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**Wednesday 27 June 2001**

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des débats  
(Hansard)**

**Mercredi 27 juin 2001**

**Standing committee on  
estimates**

Ministry of Education

**Comité permanent des  
budgets des dépenses**

Ministère de l'Éducation

Chair: Gerard Kennedy  
Clerk: Susan Sourial

Président : Gerard Kennedy  
Greffière : Susan Sourial

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## LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF ONTARIO

## ASSEMBLÉE LÉGISLATIVE DE L'ONTARIO

STANDING COMMITTEE ON  
ESTIMATESCOMITÉ PERMANENT DES  
BUDGETS DES DÉPENSES

Wednesday 27 June 2001

Mercredi 27 juin 2001

*The committee met at 1607 in room 151.*

## MINISTRY OF EDUCATION

**The Vice-Chair (Mr Alvin Curling):** Let's resume the estimates of the Ministry of Education. Before we do so, I just want to clear up what we should be doing with the remaining time. We have about two hours and 39 minutes left for estimates for the Ministry of Education. When we complete today, we'll have approximately 30-something minutes left. We'd then have to transfer those minutes to September. I'll ask the committee if we would like to call for the vote at the end of this time. The fact is that some 30-odd minutes would have been dispensed with, which would conclude the Ministry of Education estimates. It would then be up to the members here to agree upon that.

**Mr Gerard Kennedy (Parkdale-High Park):** No.

**Mr Gilles Bisson (Timmins-James Bay):** It seems to me, why not just come back in the fall? There's only 30 minutes left, and then the next ministry, which is health, would be able to have the minister come in and do their presentation and their opening remarks. Then in the second meeting in the fall, we'd actually get into responses from critics and the rotation. So I'd prefer that the estimates do come back in the fall, personally.

**The Vice-Chair:** Well, let's proceed. We asked to get unanimous consent on this and I've got two dissenting voices here anyhow, so we will come back in September and do the remaining for the Ministry of Education, then.

I understand that the last time around, the Conservatives had four minutes of their time left.

**Mr John O'Toole (Durham):** Madam Minister, it's a pleasure once again. These have been very thorough examinations of estimates, and I think you've responded in many cases with what I think will go a long way toward building bridges and establishing some confidence in the public education system, not just with the \$360 million, but with the other initiatives for quality education being your primary focus.

I know how hard you work, not just in the House but also in the riding, because we have met on many occasions, both in schools and at the board office with trustees and parents. This is a graduation time of year. I know I'm scheduled to attend a number of graduations and to keep building those relationships. It's very important for that to happen.

I was very impressed with the initiatives you've taken with respect to the whole issue of respect and decorum, or setting a climate in the schools that gives teachers and students the right kind of learning environment. I think it's absolutely critical to establish respect. I'm not only speaking to the issue of student behaviour, but other activities that aren't appropriate for the education environment. Some would say it's been politicized in some situations and has affected students' learning environment, and that's just not acceptable.

I was very impressed with the announcements you made earlier in the year with respect to the seven demonstration projects on strict discipline that you've committed to. We're dealing with difficult classroom management issues, and I think you took the right step, because I have a lot of regard and a lot of respect for the Durham board. I was happy yesterday that they were able to reach an agreement because of your initiative of giving them more money to solve that extracurricular issue which our constituents have been dealing with. I think the demonstration that you've set for the Durham district board as being one of the seven participating pilots is a commendable example of your commitment to not just our own board, but to education.

Perhaps you could more clearly outline for members of the committee what the program goals are and what we can expect this coming September to build on that mutual respect in the classroom. Perhaps you can share that with us this afternoon.

**Hon Janet Ecker (Minister of Education, Government House Leader):** I agree that trying to ensure that our classrooms are safer places for both our students and our teachers was an important priority. During the last election, we said that if we were elected we would take a series of steps to try and make sure that could occur for our teachers and our students. We've brought in a code of conduct which outlines acceptable behaviour and outlines clear consequences for not meeting those standards of behaviour. We have a Safe Schools Act that gives principals and teachers authority to take the decisions they may need to take in the classroom and in the school to protect students, and also to have better authority for strangers on school property. So there are a number of steps we took there.

One of the other things we have done is to implement strict discipline programs for those students who have been expelled. Currently, if a student is expelled for bad

behaviour by a school board, there is no requirement for anything to happen to that student; they can just kind of wander off. We didn't think that was acceptable. The strict discipline program allows for that student to be able to earn their way back into a regular classroom.

To phase the program in, we have seven demonstration projects. We asked for proposals to do this, and we had some excellent ones from school boards in partnership with community agencies. The programs will do two things: they will provide the students with a continuing education, which is important, but they will also try to give them the tools or the support they need to deal with whatever problem caused the behaviour in the first place.

Durham board, for example, is one of the boards that have been involved with the seven projects. Actually, I should note that the Durham school board and the Durham Catholic board partnered to do this, which I think was an important thing. Peel, Toronto, Waterloo—there are a number of communities that are part of this. We also put in additional resources, about \$11 million, to help support this program.

**Mr Kennedy:** Madam Minister, just before we start into the primary subject, in the House earlier today you mentioned something about a parent you had met with congratulating you. I think you want to clarify, perhaps, because I understand in checking with the parent you were speaking about, it was not one of the parents I introduced in the House yesterday, nor was it one of the parents you met with yesterday. I think that a mistaken impression could have been created. I wonder if you could verify that that is indeed the case.

**Hon Mrs Ecker:** I said one of the parents who was a guest in that gallery had actually called me over yesterday and had talked to me about some improvements they had seen for their child. That's what I said in the House today. That indeed happened yesterday afternoon in question period. I didn't make any implications. I have no idea what group that parent may or may not have been with, but I said it was in that gallery, which is indeed a fact.

**Mr Kennedy:** I can understand the honest mistake, but I want to verify to you that I've checked with each of the parents and that's not their feeling about how this is working—very importantly—because they feel they've made some significant effort, and I agree with them. They've come down here and they've been trying to make a point to you. They would hope you'd be listening and they would not want to have their views misrepresented, so I appreciate that that was not what you intended to do.

**Hon Mrs Ecker:** Well, I didn't misrepresent their views.

**Mr Kennedy:** I certainly appreciate the fact that you were able to clarify that.

**Hon Mrs Ecker:** I also said in the House that I had met with several of those parents yesterday as well.

**Mr Kennedy:** That's where we're going to start off. Yesterday in committee you said there wasn't anything

you were specifically prepared to do, no specific action that you were able to offer for the malaise that is out there, to the boards that cannot afford to provide education assistants. I understand that in a private meeting you did offer some assurance, and I wonder if you could repeat that for the benefit of the committee. What are you prepared to do for these parents? They're here again today and so are some of the other parents. There are dozens and hundreds more like them. We discussed yesterday that you had a responsibility. You're the Minister of Education. The boards are struggling mightily. They are making these decisions to drop education assistants which is keeping some of their children out of school.

I want to know, are you really prepared to do something specific? Is there some new action you're prepared to take to ensure those kids are in school next fall? Because I understand from the parents that there is some willingness on your part, and I'd like you to share that with the committee.

**Hon Mrs Ecker:** As I said yesterday, we have taken a number of steps to try and improve the special education services. When individual cases are brought before the ministry in whatever fashion, we certainly attempt to see what we can do with the staff of the board. But I should also say, as I said yesterday, that it is the school boards that do continue to have the responsibility to make decisions around the allocation of their resources and that programming. Sometimes we can be of assistance with a school board, but it is ultimately their call.

We quite recognize the need for further resources. That's why we have increased resources and will continue to do so. We also quite recognize the concerns about too much administrative process, and we can talk about the steps we've taken to improve that, not only for less time being involved for both staff and parents but also for the resources that are being eaten up, if you will, by that process, which will be able to be used for service as opposed to administration. We will continue to take some of those steps because I think these parents do require additional assistance and additional help.

**Mr Kennedy:** That's where I would like to go. Let's get to the specifics of that. Let's find out exactly what you mean by that because you said that last year, and instead of a new streamlined service that trusts some of the people out there, trusts some of the parents and trusts some of the teachers to know what their needs are, you still are going ahead with this massive boondoggle. You're going to have all these kids audited again this fall.

**Hon Mrs Ecker:** No.

**Mr Kennedy:** Minister, I'll give you ample opportunity to answer. What parents have been advised of and what boards have been told is that there is going to be yet another assessing of children to take place on top of the three and four that have already been done. What some of these parents said, and I don't think they were being at all facetious, was, do you know something they don't? Some of them have Down's syndrome children and they don't think their situations are going to change substantially year to year or in two years or what have you.

Your ministry has created this incredible boondoggle of paperwork that, at the end of the day, because of your policy—you are the minister and this is, I guess, your decision—doesn't mean anything to these kids and to these parents. For the last two and three years, they've been filling out forms but that has not brought their child any more assistance than if they hadn't filled those forms out at all, and they have to do them numerous times because of the way your ministry requires it.

I am wondering if you can say very specifically what it is that will change, what you're prepared to do now to limit the amount of paperwork that these families have to go through, the assessments and the endless repetitive paperwork that is currently in the system as a requirement from your ministry. What are you going to do about that?

**Hon Mrs Ecker:** We are in the process of making a significant number of changes. One of the difficulties that we've had with this—first of all, let me step back. From the recommendations we received in the consultations and the expert committee that said, "Here are a series of things to improve how special education is delivered," one of the things they said is that school boards need two important things in their funding: one, they need money they can use flexibly, so that is indeed done; and secondly, they also need a way to determine who are the higher-needs students, those students who require additional supports that can be, in some cases, quite costly. So we need a process by which those students can be identified and assessed so the board and the ministry know how many students a school board has. That was a recommendation which the government accepted and we have been working with boards to put in place.

