.

But I don't think that we give thanks enough in this building, so I want to extend my gratitude to the members across the way for originally bringing in that policy under a previous member that is no longer with us in the Chamber.

The Chairperson: And so, if the minister was reading from a private document, we'd ask that you table it.

There's been a request for a brief recess.

Is it agreed for a short—would that work for the minister? Yes? Two minutes.

The committee recessed at 4:22 p.m.

The committee resumed at 4:26 p.m.

The Chairperson: Will the committee please come to order.

Mr. Perchotte: Just for the record, I was not ever against the safety of students. I was against the overreach of government taking away potential autonomy from universities and colleges. Student safety is extremely important.

Also important is how we navigate the cap on international students. In September, we have a further reduction of our international student base by another 10 per cent. And we've seen the devastating blow that had on non-publicly funded institutions. We know that whether they're publicly funded or non-publicly funded, that everybody is going to be facing significant financial revenue losses moving forward.

I asked, only a couple of days ago, the minister about having contingency funds in the budget from 2024 and addressing 2025, and there was three opportunities to put on record that there was going to be funds allotted to make sure that the schools would not be facing financial deficits.

Again, I'll ask the minister and the department: What specific steps is the minister taking place to ensure that the universities and colleges do not resort to tuition hikes to cover budget shortfalls caused by the cap on international students? Are these contingency funds being allotted now, are they in the budget for next year? Students need to know this.

* (16:30)

MLA Cable: Thank you for your grace, honourable Chair.

I find this line of questioning challenging because—well, for a variety of reasons. The first of which was from 2016 to 2022, funding was cut by 17.8 per cent under the Pallister and Stefanson government. From 2016-17 to '21-22, operating grants were cut from \$475.9 million to \$461.7 million. When factoring inflation in, this left universities with a \$100-million shortfall.

The previous Progressive Conservative government phased out the tuition rebate, making it less desirable to study in Manitoba and resulting in a 16.3 per cent increase in tuition. Members opposite put it on students to make up for their cuts. As the—I will give the member credit, as he rightly pointed out, this was a federal government decision, the cap on international students. It has unsurprisingly had an impact on Manitoba schools.

But to—on the—on—when we first discussed this, the main concern was about—let me recall, private institutions not getting PALs. And now we're talking about public institutions not being funded properly because of the shortfalling international student revenue. But if you follow the bread crumbs back, it all leads back to the previous Progressive Conservative government.

Between 2017 and 2023, they cut funding at the University of Manitoba by 4.6 per cent, the University of Winnipeg by 3.7 per cent, Brandon University by 3.7 per cent, and University College of the North by 6.6 per cent and all post-secondaries in Manitoba by 4.4 per cent. The funding cuts by the PCs made 'universalies'—universities rely more heavily on international students' revenue while also making it less accessible for domestic students.

Our government invests in our post-secondary institutions so that all students can access them. And I'll remind the member that we fought for more international students than originally allotted to Manitoba when the federal 'govermade' it—government made this short-sighted change.

We continue to advocate for Manitoba. We were elected to fight for Manitobans, to make life better, to make education more accessible, to make life more affordable, to advance reconciliation. We will continue to fight for Manitobans. That is the job that we were elected to do and will continue to do.

Mr. Perchotte: Once again, the minister is stuck in the past. I am not Brian Pallister. I'm not Heather Stefanson. I am the MLA from Selkirk looking to the future for the students that I am here representing. I am looking forward to not just for tomorrow, but for a year from now, five years from now, 10 years from now, as more students enter here. And hopefully we can get more international students back on track.

I'm asking the minister what they are doing to ensure that the funding is there, that the budget has the funds to make sure that the losses that are coming from the international student cap will be alleviated by this government so that potential students don't face huge tuition increases.

I'm not talking about previous governments. I don't want to go back 10 years ago or 15 years ago or 20 years ago. I want to talk about what they're doing. They are in charge. They are responsible for carrying the ball forward to make sure these students can have a touchdown.

So can the minister please answer the question, what that department is doing to make sure that the funding is in place so the students will not have tuition hikes coming forward.

MLA Cable: The—one of the pieces of working in the kind of legislative system that we work in is that it's party politics. And so while you might want to run away from the record of your predecessors, you are wholly part of it.

And I wish that we could do away with the history and that we could just forget the massive cuts from the past and that we could just wave a magic wand and make everything better. Because I sure would want to have all of my health-care facilities staffed up right away. I sure would want to have every single institution in our province fully staffed and fully funded.

Unfortunately, that's not the mess that we inherited. That's not what we walked into. Again, from 2016 to 2022, funding was cut by 17.8 per cent under the Pallister and Stefanson government. I know the member opposite doesn't want to accept this and would like to carry on as though this didn't happen. And that would be politically advantageous, but I can tell you for the people that were impacted by these cuts, it had nothing to do with politics and everything to do with their ability to build a successful life here in Manitoba.

People voted with their feet and left this province in droves, and we are working hard every day to build Manitoba back to a place that people want to come to

learn and live and build a family. It is incumbent upon all of us to build the province that we want to live in.