**Mr Kennedy:** Minister, can I ask you a very quick question?

**Hon Mrs Ecker:** One of the challenges we've had on this is that some school boards have not had the ability or the capacity—and that's not a criticism of boards; it's just a statement of fact—to actually deal with some of the assessments. We've had cases where parents have been asked to go through another assessment—

**Mr Kennedy:** Minister, you know how short the time is here.

**Hon Mrs Ecker:** —even though they've also had an assessment and the child's condition isn't going to change.

**Mr Kennedy:** I'm going to end up disagreeing on the historical thing unless—could you look at the changes you're going to do? Could you address that for us?

1620

**Hon Mrs Ecker:** We have been putting in place a way for the school boards that once the student is assessed—so we have that information, and for many students their condition or their difficulties or their challenges or their abilities are not going to change, so there is no need to have further assessment. That process is being phased in. Mr Peter Gooch from the ministry can talk about the steps that have been taken and the steps that will be taken

to minimize the administrative process. I'd like to turn it over to Mr Gooch to answer that question.

**Mr Kennedy:** Just before you do—and I am interested in some of what Mr Gooch has to say because he's been talking to some of the parents, and they've heard from him, and I'd like to hear him repeat some of that here today—I want to know from you, Minister, from an executive position, from a political accountability position, will you set an objective for your own ministry to stop harrying the people in the school system with so much paperwork? I put this to you last year, and the fact that it has gone on and is being proposed this fall—we'll find out in what form from Mr Gooch—allows you perhaps better latitude this year to answer affirmatively. The Ontario Principals' Council said 20% of their special education staff time was being wrapped up in the assessment forms you require for ISA. As I think all members of the committee know, those forms get filled in and your ministry audits them, but they don't actually result in funding. I'm going to ask you about that in a minute as well.

Would you set a target? Would you tell Mr Gooch and your other ministry officials that you want it to go down from 20% to 5% or 2.5% or some very reasonable number, that you won't wrap up precious resources in the endless, mindless paperwork that has been diverting resources from the system, in addition to the resources being cut? Will you at least show that executive responsibility? You have the capacity to do that. This is your staff dealing with making requirements on the school board people, who, as you mentioned, can't deal with it because there are far fewer of them. Would you do that? Would you say the teachers could be spared the paperwork? Would you set a target? Would you be accountable and say what your target would be in terms of how much of their time could be freed up to deal with the needs of the children rather than your needs, expressed in the paperwork your officials require?

**Hon Mrs Ecker:** The Ontario Principals' Council and a number of other groups have been part of a committee that has worked with us very closely over the last couple of months. They've made recommendations about improvements to minimize that administrative burden. That is the goal: to minimize it as much as possible, period, end of story. We are—

**Mr Kennedy:** By how much each year?

**Hon Mrs Ecker:** Mr Kennedy, if you'd let me finish, please. We have accepted those recommendations. We're moving ahead to put them in place.

One of the challenges we've found with school boards is that even though, for example, the deadlines for reporting were clear, we had school boards, whether based on miscommunication or misunderstanding, that three weeks before things had to be submitted suddenly started to go through processes that should have started in—

**Mr Kennedy:** Minister, I'm not interested in your blaming school boards any more. I have asked you a question that requires only your response.

**Hon Mrs Ecker:** Mr Kennedy, I'm not blaming—

**Mr Kennedy:** Minister, with respect, you have had numerous chances to answer this question and you haven't bothered.

**Hon Mrs Ecker:** Mr Kennedy, if you'd let me finish the answer for you, please.

**Mr Kennedy:** No. You're taking time now.

**Hon Mrs Ecker:** No one is blaming school boards.

**Mr Kennedy:** You just did.

**Hon Mrs Ecker:** No one is blaming school boards. What I am saying—

**Mr Kennedy:** Will you take responsibility?

**Hon Mrs Ecker:** We are taking responsibility.

**Mr Kennedy:** They're your rules.

**Hon Mrs Ecker:** If we weren't taking responsibility, we wouldn't have put together the group with all our partners—

**Mr Kennedy:** That's just a process. What form will your responsibility take? You're the minister. What will you do?

**Hon Mrs Ecker:** —we wouldn't have said, "Give us the ways to solve this," and we wouldn't have then said, "Yes, we're going to do these to solve them." That's indeed what we're doing. Mr Gooch—

**Mr Kennedy:** Do you accept what the principals said? Do you accept that—

**Hon Mrs Ecker:** Mr Kennedy, please. Mr Gooch is quite happy and quite prepared. That's why he's sitting here.

**The Vice-Chair:** Could we have order?

**Hon Mrs Ecker:** He's quite prepared to answer Mr Kennedy's questions.

**Mr Kennedy:** Minister, I'm trying to find out from you—

**The Vice-Chair:** Mr Kennedy, could we get some order? Maybe you have to start directing the questions to me, then, if we're getting out of hand in the interchange here.

**Mr Kennedy:** Mr Chair, through you, I am seeking a succinct answer from the minister. I think the public of Ontario deserves to know whether there will be any political accountability for the hellish boondoggle that's been put on some of the most vulnerable families in this province and has diverted resources. It has taken 20%, by the Ontario Principals' Council's estimate, of the resources.

Through you, Mr Chair, I'm asking the minister very directly, will she, in her political capacity, set a firm target, for which she can come back to this committee next year and be held accountable, for the reduction of time teachers have to spend on her ministry's paperwork, which is an immense diversion of resources? Mr Chair, I'll let you be the adjudicator as to whether the minister is answering that question. I'm just looking for a yes or no, or "yes, here's a target," or "yes, she'll consider it." Otherwise, I think we're on the record with the minister's answer.

**The Vice-Chair:** I can't really tell her to say yes or no. I just want her to respond—

**Mr Kennedy:** But, through you, I'm putting that question.

**The Vice-Chair:** I'm just saying to her to respond to the question.

**Hon Mrs Ecker:** Mr Chair, thank you very much. We have recommendations about how to reduce the administrative process. We also have a clear recommendation from the special education community that we do need to have a process to make sure that for students with higher needs, those needs are assessed.

**Mr Kennedy:** I guess the answer's no.

**Hon Mrs Ecker:** So we are making sure and will continue to take steps to reduce that administrative burden, because there is too much red tape, and I've said this before and Mr Kennedy has heard me say that. We are also prepared to walk through the steps we took last year and those we're taking this coming year to continue to reduce that burden, because it should be as low as possible. Rather than setting arbitrary targets which may or may not be accurate, the goal here is to reduce it as much as possible, and we will continue to do that.

**Mr Kennedy:** Well—

**The Vice-Chair:** Excuse me, Mr Kennedy. That's the answer you're going to get.

**Mr Kennedy:** Mr Chair, I want to ask the minister another straightforward question. Is the minister going to implement her assessment system next year, because that assessment system overlaid to the boards—if you actually are going to implement an assessment system based on last year's results, the last assessment, if you actually use the paperwork that you're generating, it would result in an average 32% cut.

Please don't play games. You know exactly what I'm talking about. Every board looks at two figures: the results of the assessment and the actual money that you gave them. They've been told it's going to be implemented next year, and I want to know, because these parents have a right to know, are you going to be implementing that funding system or will you be assuring for at least a period of two or three years some level of stable funding, or are you going to be implementing that system which will result in cuts?

**Hon Mrs Ecker:** We are not cutting special education funding. The school boards are aware of that, and if they're not passing this information along to parents, that gets back to one of the problems we've had in terms of the ability to keep—

**Mr Kennedy:** Blaming somebody else. Yes, I know.

**Hon Mrs Ecker:** No, Mr Kennedy. Would you stop putting words in our mouths?

**Mr Kennedy:** Minister, it's tiring to hear—

**Hon Mrs Ecker:** That's not what I said.

**Mr Kennedy:** —I'm going to ask you to do that.

**The Vice-Chair:** We're not going to start this again, please.

**Hon Mrs Ecker:** That's not what I said. What I said was that there has been a communication problem. It's a statement of fact. It's not pointing fingers at anyone. One

of the communication challenges has been the message that the boards have a stable funding guarantee.

**Mr Kennedy:** For how long?

**Hon Mrs Ecker:** Now, if that message has not gotten to the parents, we can only hope you and I can help to communicate—

**Mr Kennedy:** Mr Chair, through you, how long is the minister prepared to—

**Hon Mrs Ecker:** —that to the parents. But there is a stable funding guarantee to make sure the processes and procedures are in place.

The other thing that is important to recognize is that the special education community, when they made recommendations to the ministry, asked for a way to fund that recognized when school boards' needs went up and down. Now school boards are saying they need additional time. We are giving them that time.

**Mr Kennedy:** How long—

**Hon Mrs Ecker:** That stable funding is in place and it will continue to—

**Mr Kennedy:** For how long?

**Hon Mrs Ecker:** Mr Kennedy, if you would stop interrupting me, I would like to give you my answer.

**Mr Kennedy:** Minister, you're taking much more time than you need to answer this question.

**Hon Mrs Ecker:** I would be—

*Interjection.*

**Hon Mrs Ecker:** Well, because I'm trying to respond to every new issue that you throw in here, Mr Kennedy. First of all—

**Mr Kennedy:** No, it's very simple. How long will the stable funding last for?

**Hon Mrs Ecker:** Mr Chair, I'm quite prepared to answer the question. I don't tell him how to ask them, so I don't need the advice on how to answer, with all due respect.

We have certainly told the school boards that stable funding is in place for as long as we need that guarantee to make sure that students are getting what they need.

**Mr Kennedy:** They've been told it will end next year. So you're going to say here today that the stable funding will go on indefinitely. Is that correct?

**Hon Mrs Ecker:** Well, here we go with one of the incorrect—

**Mr Kennedy:** Now you have a chance to correct it. Please.

**Hon Mrs Ecker:** Here we go with one of the incorrect facts that has been communicated to parents. The school boards know there is stable funding this coming school year. As you know, school board decisions are done on an annual basis, year to year, for funding. That's the same in every sector within the government. That's not a new process. So they do know that they have stable funding coming for this school year. If parents are being told that is not the case, I appreciate the opportunity today to put that on the record.

**Mr Kennedy:** No, you in fact confirmed that it's only for this school year.

**Hon Mrs Ecker:** That's always been the case.

**Mr Kennedy:** There are three-year contracts you're requiring from the school boards. There is anxiety and uncertainty being visited from at least two different sources on the families out there. What is happening to these families is going to be happening to all families eventually, because if you can't provide for the conspicuous needs, if these people who have obvious and clear needs that you have documented to here and back, if they can't be met, then it becomes wilful at a point. I'm saying you had opened up the possibility before that it was a longer guarantee. We find out, after five minutes of time wasted, that it's only lasting for a year.

Minister, I want to put to you or to your staff—

**Hon Mrs Ecker:** Mr Kennedy, we do do annual funding decisions.

1630

**Mr Kennedy:** You've given mitigation over multiple years. You've done—

**Hon Mrs Ecker:** That had been the process when your party was in government and it continues—

**The Vice-Chair:** Let's not start that exchange again. Order.

**Mr Kennedy:** I didn't ask you a question, Minister, so you're not taking any more of my time. Thank you, Mr Chair.

I'd like to ask Mr Gooch or, Minister, if you prefer to take the question, how exactly you will be reducing the paper burden on these families this year. I would appreciate if you would tell me, as succinctly as possible, how you will materially reduce the amount of time that classroom teachers and rare and hard-to-find board specialists or other people even in the health field are having to spend on your assessments. How will you do that in the coming year?

**The Vice-Chair:** So succinct that you have a minute and a half to do it.

**Mr Kennedy:** It would be terrific if they could.

**Hon Mrs Ecker:** Mr Gooch?

**Mr Peter Gooch:** The difficult challenge for the government and the ministry is to balance responsiveness and accountability. What we can't do is hand over major funding decisions on a very poor information base.

Your question was, how are we going to reduce the administrative burden. The first thing we're going to do is make sure that wherever boards have had an appropriate level of approval from the files they've made in previous years, they will not have to resubmit those files. We will go board by board. If you know the ISA process, there are different profiles for every kind of exceptionality. We are going to look, and every time we can get to an appropriate approval level that boards have shown in the past, we'll bring all the files—

**Mr Kennedy:** Mr Gooch, can I ask very quickly for a clarification? I would like to know what you consider an appropriate level of approval. How can you determine what an appropriate level of approval is? More specifically, do you have something in writing here today that would show us what you think an appropriate level of approval would be to get this privilege for the board?

**Mr Gooch:** The ministry contracts with experts in special education who have gone out to school boards and reviewed the files that they have brought forward. When I say “an appropriate level of approval,” it’s the decision made by our auditors.

**The Vice-Chair:** Mr Bisson, I understand that you have 36 minutes, which is different than the 20, because you had an extra 16 minutes last time. You may now proceed.

**Mr Bisson:** Just before I start, I’ve got a series of questions. Some are from parents, some are from students and some are from school boards. I’ll try to do the French ones up front and the English ones after so that we’ll be able to work a little bit more easily through the translation.

J’ai une série de questions des conseils scolaires de mon comté. J’ai pris l’opportunité de demander aux conseillers scolaires d’à travers le comté, de Timmins-Baie James et aussi de Nipissing-Timiskaming. Comme vous savez, ce sont de gros conseils. Notre conseil, par exemple, public francophone prend part de Nipissing-Timiskaming et de Timmins-Baie James. J’ai eu aussi des questions de certains individus quand je leur ai demandé, s’ils avaient la chance de demander des questions au ministre, de quoi ? On va suivre avec ces questions.

La première question : comme vous savez, la communauté francophone a appuyé les recommandations de la part du D<sup>f</sup> Mustard. Il a démontré à plusieurs reprises l’importance de l’éducation pour la jeunesse francophone, et particulièrement pour la petite enfance. La question que le monde se pose : c’est bien bon et beau que le gouvernement a appuyé le rapport du D<sup>f</sup> Mustard. On est tous d’accord, tous les membres de l’assemblée dans les trois partis. Ce qu’ils veulent savoir, et c’est une question non seulement des conseils scolaires mais aussi des parents, est : quand est-ce qu’on peut s’attendre à avoir le financement nécessaire pour compléter la maternelle jusqu’au jardin ?

**Hon Mrs Ecker:** Mr Bisson, I’d be quite happy to have my assistant deputy minister, Maurice Proulx, answer that question.

**M. Maurice Proulx :** Maurice Proulx, ministre de l’éducation, sous-ministre adjoint, éducation langue française et administration d’éducation.

Monsieur Bisson, pour ce qui est de la petite enfance, maternelle et jardin, c’est la politique du gouvernement que la maternelle et le jardin ne sont pas financés à temps plein. Ils sont financés à mi-temps d’une part. D’autre part, dans le rapport Mustard-McCain, effectivement le D<sup>f</sup> Mustard ne recommande pas nécessairement des maternelles et jardins à temps plein. Le troisième point, c’est que tous les conseils de langue française, sans exception, pour septembre prochain auront en place des maternelles et des jardins à temps plein. Ils se servent en partie du financement qui est accordé pour l’animation culturelle, l’aménagement linguistique.

**Hon Mrs Ecker:** Mr Bisson, we did give French school boards an additional \$10 million to use flexibly,

and that’s how many of them are actually choosing to do the full-day kindergarten.

**M. Bisson :** Vous avez fait le commentaire que toutes les commissions scolaires à travers la province l’année prochaine, maternelle et prématernelle à plein temps, seront payé par le ministère de l’éducation ?

**M. Proulx :** Tous les conseils auront en place maternelle et jardin à temps plein. La ministre a fait mention de l’argent supplémentaire qui a été accordé l’an dernier, et les conseils utilisent en bonne partie ces argent-là pour s’assurer de mettre en place des maternelles et des jardins à temps plein.

**M. Bisson :** Comme vous savez, pour nous autres dans notre région c’est déjà un fait. Les conseils dans notre région pour la plupart ont toujours offert une maternelle à temps plein et les autres conseils, les nouveaux conseils publics, par exemple, ont fallu l’offrir aussi pour s’attirer les étudiants à leurs écoles. Le problème tel que je le comprends a toujours été que eux ont besoin d’offrir la maternelle et le jardin de leur coût. En d’autres mots, ils ont besoin de trouver des efficacités dans d’autres parties de leur budget pour être capables de payer ces programmes à temps plein.

Vous nous dites aujourd’hui que vous allez donner de l’argent de surplus pour qu’ils n’aient pas besoin d’aller rechercher l’argent dans leur budget pour le payer.

**M. Proulx :** Non. Monsieur Bisson, l’an dernier, alors l’année scolaire qui se termine maintenant, les conseils ont reçu, à partir du financement axé sur le besoin des élèves, une somme supplémentaire de 10 \$ millions qui revient chaque année. Ce n’est pas une somme qui est accordée une fois mais qui est récurrente, qui revient chaque année. C’est à partir en bonne partie de ce montant-là que les conseils de langue française assurent le financement des maternelles et des jardins à temps plein.

**M. Bisson :** Vous voulez dire que les conseils ont besoin d’aller chercher une certaine partie de cet argent dans leur budget ?

**M. Proulx :** Le montant supplémentaire qu’ils vont chercher principalement dans l’aménagement linguistique est là, vous avez raison, mais ils réussissent quand même à financer et les maternelles et les jardins à temps plein.

**M. Bisson :** Je ne sais pas comment ça marche dans les autres comtés, mais je sais que chez nous avec nos conseils ils se plaignent de la difficulté que ça met financièrement sur le conseil lui-même d’être capable d’offrir—par exemple, comme je disais tout à l’heure, le conseil public a fallu offrir à temps plein ces programmes parce qu’il faut faire la compétition avec les autres écoles. Sans ça on va perdre les élèves, et avec ça le financement. Les conseillers et l’administration me disent toujours que c’est une question de la formule de financement qui ne reflète pas adéquatement le montant que ça coûte pour offrir ces programmes. Est-ce qu’il va avoir un ajustement sur la formule ?

**Hon Mrs Ecker:** Mr Bisson, just to be clear, as you’ve probably heard me say before, what the funding



formula does is recognize the unique circumstances of school boards. School boards have different needs. The francophone boards have some very special needs; for example, just the geographic space, the boundaries they have to cover. They get funds that help them deal with that, but secondly, the challenges of assimilation of a minority community in a majority speaking another language presents some additional challenges for them in terms of their young people being able to succeed. So on top of the monies they had gotten through the funding, we gave them a special ongoing \$10 million a year that they can use to help meet some of those unique linguistic needs that they have.

It's my understanding they believe that is best used for certain kinds of junior kindergarten programs. That was their decision about how to do it, but they did get additional funding to meet that particular unique need, the linguistic needs they have.

**M Bisson :** Ça, je le comprends, mais la deuxième partie de la question est : avez-vous l'idée d'augmenter la formule de financement pendant la prochaine année ?

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**Hon Mrs Ecker:** Every year we look at how we can improve funding. We have already given all school boards additional monies for the primary grades for literacy, for example, for special-needs students in kindergarten to grade 3. So those were decisions that were already made this year.

We are now in the process of doing the work for how we can improve for the next school year. So we'll be taking a look at some of those issues, because I agree that keeping a focus on earlier grades is really important in a whole range of things, not only for special-needs students, but also for literacy etc. So for this school year there were 70 million new dollars for literacy from JK to kindergarten. There were also another \$70 million for special needs, focused to grade 3. Then we also did another \$24 million this year for early reading strategies from JK to grade 3. So it is a priority and we'll be making decisions as to how to improve for the next year.

**M. Bisson :** Je pense que vous avez une note, quelque chose à ajouter. Non ? C'est correct ?

**Hon Mrs Ecker:** No, go ahead.

**Mr Bisson:** I just saw the Post-It note, so I thought they were trying to tell you something.

J'ai une autre question. Si je comprends bien, vous avez demandé, à travers le ministère de l'Éducation, aux conseils scolaires de faire un inventaire des besoins physiques des bâtiments qu'ont les conseils. Si je comprends bien, c'était le cas.