From 2016 to 2017, to 2021 to 2022, operating grants were cut from \$475.9 million to \$461.7 million. When factoring inflation in, this left universities with a \$100-million shortfall.

They phased out the tuition rebate, making it—

An Honourable Member: Point of order.

MLA Cable: Truth hurts.

Point of Order

The Chairperson: The honourable member for Selkirk, on a point of order.

Mr. Perchotte: The minister had promised to keep Manitoba schools whole. Will there be tuition hikes under her administration, yes or no?

An Honourable Member: That's not a point of order.

The Chairperson: Would the minister like to speak to the point of order?

MLA Cable: It's not a point of order.

The Chairperson: So, a point of order should not be used to further debate and further—and this is actually just a dispute over the facts and not a point of order.

* * *

MLA Cable: Members opposite put it on students to make up for their cuts to post-secondary education in Manitoba. Between 2017 and 2023, they cut funding to the University of Manitoba by 4.6 per cent; University of Winnipeg by 3.7 per cent; Brandon University by 3.7 per cent; University College of the North by 6.6 per cent; and all post-secondaries in Manitoba by 4.4 per cent.

Honourable Chair, in our very first budget we increased funding to all post-secondary institutions by 6 per cent to a total of \$831 million. So we are moving against the trend that the previous government started. We are making investments in post-secondary. We are helping to enable opportunities for learners of all ages. And we know how valuable post-secondary education is, not only to the fabric of our society but to the future economy and the Manitoba of the future.

And I can appreciate why the member doesn't want to hear the facts and doesn't want to face it, because it is a dark time in our province's history, and it is—it must be frustrating to feel as though you've come in and you're a new member and you want a clean slate. But this is, again, part of the system that we work in. This

is part of being accountable for the actions of your government.

* (16:40)

Mr. Perchotte: Honourable Chair, I find it a little disturbing, this diatribe that's just been going on here.

So every day I get up and when I do ask questions, I try to look to the forward, I try to be positive. I want to inspire people to do the right thing and move forward. And we can't go back in the past and debate decades of stuff from one point of view or another.

And I understand that the minister doesn't have a platform to stand on, doesn't have any track record to bring forward and say, this is what we're doing, I'm proud of what I've done and we've got millions of dollars put over here.

They talk about increasing education, but yet we have the University of Winnipeg and the University of Manitoba each looking in millions of dollars of potential deficits this year.

And the member wants to talk about what they did before. Well, you know, when I was four, I drove a tricycle and the wheel fell off. Like, I—you know, I got past that. You know, I had a fight with a kid in junior high; I got past that. We need to get past the past and start looking to the future. You cannot move forward by looking in the past.

You need to tell me and tell the people around what the department is able to do to make life better for Manitobans. What will the students look at?

Instead of saying, yes, we've got the students, we've got funding put aside to make sure tuitions are not going up, instead they talk, well, Brian Pallister did this back in the day.

I don't care about that. I care about the kids that are in school now that are looking to say hey, I'm on a limited budget, and I'm going to have to invest in tuition. Do I invest in this province, who I believe that tuition's going to go up under this administration, or do I look somewhere else where I know it's stable?

And the minister refuses to answer questions. They just keep skirting around and dancing about what's going on and what's happening there, much like in question period, where they just: I'm going to sit down. We just can't sit down as government. We need to answer the questions that are brought forward.

Will the minister stand up and answer the questions that have been brought forward? Will there be tuition

hikes coming forward under this administration? Simple question: yes or no?

MLA Cable: I couldn't agree more that I should have a lot to be proud of, and we certainly do from this department.

Budget 2024 added \$32.9 million to post-secondary institutions for 111 more training seats, for critical front-line professionals like doctors, physician assistants and nurse practitioners; \$15.6 million to increase medical school seats from 110 to 140 in Winnipeg; \$370,000 for initial planning and work for the Brandon UGME 10-seat expansion; \$3.6 million to expand physician assistant seats from 15 to 30; \$802,000 to increase nurse practitioner seats from 25 to 45; \$1.2 million to expand physical therapy seats from 50 to 60; \$1.2 million to increase occupational therapy seats from 50 to 60, \$10 million to construct a new medical training building at Bannatyne campus, \$226,000 in capital funding to double primary-care paramedic training seats at UCN, in The Pas and Thompson, from 16 to 32.

We're also providing health-care training closer to home. We've moved forward on our commitment to create new doctor training seats at Brandon University. We're partnering with the University of Manitoba, BU and Prairie Mountain Health to train physicians in Brandon and surrounding regions. That makes me personally very happy as I have family, aging family in the Brandon area and I know that having health care closer to home is a real concern for them. And this move will help ensure that we have adequate staff in the Prairie Mountain Health region.

We're working closely in partnership with our college and universities to ensure that Manitoba has a high-quality post-secondary system, that it respects their autonomy and independence. We're working with our post-secondaries for reliable, stable, predictable funding, something they never had under the previous government. We are working on models that are not just for this year but are for subsequent years, so that institutions can plan, so that institutions know what's on the horizon, so that, when other interruptions come, that they're ready.