Deuxièmement, ce que je me fais dire par les conseils scolaires, c'est que les conseils ont fait ce qu'on leur a demandé. Ils ont fait l'inventaire. Ils ont regardé leurs édifices pour voir ce qu'on avait besoin de faire pour faire sûr que ces édifices-là sont selon les standards établis par le ministère pour s'assurer de la sécurité du personnel et des élèves.

La question qu'on demande, c'est que jusqu'à date on n'a pas eu de réponse à ces rapports, et les conseils

veulent savoir quand ils peuvent s'attendre à avoir une réponse ou une réplique à ce qui a été envoyé au ministère sur ce sujet.

**Hon Mrs Ecker:** There are a couple of things. First of all, we did increase to French boards money for ongoing construction for new pupil places which did reflect some of the information that they gave us. So they did get additional monies to meet some of those needs.

Second, we've asked all school boards to give us their long-range plans and forecasts on the capital side for their school buildings, and we are looking at how to meet those needs. We're sort of doing an inventory, if you will, of those capital needs of all boards, including the French boards. One of the things we've been pushing is longer-term planning for school construction and school maintenance because we need to put in place better financial supports and encouragement for school boards to do that kind of long-range planning.

**M. Bisson :** L'autre partie dans cette affaire c'est que, par exemple, le conseil scolaire des Grandes Rivières se trouve avec un territoire immense. Si je comprends bien le problème, un problème qu'ils ont, c'est qu'il y a une surabondance d'espaces dans nos écoles rurales, mais les écoles urbaines sont pas mal pleines, à capacité, avec les élèves. La manière dont je me suis fait expliquer l'affaire c'est que, quand ça vient aux formules de financement pour l'entretien de ces bâtiments, c'est un peu plus difficile parce que, de ce fait, si vous avez un conseil scolaire dont toutes les écoles sont remplies on va dire à 90 % ou 95 %, le financement est un peu meilleur que pour un conseil scolaire qui se trouve, à cause de la géographie, avec des écoles rurales qui ne sont peut-être pas pleines, à capacité, selon les critères établis par le ministère.

La question qu'on demande : est-ce qu'il y a de l'ouvrage qui se fait de la part du ministère pour trouver une manière de répondre à ce problème, qui est pas mal spécifique à ces gros conseils scolaires anglophones et francophones ?

**Hon Mrs Ecker:** There are a couple of things. School boards for this coming school year, including the francophone boards, received additional resources in two areas that respond exactly to that sort of geographic challenge that they have. First of all, we've made the funding for remote and rural boards more generous—the francophones, I believe all of them, would have qualified for that, so they got additional monies for the remote and rural. There were about 10 additional boards actually that received additional monies on that.

The second improvement for this coming school year was in what is called new pupil places, and that is a step to address exactly that challenge, where you've got low enrolment in one part of your board, high enrolment in another part of your board. So we took a step by making it more generous, if you will, more flexible to help meet that. That's one of the things in the reports that boards have given us on their long-range capital needs, one of the issues we are looking at. Because, clearly, for a board that is covering a remote and rural area, you may well

have a decline of students in one community, but those students still need an education. So where's the floor, I guess, is the question for those boards that have significant shifts in enrolment or those boards, especially northern boards, that are suffering declining enrolment. So that's work we're doing now.

**M. Bisson :** Ce qui m'amène à ma deuxième question. C'est exactement le point. Nous dans le nord ne sommes pas aussi chanceux que d'autres quand ça vient à l'économie, comme vous le savez. L'économie du grand nord n'est pas aussi forte que dans le reste de la province. Justement, on a une perte de population au nord-est de l'Ontario, comme au nord-ouest, et ça veut dire que nos conseils scolaires sont en train de perdre des étudiants, parce que leurs parents ont besoin de déménager pour trouver de l'ouvrage dans une autre partie de la province.

Un problème qu'ils ont c'est que, comme vous le savez, les conseils du nord de l'Ontario ont toujours eu une bonne approche quand ça vient au transport des élèves. Il y a toujours eu, par exemple, dans notre communauté un échange de services entre le conseil séparé et le conseil public. Au lieu d'avoir seulement un conseil avec son système individuel, puis l'autre conseil à côté avec un autobus individuel, ils ont toujours fait un échange de services. C'est la ville de Timmins qui a commencé ça des années passées. C'était un peu le modèle qui était suivi partout dans la province.

Le problème que je me fais dire par tous les conseils dans cette région qui ont le même problème est que, avec la perte d'étudiants, ce qui arrive, c'est qu'on perd l'argent pour le transport, si je comprends bien. Le fait qu'on perd des élèves, ça ne veut pas dire nécessairement qu'on a besoin d'avoir moins d'autobus. Si le numéro 4 a 50 milles de l'école avait déjà 15 élèves puis là il n'y a que 13, c'est vrai que vous avez deux élèves de moins, mais vous avez encore besoin d'avoir le même autobus, si vous comprenez ce que je veux dire.

Je vous demande de la part de tous les conseils—c'est un problème de tous les conseils dans notre région, j'imagine, le nord-ouest et même d'autres places—est-ce qu'il va y avoir une accommodation au budget pour le transport pour qu'on ne se trouve pas dans cette situation d'avoir une réduction même si ça nous coûte le même montant de dollars à cause de la géographie ?

**Hon Mrs Ecker:** There are two issues on transportation: one, the issue, as you point out, and that gets back to what I said about declining enrolment boards. You're quite correct: whether you have 10 students or 13 students, they all need a bus. So there are certain fixed costs that boards have regardless of the number of students. So that is work that we are doing with boards on that.

The second issue on transportation is the transportation grant itself. We've been working with boards in a multi-year process to improve how we fund transportation. Boards have been putting in place technology so they can have better planning of routes. Some boards have been doing consortium among themselves. So we're looking at how we can better fund them for the trans-

portation costs. There are some pilot projects starting this year to try out the new criteria to make sure that they're working appropriately. We want to try and improve that area of funding.

**M. Bisson :** Est-ce que je peux demander à votre ami—c'est encore le cas dans notre région que les conseils s'entraident sur le transport. Il y a un système de transport pour tous les conseils, non ? C'est-tu encore le cas ?

**M. Proulx :** Ça varie selon les conseils. Sont rares les conseils qui avaient des consortiums qui vont s'en sortir, parce que, effectivement, c'est la direction dans laquelle aller et non pas revenir—

**M. Bisson :** Si je suis correct, et je ne suis pas sûr—j'aurais besoin de le vérifier—j'ai pensé que dans notre région il y a encore le consortium de transports qui est en place pour le conseil des Grandes Rivières et les autres conseils. Quand vous avez mentionné, madame la Ministre, qu'il y a des projets pilotes pour regarder aux efficacités, ces conseils, c'est eux autres qui ont mené la charge à trouver les efficacités ça fait beaucoup d'années. Ils me disent qu'ils se trouvent dans une situation où il va y avoir une perte de financement.

Je veux savoir, pour ces groupes-là, y a-t-il quelque chose qui va être fait pour les assister pour qu'on ne se trouve pas dans une situation de perdre, comme j'ai dit, de financement pour des fautes qui ne sont pas les leurs ?

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**Hon Mrs Ecker:** No. I quite agree that it's not the fault of the school board if there is declining enrolment in northern communities. That is why we're doing the work now to say, how do we make sure those fixed costs they have—again, whether it's 10 kids or 13 kids, they still need the school bus. We're doing that work now to try to match the funding with the need. So that is happening.

The other piece that is happening is on transportation in general. While some school boards have partnered to have better transportation and find savings, or some school boards have contracted out to different busing companies etc, we recognize we are still not supporting that need in boards the way the boards and the ministry agree we need to. The boards and the ministry are doing the work so we can do that, because part of the problem has been finding a way to measure the need and fund it fairly for every board, and putting the data in place. So a lot of that has been happening.

**M. Bisson :** Une autre—je ne suis pas trop au courant, mais c'est une question qu'on m'a donnée—fait affaire avec le sous-financement pour les nouveaux manuels scolaires de secondaire pour le nouveau curriculum. Apparemment, il y a une réduction cette année de 50 % pour les textes de 10<sup>e</sup> année. Vous êtes au courant ? Moi, je n'étais pas au courant. C'est une question qu'ils m'ont envoyée du comté. C'est-tu le cas ?

**Hon Mrs Ecker:** Funding for textbooks is still in the foundation grant. That's part of the regular funding they continue to get every year. Secondly, we have put in more money every year as a top-up, recognizing the new curriculum needs. The funding for the coming school

year will be \$15 million. We've had varying amounts. One time we put in \$100 million, one time it was \$30 million and the amount for this coming year is \$15 million. That's top-up on top of—

**M. Bisson :** C'est pour ça qu'il fallait que ce soit une réduction de 50 %, parce que le montant était à 100 \$ millions, puis là on descend à 50 \$ millions. C'est du 50 % que vous parlez ?

**Hon Mrs Ecker:** No, what we've done is put in place one-time funding on top of the regular foundation grant.

**M. Bisson :** Je comprends.

**Hon Mrs Ecker:** For example, there was \$15 million for grade 11 textbooks and \$15 million for grade 12 textbooks. When we did the elementary there was, I believe—and staff can correct me if I'm wrong—approximately \$100 million for all the elementary grades. So we've been trying not only to continue to fund, obviously, through the basic foundation grant that allocates a certain amount per student for textbooks and learning material, but also, recognizing the challenge in upgrading and replacing because of the new curriculum, we've been putting top-up monies to boards as one-time funding to start allowing them to build up those resources.

**M. Bisson :** Combien de temps, monsieur le Président, est-ce que j'ai dans cette rotation ? Monsieur Kennedy, combien de temps me reste-t-il ?

**Le Président (M. Gerard Kennedy) :** Environ 16 minutes de plus.

**M. Bisson :** C'est beau ; j'ai du temps pour les autres questions.

Une autre question : l'été passé on a contacté votre bureau faisant affaire avec le changement de représentation de ces conseils scolaires. Je pense que c'est au conseil scolaire francophone catholique de notre région où on a eu une réduction des conseillers scolaires, qu'ils ont abaissé d'un dans la région selon les nouveaux critères du ministère, si je me rappelle bien. La question que je me fais demander, encore par le conseil, c'est, y a-t-il une possibilité que le ministère soit préparé à revisiter comment cette formule-là est appliquée faisant affaire avec la représentativité pour les conseils scolaires pour ces régions ? Le problème, juste pour que vous compreniez, c'est qu'avec une réduction du nombre d'élèves, le conseil s'est trouvé à court d'une dizaine d'élèves pour être capable d'avoir un autre conseiller comme il y avait dans les années avant. Puis quand on est descendu en nombre, parce qu'il y a moins d'élèves inscrits aux programmes, ils se sont trouvés en bas de la norme, ce qui veut dire qu'il a fallu réduire par un les représentants scolaires. Ça fait que la politique du conseil a vu que Hearst a perdu son représentant. Je veux savoir, y a-t-il une chance que ça va être revisité ?

**M. Proulx :** Monsieur Bisson, à ma connaissance il n'y a pas de révision prévue dans l'allocation du nombre de conseillers scolaires. Une chose que j'aimerais ajouter, par contre, c'est que la détermination du nombre de conseillers scolaires était fonction de plusieurs éléments, incluant le nombre d'élèves mais incluant également le

territoire représenté. La distribution des conseillers scolaires avait été laissée aux localités, ce qui a fait en sorte qu'on est conscient du fait que dans certaines localités il y a eu des redistributions qui ont été faites sur le plan local qui n'étaient pas déterminées ici.

**M. Bisson :** La courte réponse, c'est qu'il ne va pas y avoir de changement aux critères.

**M. Proulx :** Il n'y pas de changements qui sont prévus dans le prochain avenir.

**M. Bisson :** C'est seulement pour vous dire que, si on pourrait vous implorer, je sais que quand ça vient aux critères, on regarde les politiques dans les manuels et ça fait du bon sens. Je le reconnais. J'étais au gouvernement ; je sais comment ça marche. Mais ce qui arrive, quand ça vient à l'application, c'est très difficile, parce que je trouve, comme vous le savez—vous connaissez bien la région. Hearst est un coin de la province qui est très spécial, très distinct et très différent d'autres parties de la province. Parce qu'eux autres se trouvent un peu en fin de la ligne, ils ont perdu leur conseiller scolaire par la majorité des autres sections du conseil, des autres parties du conseil. Pour Hearst, c'est vraiment une perte, parce qu'ils n'ont rien en commun avec, on va dire, Timiskaming, Sturgeon Falls et les autres places. Ils n'ont pas de liens. Puis là ils se trouvent sans représentant au conseil scolaire. Puis on vous demande : si vous êtes capable de revisiter cette décision, ce serait vraiment apprécié pour être capable de voir s'il y a quelque chose qu'on peut faire pour cette région.

Une couple d'autres questions. Apparemment, il y a eu un nouveau système qui s'est appelé le SAP, qui est le système informatique, si je comprends bien, qui a été établi pour avoir une norme pour l'informatique à travers les conseils en Ontario. Je veux savoir—

**M. Proulx :** Le système SAP, c'est le système de gestion financière des ressources humaines, de la paie etc, tout le traitement des données pour l'enseignement de l'informatique qui est utilisé sur le plan de la gestion—

**M. Bisson :** Gestion, c'est exact. Pour avoir un standard, je pense que la plupart du monde est d'accord ; on n'aura jamais que tout le monde soit d'accord. Le problème—ce que je me suis fait dire par tous les conseils ; encore c'est une plainte qui est venue à travers tous les conseils—c'est qu'ils sont d'accord avec l'idée de le faire, mais ils n'ont pas été rémunérés pour cette installation de ce système. Il a fallu trouver cet argent dans leur budget. Pour certains conseils, c'est un problème. J'aimerais savoir s'il y a des plans par le ministère de trouver des fonds pour être capable d'assister les conseils avec cet équipement.

**M. Proulx :** Alors, sur cette question-là, peut-être un premier commentaire, à savoir que les 12 conseils de langue française ont, je pense, donné le ton en collaborant pour mettre sur pied un système commun pour épargner, au lieu d'avoir trois, quatre différents systèmes, et puis qu'à un moment donné on a de la difficulté à obtenir des services en commun. On les

encourage certainement dans ce sens-là, et on est content qu'ils l'aient fait.

Vous avez raison que c'est un système qui est assez onéreux sur le plan financier. Les conseils ont reçu dans les fonds de restructuration, lors de la mise sur pied des conseils en 1998, des argents pour payer la mise en place de ce système-là. Maintenant, ce qu'ils voient, c'est qu'il y a des dépenses qui sont plus élevées que ce qu'ils ne l'estimaient. À l'heure actuelle, ils ont des demandes qui sont faites au ministère pour savoir s'il n'y a pas moyen de rediriger les argents non dépensés dans d'autres enveloppes dans le domaine de la restructuration.

**M. Bisson :** Dans l'intérieur des conseils ou du ministère ?

**M. Proulx :** Que des argents qui ont été donnés aux conseils—ça, c'est dans le cadre de l'entente Canada-Ontario, un programme qui est partagé à 50-50 entre la province et le fédéral. Ce que les conseils nous ont demandé, c'est de prendre une partie des argents non dépensés à l'intérieur des fonds de restructuration qu'ils ont reçus pour les rediriger au projet SAP. La porte n'est certainement pas fermée à ça ; au contraire, on fait tout ce qu'on peut essayer de voir s'il y a un moyen de les accommoder à l'intérieur de ces enveloppes-là.

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**M. Bisson :** Vous le saurez aussi, madame la ministre—on voit ici qu'il y a des élèves qui assistent avec nous aujourd'hui—c'est toute la question de l'aide à l'enfance quand ça vient aux programmes d'éducation spéciale pour les jeunes en difficulté.

Un des problèmes qu'on a dans la communauté francophone, c'est qu'il y a déjà une pénurie de spécialistes qui puissent faire les évaluations nécessaires que le ministère utilise pour déterminer quels services on peut donner à un jeune. Pour être capable d'attirer ces spécialistes qui font les « assessments » en français, c'est beaucoup, beaucoup plus difficile comparé à la communauté anglophone.

Avec ça on trouve que les jeunes francophones, parce qu'ils n'ont pas les « assessments » de faits, se trouvent sans ces services et sans le financement même, parce qu'il n'y a pas de demande. Sans « assessment » il n'y a pas de demande. On se trouve un peu dans une situation très précaire, puis je veux savoir : le ministère a-t-il des plans pour trouver une manière à se prendre à ce problème d'« assessments », premièrement ?

**M. Proulx :** Dans un premier temps, vous avez raison. Le problème d'évaluation des besoins des jeunes par des spécialistes existe—

**M. Bisson :** Ça fait longtemps.

**M. Proulx :** —pas uniquement pour les francophones, mais existe également pour les anglophones, particulièrement dans le nord de la province. C'est un problème qui est assez important. Il y a déjà des mesures de collaboration interministérielles qui ont été mises en place. Le programme SIEN, service intégré pour les enfants du Nord, est un exemple de collaboration entre-ministère du côté anglophone comme du côté francophone pour essayer de trouver les spécialistes. La

difficulté qu'éprouvent les conseils du nord, particulièrement dans les parties de leur conseil qui sont plus clairsemées en fait du nombre d'élèves, c'est d'avoir un bassin avec suffisamment de population qui requiert ces services pour embaucher des spécialistes à temps plein. À travers un programme comme SIEN, ils réussissent à mettre ensemble les besoins et les ressources. Alors, c'est un domaine où l'on continue à essayer d'encourager les conseils à collaborer ensemble.

Au niveau de tout le processus des évaluations pour déterminer les besoins d'enfance en difficulté, on reconnaît que les conseils nous font part d'un besoin particulier de ce côté-là.

**Hon Mrs Ecker :** Again, one of the unique needs that is recognized when we fund boards is that challenge that francophone boards have in northern communities. There is additional funding for that.

**M. Bisson :** Je sais qu'on pourrait parler longtemps sur cette question, mais j'ai d'autres questions. Je pense que j'ai environ cinq minutes de plus.

Un point qui a été soulevé avec moi, je pense que c'était avec le conseil public francophone : ils se sont trouvés, avec la création du nouveau conseil, falloir offrir un programme en français pour les élèves francophones au conseil public à Iroquois Falls. Un conseil séparé a donné en échange une école à ce nouveau conseil. Eux, pour être capables de préparer cette vieille école pour les élèves, ont dépensé environ 500 000 \$, mais ils ont eu seulement 10 000 \$ du conseil. Est-ce que vous trouvez que c'est juste ?

**M. Proulx :** Au niveau des besoins d'immobilisation—vous en avez parlé un peu plus tôt—les besoins existent strictement par rapport aux nouvelles places élèves, puis la ministre a parlé des mesures qui ont été prises pour répondre à ces besoins-là. Mais la question de besoins en rénovations est là, et ça fait partie des besoins qui ont été exprimés par les conseils pour les 15 prochaines années. C'est la raison pour laquelle on a demandé aux conseils de nous parler de leurs besoins, pas strictement en rapport avec les nouvelles places élèves mais en rapport avec les besoins en rénovations. C'est un domaine qui n'est pas particulier à un conseil mais qui fait partie de la planification des conseils et pour lesquels les modifications de la formule de financement où on doit accorder une importance particulière parce qu'on reconnaît que les besoins sont grands de ce côté-là.

**Mr Bisson :** How much time do I have, Chair?

**The Vice-Chair :** About two minutes.

**Mr Bisson :** Two minutes. Oh, so much in so little time. I don't want to go into these, because that's going to take more than two minutes.