We quickly responded to the federal government's cap on international students to minimize disruptions and impacts to the system. We came up with a balanced plan to allocate the cap across institutions, focusing on our public institutions and needs in our labour market. We quickly developed a secure and efficient online portal to issue over 18,000 Manitoba provincial attestation letters for prospective undergraduate international

students. We were likely the first province in Canada to roll this out, 'minerizing' disruption.

What else can we be proud of here? We brought in new amendments to legislation to strengthen sexual violence policies. We increased funding for Research Manitoba. Budget 2024 increased support to Research Manitoba by \$250,000 which will help leverage federal and private sector funding. We also added another \$500,000 to the Manitoba Scholarship and Bursary Initiative budget, increasing support to Indigenous Education Awards provided by the Business Council of Manitoba.

Students from Yellowquill University College can now access the Business Council Indigenous Education Awards through the MSBI program. We are also recognizing Indigenous-led higher education, consistent with truth and reconciliation commitments as well as UNDRIP. We introduced a new regulation providing Yellowquill University College degree-granting status for its First Nations bachelor of education program. This will certify their graduates to teach in every school across the province.

And can you think of what a monumental impact that will have on this generation and future generations: to have Indigenous teachers in the classroom, to see reconciliation in action and for young people to be able to see teachers that look like them and sound like them and are from their home communities in the classroom?

This is transformational, and I couldn't be prouder.

Mr. Perchotte: Based on the fact that I have not got any real answers other than talking about a history lesson of the past, I have no further questions.

The Chairperson: Seeing no further questions, we will now turn to the resolutions, beginning with the second resolution as we have deferred consideration of the first resolution containing the minister's salary.

Resolution 44.2: RESOLVED that there be granted to His Majesty a sum not exceeding \$859,400,000 for Advanced Education and Training, Advanced Education, for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2025.

Resolution agreed to.

* (16:50)

Resolution 44.3: RESOLVED that there be granted to His Majesty a sum not exceeding \$85,291,000 for Advanced Education and Training, Student Access and Success, for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2025.

Resolution agreed to.

Resolution 44.4: RESOLVED that there be granted to His Majesty a sum not exceeding \$95,000,000 for Advanced Education and Training, Loans and Guarantees Programs, for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2025.

Resolution agreed to.

Resolution 44.5: RESOLVED that there be granted to His Majesty a sum not exceeding \$38,673,000 for Advanced Education and Training, Other Reporting Entities Capital Investment, for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2025.

Resolution agreed to.

The last item to be considered for the Estimates of this department is item 44.1(a), the minister's salary, contained in resolution 44.1.

At this point, we request that all ministerial and opposition staff leave the Chamber for consideration of this last item.

The floor is open for questions.

Mr. Perchotte: As I said earlier, this is a learning process for me. I believe in higher learning, and the ability to sit down in this Chamber and ask questions on this important topic was—been on my mind for quite some time.

Estimates seem to have got delayed over and over and over. And I was really hoping that we would have a fulsome change of ideas between the question and answer, that we actually got down to the heart of things where we know that students will be protected moving forward, much like I say, on the days that I ask questions in question period relating to Advanced Education and Training, I don't get an answer.

I seem like I either—the minister would need staff around to give me that answer or just doesn't want to provide it. I've seen several times where the minister just decided to sit down, and I think that we deserve much more from elected officials, especially in charge of a department as important as Minister of Advanced Education and Training.

Based on my—and assurance that this minister can deliver those questions and knows that role fully, I move that line 44—that line item 44.1(a) be amended so the Minister of Advanced Education and Training salary be reduced to \$1.

The Chairperson: Order.

It has been moved by the honourable member for Selkirk (Mr. Perchotte) that line item 44.1(a) be amended so that the Minister of Advanced Education and Training salary be reduced to \$1.

The motion is in order.

Are there any questions or comments on the motion?

Is the committee ready for the question?

An Honourable Member: Question.

The Chairperson: Shall the motion pass?

Some Honourable Members: Pass.

Some Honourable Members: No.

The Chairperson: I hear a no.

Voice Vote

The Chairperson: All those in favour of the motion, please say aye.

Some Honourable Members: Aye.

The Chairperson: All those opposed to the motion, please say nay.

Some Honourable Members: Nay.

The Chairperson: In my opinion, the Nays have it.

The motion is accordingly defeated.

* * *

The Chairperson: Resolution 44.1: RESOLVED that there be granted to His Majesty a sum not exceeding \$3,874,000 for Advanced Education and Training, Administration, for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2025.

Resolution agreed to.

This completes the Estimates for the Department of Advanced Education and Training.

The hour nearing 5 o'clock, what is the will of the committee?

Some Honourable Members: Rise.

The Chairperson: Committee rise.

IN SESSION

The Deputy Speaker (Tyler Blashko): The hour being 5 p.m., this House is adjourned and stands adjourned until 10 a.m. tomorrow.

The Legislative Assembly of Manitoba Debates and Proceedings
are also available on the Internet at the following address:

<http://www.manitoba.ca/legislature/hansard/hansard.html>