The only thing I want to say, as I go into the other series of questions, is that if anything could be done, the area of special-needs education is where we need to do it. We have a particular problem that's worse in north-eastern and northwestern Ontario, as we discussed earlier, because you have difficulty trying to attract the people who need to do the assessments, and without the

assessments you can't access the funds, which means these kids are going without.

There is a huge shortfall with regard to the capacity of the system to respond to those kids, and far too often, as you well know, Minister, it ends up that the kids are seen way too late into the educational cycle and, as a result, the problems are much more expensive and more difficult to deal with in the end.

If anything can be done, we need to really make a serious attempt at investment in the early years in order to deal with making sure we do what has to be done for special-needs education, because those kids need all the help they can get to be able to compete with other kids down the road. If they're not getting it in the earlier years, it's really difficult to do it later.

Just in the last month I've probably dealt with five or six parents in Timmins alone, and a couple up in Kap, who are basically at their wits' end. They're not able to get the services. As a parent, I think you understand the stress that puts on the whole situation.

**Hon Mrs Ecker:** Yes, I agree with you. There are a number of things we can talk about at another time, steps we've already taken—lower class sizes and more money targeted specifically for earlier special-needs students. But I agree that more needs to be done, and it continues to be a priority to try to fix that for parents.

**Mr Bisson:** Thank you, Chair. We're still in 20-minute rotations, I understand?

**The Vice-Chair:** Yes, we're back to 20-minute rotations.

**Mr Bisson:** I want to apologize. I need to get to the House to speak on a bill, and I'm coming right back for the next rotation, just so you know.

**The Vice-Chair:** All right. Mr Wettlaufer.

**Mr Wayne Wettlaufer (Kitchener Centre):** Minister, a little bit of a problem in my area with the—

**Mr Bisson:** You can't have a problem.

**Mr Wettlaufer:** Yes, we have a little bit of a problem. The Waterloo region board received considerable extra funding for text books and yet, on Friday, I had a couple of parents from the parents' council, representing the board, tell me they had inadequate text books for the grade 11 curriculum.

I know they received extra money that was fixed, and I know they received extra money that was flexible. This money was to go to textbooks and classroom resources and programs such as ESL. I guess I'd like to know from you why the Waterloo region district board, and perhaps even the separate board in Waterloo region, is using this money to fund other areas, particularly an increase in teachers' salaries which were over and above the suggested limit.

**Hon Mrs Ecker:** It's projected that the Waterloo region district school board is going to receive an almost 2% increase in overall funding; that is, while their enrolment only grew by just under 1%, they also received additional monies for textbooks. For example, for Waterloo region school board, the one-time investment for grade 9 textbooks was almost \$900,000; for grade 10

textbooks, it was \$871,000; for grade 11 textbooks, it was about \$434,000. That's on top of the foundation grant.

Textbook money and teacher compensation are considered part of the classroom envelope. While we fund school boards based on calculations of where salaries are, there is no cap on what they do in terms of salaries. Some have advocated that we should have done that. Some have advocated that we should envelope and say, "This is money for compensation, and you can't use any other money for compensation." I know that is something some parent groups have recommended to us. Currently, classroom dollars include compensation and things like textbooks, and school boards have the ability to use those dollars within classrooms as they see fit.

**1710**

It is a controversial item. One example you've probably heard me use is of a particular school board that went out and told their community they were going to use part of their textbook and learning resources materials to improve compensation for their teachers, and the community approved. The trustees were re-elected, and it was a decision on which the community agreed with them.

It is the school board's decision, as the employer, how they do that. They have to report how they do spend the money, so it is available for parents so they can make that judgment. That's the current policy, and I do recognize there are some parent groups that have asked us to perhaps change that. But currently that's how it stands.

**Mr Wettlaufer:** Thank you, Minister. I do have another question, but I think Mr O'Toole has a question as well.

**Mr O'Toole:** Mr Ouellette has.

**Mr Jerry J. Ouellette (Oshawa):** Minister, one of the questions that's come forward on a regular basis from a number of constituents is regarding teachers who have retired and are actively working as substitute teachers. I know that we've been in the board before and we've discussed it. What is the policy or the reasoning that we have limitations on the number of days a retired teacher can actively teach in the schools?

**Hon Mrs Ecker:** Under the current rules, a teacher who has retired is allowed to come back and continue to teach, and they receive remuneration for doing that. They're allowed to teach for 95 days a year for three years after they've retired, and then it's reduced to 20 days per year.

The reason for that limitation, obviously, is that if they are receiving their pension benefits and receiving a salary on top of their pension benefits, the partners in the teacher pension plan—which include the teacher unions, which partner with the government on this—felt there should be a limitation on how much double-dipping is allowed, because that is, in effect, what is occurring. They're getting their pension, which comes from contributions by teachers and contributions from taxpayers. It is a very successful and very generous pension

program. There is a limitation on how much other salary they could get if they are out teaching part-time, even though they are retired.

The teachers' pension plan has made a recommendation to the government about one of the steps we could take to reduce the teacher shortage—as you know, with the demographics society-wide, we have more teachers retiring than coming into the profession, so we've taken a number of steps to deal with that, expanding teachers' colleges etc. The teachers' pension plan has recommended that we extend that 95-day period for a longer period of time, so that a retired teacher would be able to continue to have their pension but also be able to teach for a longer period of time—still part-time but more days than they currently can.

The government is looking at that recommendation, and I hope we will have a decision as to whether we'll be able to move forward with that recommendation.

**Mr Ouellette:** Just to follow up on that, we have what's called the double-cohort year. After that initial year, would we expect the number of teachers who will be participating in the school boards to change; for example, the retired ones who will be looking for additional time? At that time, do we need to go back to an old system while, as you mentioned, we're short of a number of people coming into the profession?

**Hon Mrs Ecker:** We have a project with the ministry, the College of Teachers, faculties of education and the teacher unions looking at the data as to what the gap is likely to be, whether it's a double-cohort year or other years. At the moment, while it looks like we're going to be quite tight some years, on the other hand, some steps we have taken and some of the other recommendations, like the recommendation on the teachers' pension plan, should help us manage that, if I understand your question correctly.

**Mr Ouellette:** Just that after grade 13 is ended, or OAC, those teachers won't be teaching grade 13. Then they become available to teach other courses.

**Hon Mrs Ecker:** Sorry. Yes, that may also help.

**Mr Ouellette:** So we don't need the number of retired individuals participating in that.

**Hon Mrs Ecker:** Yes, that may also assist us in managing it, so we might not need as many retired teachers to handle the workload there.

**Mr Ouellette:** I know my associates have questions as well.

**The Vice-Chair:** We'll have Mr Wettlaufer after.

**Mr O'Toole:** I think Mr Miller has a question too, so we'll sort of split it up. It's a team sport here, actually. That's what I read in the paper recently.

I just sort of inadvertently want to follow up with Mr Ouellette's question. I have been associated with the profession of teaching through family, directly and indirectly, for a lot of years. Is there any tracking of absenteeism? I find it difficult to understand how there can be 20 days of sick leave per year. I don't get that. I'm wondering, is there any tracking, administratively? I worked in personnel for a very large corporation, General

Motors, for many years. Average absenteeism was about six or seven days per year. These are jobs where it's 300 days of the year, roughly. It's shift work. I don't begrudge that. A simple question: is there any tracking? I think it's two days a month, 20 days a year, cumulatively, with a payout when you retire. That's prehistoric. Is there anything we're doing about that? When is it going to be eliminated?

**Hon Mrs Ecker:** The number of sick days that a teacher is entitled to depends on the agreement between the school board and the union, the collective agreement—

**Mr O'Toole:** It's about 20 days a year.

**Hon Mrs Ecker:** —and that is approximately where it resides. But that is an issue that's been bargained at the table. School boards are responsible for tracking that as part of their human resource obligations.

**Mr O'Toole:** Is there any measuring of that compared with other comparable sectors? For instance, there's some attempt that they've got to use them or something? Even in comparable industry, what is the average attendance? I'll tell you, the real cost in that job is that they have to be replaced. In a sales job or marketing or other kinds, they don't replace them. This is a double cost factor, and I really think it's serious. I would like to know what the annual cost of those absentee teachers is per year. I think it's an inordinately large number and should be dealt with.

At the same time, I would say, in defence, that they should have a long-term disability benefit plan, not these accumulated sick days. It's prehistoric. I just leave that on the table. I just think it's a lot of money. It should be measured. I'd like to know the number.

**Hon Mrs Ecker:** They also do have a long-term benefit plan, as many employees do. We can certainly see what information we can get you about those costs.

**Mr O'Toole:** I think it should be tracked.

**Hon Mrs Ecker:** Again, there are those who would also say to you that teachers, because of the stress of the job that they have, do require that kind of support; and secondly, the other factor that they will tell you is that adults exposed to young children on a regular basis do have additional sick days. So that's one of the other things.

**Mr O'Toole:** My wife is a primary ed teacher and my daughter is a high school teacher. She went to Quebec on Monday, I think; she's already on holidays, or whatever. She's doing another pursuit. But there is stress often in your job. I guess I just wanted to switch a little bit and I'll appreciate it if there's any follow-up on that.

**Hon Mrs Ecker:** We can see what figures we can get for you, Mr O'Toole.

1720

**Mr O'Toole:** Yes, that's good. I think it's worth tracking.

I just quickly want to put on the record, and this may come as a shock and a surprise, but I'm somewhat in sympathy with one of the earlier lines of questioning that Mr Kennedy had. Having been a trustee for a couple of

terms, having been the chair of the special-ed advisory committee and having some familiarity—my sister's a speech and language pathologist, now retired—I have been intensely involved in the topic for probably 10 to 12 years. I noticed, with the new funding, the first thing they used to do was to get the IPRC. It was never done as early as it is. The IPRC precipitates an education learning plan. The number of IPRCs and identifications went directly up when this new funding model came in. I would like to have some response from staff, but it's my sense that the designated funding specifically identified in the ISA model, the higher level ISAs, the three and four that are potentially long-term, protracted—I kind of agree with Mr Kennedy: how much paperwork do you have to do where you've established some base thing? That's appropriate, I totally agree.

I think there's been an inordinate increase in the number of identified individuals. My point is this: as a parent of five children, I think they all have special needs, every single one of them. Every single one of my children has a different learning style. One is an electrical engineer, one is in law school, one's a high school teacher, but they all had specific styles of learning. If we're going to micromanage the system, I think professional educators—this whole special ed for those really marginal, identified cases is a difficult area. I saw in our board, when they did the assessments, the number of cases year over year had gone up almost 50% in 1997. Could you respond: has there been an increase in the number of IPRCs and in such identifying resources that are then protracted resources and impossible to get out of the system?

**Hon Mrs Ecker:** First of all, if the number of students in special needs is increasing, the funding is designed to respond to that and to increase as well. What we have found when you look at the data that school boards have submitted to us is that the overall number of claims—and I'm talking province-wide; it may vary from board to board—has actually been quite stable over the past three years. Second, when you look at the percentage of our student population that has special needs, we are consistent with other Canadian provinces.

**Mr O'Toole:** That's what I was trying to establish. Under normal distribution with statistical modelling, you would expect to look at 10,000 students and anticipate certain anomalies, of course, and that's really why your assessments and those rigorous disciplines—there should be some way with the collected data to be more accurate and less dependent on specific assessments, to say, "Gee, they're within the normal distribution range here." I'm all for more money into special education with respect to right in the classroom, absolutely. So we have some harmony there on the intent to get the money to the student and the teacher. I'm going to leave the rest of my time for Mr Miller.

**The Vice-Chair:** I presume that's a statement.

**Mr O'Toole:** Yes, it is.

**Mr Wettlaufer:** Minister, I was interested in your answer to Mr Ouellette insofar as the maximum number

of days that teachers can come back on contract. While that isn't my question, I would like to point out that I don't believe that is being adhered to by all the boards. In fact, I know that it is not being adhered to by the Waterloo Region District School Board, because I know of a number of young teachers who have graduated and they are advised by the school board that there are no jobs, and that is because they have brought back on full-time contracts a number of retired teachers. I have personally intervened in two or three cases in the last two years and, lo and behold, the teachers who were told that there were no positions available wound up getting jobs. I would ask you to take a look at that policy and to see whether it is being adhered to by the boards across the province.

**Hon Mrs Ecker:** Let me say, though, that there are more jobs available. We do need new teachers. If there's one board that's not hiring, I know of several other boards that would be quite happy to have good new graduates.

**Mr Wettlaufer:** Yes, that's good.

I do have a concern in that I think most of us realize the very strong importance of early identification of difficulties in learning. I would like to know a little bit more about the strategy that is being employed by the ministry in terms of early reading.

**Hon Mrs Ecker:** Yes, I think that's a very important step. First, we put in place the new curriculum, making sure that our students have what they need: the information, the skills, the knowledge to succeed when they leave school. So we put that in place. Second, we put in place the testing to make sure that our students are learning that new curriculum. Now that those pieces are largely in place, especially in our elementary grades, we're saying let's take that data and improve our students' ability to achieve, improve student outcomes, improve student achievement. The first step in doing that is to have school boards and schools set improvement targets for grade 3 reading.

We put in place new monies this year, as I mentioned earlier, for early literacy, from junior kindergarten to grade 3, and also for special needs from kindergarten to grade 3 to start putting in place the programs to do this. This next school year we're requiring school boards to start to set improvement targets. We will be doing that over a three-year period. We are putting in place additional training for teachers to be able to use assessment data to adapt their teaching strategies for students, if they need to do that, or other steps they can take to help the students read better. We have school improvement teams that will be available for schools that are having difficulty meeting those targets.

That strategy is coming into place this school year. There were additional resources put into that, another \$24 million on top of the \$140 million I mentioned before. We want to take that kind of approach through the whole system, step by step. It will obviously take several years to get there, but we're starting with grade 3 because that's where we've had the curriculum and the testing in place for the longest period of time.

**Mr Wettlaufer:** I'm a fan of target-setting, but do we have any evidence that this is in fact working?

**Mr Rosario Marchese (Trinity-Spadina):** Of course we do.

**Mr Wettlaufer:** We do?

**Hon Mrs Ecker:** A couple of things: the experience in other jurisdictions and the research shows that setting improvement targets and providing the training and supports to meet those targets works. It does result in improved student outcomes. That is the goal of our education reforms: we want our students to do better. So we've looked at the research and we've looked at the experience of other jurisdictions. That's why we're taking this approach, because it is the one designed to work the best.

We're starting to see some improvements. Some boards and some schools have been able to make significant improvements. We're also seeing on national and international tests that Ontario's students in certain categories are starting to improve. That's what we want to see, but there's a lot more work that we need to do. This is one step in what will require several steps to improve our students' ability to achieve.

**Mr Kennedy:** Minister, I'm going to come back to the question and, having spoken to some of the parents, I want to refocus your attention on what I think is a concern that every parent is going to have as the summer unfolds and as boards are faced with more and more bad choices about what to cut. Because these parents represent children whose needs are conspicuous—those needs are here, they're present, they're today—they've been told they're going to lose education assistance. Minister, your staff has told some of them that a ministry official is going to contact them. Are you prepared for every parent who finds out they're going to be losing something their child needs, in this case, even on this level, where they're not going to be able to go to school? Will they be able to contact you and will a ministry official from your office get back to them to try and solve their problem?

**Hon Mrs Ecker:** Mr Kennedy, as you quite recognize, it is up to school boards, based on the individual education plans that are put in place, to provide supports to students. We are not proposing that we're going to take away from school boards and schools that decision-making authority; that will reside with them. When parents have contacted us in the past, we have attempted to be of assistance, but it is ultimately, based on the individual education plan, the decision of the schools and the school boards on how to support those students.

1730

**Mr Kennedy:** I hear you saying that fairly bland thing that takes up some time. These parents are not going to have their kids in school. Privately, you're saying to some of them, "We'll try and help you," but in general there is no policy of helping these parents. They need help, and it's about time that some of the bureaucracy in this got swept aside, quite frankly, because it is not fair,

Minister, for you to sit here and say to them that the board is going to do it.

Let me just read from one parent who isn't here today. She was here yesterday, Andrea Rosenberg. She says, in a letter that you have a copy of, Minister, I believe:

"I believe that the source of the problem lies with the Ministry of Education. Specifically, I believe that the problem lies with the ISA funding model. I believe that millions of dollars are being wasted creating damaging paperwork which is of no apparent value. Clearly, the children with special needs are not getting adequate support under this model.

"I believe that this funding model is grossly inefficient and unresponsive to the needs of those it espouses to assist. I believe that the ISA funding model should be abolished and, in its place, a trust in our teachers/administrators must be developed to allow them to identify children with special needs and provide them with the supports needed via IEPs."

The point is that most of the public doesn't know what an IEP is or even what an ISA is. These parents have had to become very versed with it. There is at least a strong body of evidence—and you can continue to resist it, but then you can't deal with this question—that the money out there this year, the lowest amount of money being available to boards in terms of any nominal increases, is going to take an effect directly on these children and then on other children. We're dealing with people who have learned to have their kids termed exceptional and then a lot of other negative things, but it is striking to me that the Minister of Education has nothing to offer them. Their kids might not be in school in the fall. The boards have said to you repeatedly—and now you've heard from Ottawa, you've heard from Kawartha Pine Ridge; you could hear from all of them—that you are not giving them the resources. It's not a tit-for-tat kind of thing. They have proven, I think, a little bit of good faith, most of them: I think it's about \$6 million in Ottawa and your own board in Durham spends \$2 million of money from somewhere else to pay for these families getting at least some decent education.

I just want to propose to you what could be a better development than simply turning your back on them. There is, instead, a possibility—why not look at scrapping, as Andrea Rosenberg says, the ISA program altogether? Why not, Minister, find a way—

*Interruption.*

**The Vice-Chair:** Order. I would ask those observing the proceedings to please not protest or heckle. Allow the member to ask questions of the minister and the minister to respond.

**Mr Kennedy:** Thank you. I'll just elaborate on it slightly so the minister can give us a response to it in full. The ISA program is basically that you set up a set of rules and your people say, "If they fit our profiles, then we like that." You set the rules and you get the boards to execute them. Your rules identify students with particular needs, at least that's the objective. There are parents sitting here whose children have been identified as three



on the ISA scale, and then the board turns around and offers them half an assistant. Why? Because at the end of the day, you, the minister and the ministry, don't take the responsibility of making sure that every approved child gets the amount of support they're supposed to get. There's a very illogical bureaucratic buffer here between what you say you want for them and what comes out the other end. I guess what's very important today is to at least find out whether you're willing or open to the idea of taking responsibility for this, because the boards are just executing what you ask them to do.

The reason you can't, so far, I assume—I'm sorry, I'll put it in a positive context. Would you cancel the current ISA program, get the funding to be what it is currently, add funding that is determined by some objective panel to be needed, allow the boards to determine their own needs, or, alternatively, set up a system where you determine the needs and you pay for them so that you will pay for every single qualified student all around the province? That would be more straightforward; if you say they need this response, then you'll provide the funding. Today it's the worst of all worlds: you make people qualify and they don't get the money. It goes on and it goes on, and it's going to go on again next fall.

Minister, are you open to a proposal to radically change this? I will just remind you that it has been four years. Four years this has been going on, evaluation after evaluation. Some parents don't want to subject their kids to evaluation, then they're told they can get no assistance. That's bureaucratic craziness, to not have some way to respond to a human need in a classroom. All these kids are being medicalized. They're all being referred to in very negative terms. It becomes now a chart. We heard nine profiles before, and so on. But if you want to do that, Minister—I think that a lot of these parents object to that—would you at least take responsibility for funding directly the kids that your system says need the funding? Would you be open to that as a way to brush aside all this paperwork, all the auditors, and just say, "Once they're approved, they'll get their funding"? Will you open up three- and five- and six-year terms, whichever is appropriate for the children, rather than this repetitive redocumentation that's going on? Would you be open to that kind of progress or that kind of advancement here to try to help these kids?

**Hon Mrs Ecker:** Mr Kennedy, we agree that annual assessments are not appropriate for every child. I agree. That's why we are changing the system so that does not occur. One of the challenges we've had—and again this gets back to some of the communication challenges we've had—is that some boards have done annual assessments. We agree that is not appropriate in the case of children whose needs are not anticipated to change, so that's what we are moving toward, to minimize, to stop needless assessments, because it is a waste of money, it is a hassle for parents and teachers. I agree. But there does need to be a way that a school—whether it's the principal, whether it's the teacher. You've said, "Let's trust teachers and principals to make decisions to

document needs." Well, that's indeed who is there doing that. You yourself have said we need a process to do that. You need to know how many students you have with particular needs, so we have put in place a process. It is not working the way it should. That's why we have made and will continue to make changes so that it will work the way it should.

You're asking to completely stop that, but you're also saying we need another process. I don't think it's going to be of any assistance to anybody that we say, "OK, let's scrap the ISA, let's scrap the way we fund special ed, and now let's start putting in place another process." I think that's not going to help the parents.

We recognize that teachers are part of it; that's why teachers are part of it. We recognize that bureaucrats at Queen's Park should not be deciding whether a student needs this educational support or that educational support. That is not their job. That is a decision that I think teachers and the appropriate staff in school boards should be making. So we quite recognize that improvements need to happen, and we're making steps to put in place those improvements. But at the end of the day, you yourself have just agreed, there has to be a process to determine the needs of a child and how many children we have who have special needs. The goal here is to have a process that works.

**Mr Kennedy:** The minister has come a little bit of the way down the road, and I just wonder if you would fully contemplate this.

**Hon Mrs Ecker:** You keep asking the same question.

**Mr Kennedy:** If the teacher and the principal determine the need, why won't you just pay? Why do you have to verify and document and audit and have this huge paper mill? The teacher is there. If they meet the criteria, then sample after the fact, but don't require massive amounts of paperwork to be generated.

You have a funding game going on, Minister. I don't know if you're aware, but I think you might be aware, there is a funding game that goes on that leaves out the kids altogether. That funding game brings disrepute to all people in government. I will remind you that it's \$80 million worth of service that's being diverted here, according to the Ontario Principals' Council. There is bad news already with the cuts that are taking place, but this is mindless.

Minister, why can't it be as straightforward as: well-trained teachers and principals make a determination and say, "I need a full-time educational assistant for this person," and they get it? Every year the boards tell you how much it is—you know it's going to be a slightly varying amount—and you pay it. What's wrong with that?

**Hon Mrs Ecker:** Mr Kennedy, you yourself have just said there needs to be a process by which—

**Mr Kennedy:** I just described it to you.

**Hon Mrs Ecker:** —principals and those teachers make that determination. If you do not have a consistent process so that a student in school A gets an evaluation, an assessment or determination that is consistent with the

student in school B, you have a very unfair process, because it will be very inconsistently applied. You need to have some rules around it. That's what we've been told. That's what has been recommended to us.

The principals' council is part of the group that is telling us we need to continue to have a process. Can it be changed and improved from what we have in place? Absolutely, and I have said that. We're taking steps to do that. But you can't just simply say, "Let's have a teacher or principal"—based on no criteria, based on no rules, based on no way to consistently and fairly make a decision. You can't have it function that way either.

I agree with you—I've said this I don't know how many times, and I will continue to say this—there need to be improvements. Some have been made, more need to be made, and we're working with our education partners to put those in place so that every dollar that can go to front-line service, as opposed to administration, can be there.

**Mr Kennedy:** You have to send a signal. Would you be willing to radically overhaul this system? Would you be willing to get rid of—again, I thought of it as a target, because I like targets too. I'm a little scared to share something with one of the members opposite there. But the idea of taking the paperwork down from 20% to 5%, or even 10% initially down to 5%—because you control this. These are your ministry people who cause these reactions on the part of other people. It's not you telling somebody else what to do; it's you behaving in a certain way that would save the public—well, it wouldn't save the public money. Resources are badly needed in the school, but it would save these kids the fate that some of them are headed for, which is time out of school.

There are many kids in this room here who have not been to school for varying periods of time—withdrawn—and it seems to me it doesn't make sense. Would you give us a signal today? You said yes. I wonder if you would, then, agree that you're interested in a radical overhaul of this, a simplification of it, and if it came back to you from parents and from school administrators—you've approved of principals having input—would you entertain that? Would you head off this fall the process that's going to have so many kids re-evaluated?

**Hon Mrs Ecker:** Mr Kennedy, the people who are—

**Mr Kennedy:** You think what you have is good enough.

**Hon Mrs Ecker:** Mr Kennedy, I have just told you that there need to be additional changes, and the people who are working with us to make those changes are parent groups, school board groups, teacher groups and principal groups, who are saying, "Here's where we need to make changes." What you're saying is, "Let's completely scrap the work that has been done," in terms of making sure there are appropriate assessments of students. Those have already occurred. I don't think we should now say, "Let's take all those assessments that were done and throw them out the window so we can start with something new."

Change needs to be made. I agree. We are making those changes, putting them into place to give the boards some ability to plan on their funding. That's why we've had stable funding guarantees for school boards. That's why we're not going out there and saying, "Let's completely change the process about where we're going." We are continuing to make changes to improve it, because we need to do that.

We have a whole special advisory council that has representatives of all the special-needs groups who make recommendations to us and are working with us to improve this process. They share the concern, as I do, about too much red tape.

**Mr Kennedy:** I appreciate there are areas of real concern, and I'm not going to limit that in any way except to say that I'm not sure you fully appreciate that this process has turned into a parody of itself. It is not seriously on the side of the people that it should be. Something more dramatic is required in order for this to do justice to our particular obligation to these kids. I'm not going to be able to pursue that today, but I'm not going to give up either.

**Hon Mrs Ecker:** Mr Kennedy, we—

**Mr Kennedy:** There is another thing I want to ask you in the limited time that I have.

**Hon Mrs Ecker:** Stop putting words in my mouth. I agree there need to be improvements.

**Mr Kennedy:** I appreciate that.

**Hon Mrs Ecker:** I don't know how many more times I can say that we are working to do that.

**Mr Kennedy:** We couldn't find common ground completely.

Minister, I'm going to ask you if we can share a smaller project, a much more modest project, and that is: over the course of the next few weeks, would you agree to guarantee that for every child who is adversely affected by the budget decisions of boards—and I'm going to specifically restrict it to special education so it's not some kind of trick question—who is losing educational assistants or losing other supports that would permit them to go to school, that you, the ministry, will take a particular interest in ensuring that every one of those kids is in school in the fall? Would you agree to that here?

**Hon Mrs Ecker:** Mr Kennedy, if you would like us to take away the authority of school boards to—

**Mr Kennedy:** No, work with them.

**Hon Mrs Ecker:** Mr Kennedy, if you would like us to take away that authority, that's the only way something like that can occur. They have the ability to make those decisions. They should continue to have that ability to make those decisions. I appreciate there is a great need for change, which we've acknowledged and we're moving forward to make. But that is their responsibility. They're the ones there on the ground. They're the ones who are working with the parents to try to put these supports in place for the children. It is not the job of the bureaucrats.

**Mr Kennedy:** Mary Johnson is a principal at a school with a couple of these parents. Mary Johnson says, “Give me the educational assistants for these kids, and they’ll go to school in the fall.” That’s what she says. The ministry says to the board, “You can’t have more money,” and the board says to the school, “You can’t have those educational assistants.”

That sounds like a very sad story developing unless you change the scenario, and the scenario is a willingness on your part to not just say, “The boards in their current situation,” but maybe “The boards with a look over from my ministry to make sure these kids go to school, and if more money is required, then that’s what we’ll do.”

Maybe there’s an inadvertent effect here, but it’s happening. The parents are in this room, and there will be more parents with more kids with different needs, because there are generalized cuts. But in this specific case, could we not agree that special-needs kids will not get sacrificed and that you might take some special measures, including augmenting board resources if it’s justified—I’m not asking you to sign any blank cheques here, but the possibility exists that it’s a resource-based issue in many of these circumstances. Would you then be willing to be active on that during July and August to make sure that every one of these kids has the assurance that they’re going to be in school come September?

**The Vice-Chair:** Madam Minister, you’ve got about a minute to respond, and then the time is concluded.

**Mr Kennedy:** I show two minutes, but OK.

**Hon Mrs Ecker:** Well, Mr Kennedy, we have increased resources for this coming school year for school boards, and we have done that—

**Mr Kennedy:** At less than 1%, Minister, for crying out loud.

**The Vice-Chair:** Could we let the minister respond?

**Hon Mrs Ecker:** We have increased money for school boards more than 1%. We’re told that they needed flexibility in terms of how they allocated that, so we have indeed given them that. We are continuing to work to put improvements in place this coming school year so that less and less of that resource is being used on administrative stuff and more can be directed to front-line services. But it is and still remains the decision of school boards to make the decisions around the needs of the individual students; it’s not the ministry’s or the minister’s job to decide Sally should get this or Tommy should get that. We will continue to invest more resources for special needs, because it has been an important priority.

**The Vice-Chair:** Thank you, Madam Minister. The time is up, but there are 58 minutes left in the estimates for the Ministry of Education. We could continue the rotation, but there is going to be a bell shortly for a vote. I’ll ask the indulgence of the committee that we adjourn this meeting now and resume on the Tuesday that follows September 23rd, when we have estimates starting again. That sounds all right, sounds very efficient?

We stand adjourned until then.

*The committee adjourned at 1748.*

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