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**Official Report
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Tuesday 24 September 2002

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des débats
(Hansard)**

Mardi 24 septembre 2002

**Standing committee on
estimates**

Ministry of Education

**Comité permanent des
budgets des dépenses**

Ministère de l'Éducation

Chair: Gerard Kennedy
Clerk: Susan Sourial

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LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF ONTARIO

ASSEMBLÉE LÉGISLATIVE DE L'ONTARIO

STANDING COMMITTEE ON ESTIMATES

COMITÉ PERMANENT DES BUDGETS DES DÉPENSES

Tuesday 24 September 2002

Mardi 24 septembre 2002

The committee met at 1535 in room 151.

MINISTRY OF EDUCATION

The Vice-Chair (Mr Alvin Curling): I call to order the meeting of estimates committee for the Ministry of Education.

I have before me a letter from the minister, who has indicated that she won't be available at the hearing after 5 o'clock tomorrow, which is from 5 to 6. What we could do is postpone that 5 o'clock to 6 o'clock to the hearing on the next Tuesday, if that is acceptable to you all. The minister will be available today and until 5 o'clock tomorrow, but from 5 to 6 she will have another commitment. I'm asking for your consent that you could deal with that situation on the next Tuesday. Is that OK? I heard agreement on that.

In proceeding with this today, we will commence with vote 1001, item 1. We will begin with a 30-minute statement by the minister, followed by 30 minutes for the official opposition, 30 minutes for the third party and then another 30 minutes for the government or for the minister to use the right to reply and use it the best way she wishes. The remaining 5.5 hours will be appropriately apportioned equally among the three parties. So first we will have the minister for 30 minutes, then the official opposition for 30 minutes, then the third party for 30 minutes and then her response of 30 minutes, and then we will divide up the 5.5 thereafter equally.

Madam Minister, welcome. This is your first estimate for the Ministry of Education. You may proceed.

Hon Elizabeth Witmer (Deputy Premier, Minister of Education): I am extremely pleased to appear before the committee on behalf of the Ministry of Education. Joining me here is the ministry's deputy minister, Suzanne Herbert.

First and foremost let me say how proud and pleased I am to have been appointed Ontario's Minister of Education and to be able to continue the work that has been undertaken by my colleague Janet Ecker in this very important portfolio. I say "important" because I think one of the most important purposes and responsibilities of any government is the growth and personal development of our young people. In a world in which rapid change and continuous learning are a way of life, our schools and our dedicated teachers are assisting students of all ages to

adapt to challenging times and also encouraging them, of course, to pursue new interests.

There was a man at one time whose name was Lon Watters, who said that schools are buildings "with four walls—with tomorrow inside." However, it is by working together as a team, whether students, parents, government, taxpayers and staff, and by maintaining an optimism for what lies ahead that we are going to effectively be able to meet the challenges of the future of these young people and make sure that the tomorrows are even brighter for all of the students we serve.

I think we have a great opportunity and a great responsibility to ensure that we can provide the best learning environment in the province in order that each student can achieve their maximum potential.

I would just be on the record as saying I am a strong advocate of public education. I believe we have an outstanding system, and by working together we can all continue to make it even better.

1540

As of this September, I'm pleased to say that the province-wide standardized curriculum is now in place for every grade. Our last class of OAC students will graduate at the end of this school year. These are probably the most obvious examples of an education system that has changed fundamentally over the past seven years.

When our government was elected in 1995, we made a commitment to the people of this province to reform and improve Ontario's education system. We promised that we would make it equitable for all students, no matter where they lived or which board they attended. We also committed to make it responsive to student needs and more accountable to the parents and taxpayers. We have kept this promise. However, we know there is more that needs to be done.

We have put in place a comprehensive plan in order that we can improve student learning and achievement and support our teachers. I'd just like to review some of the key elements of the reform. We have established a new curriculum from kindergarten to the end of high school that sets a high standard for student achievement and excellence. We have introduced province-wide tests that are reporting regularly on how successfully students and our schools are performing. Third, we have developed strategies that respond to the test results, such as the early reading strategy and the early math strategy, to help

our students gain the fundamentals they are going to need for future success. Fourth, we have put in place a comprehensive program for teachers' ongoing professional development and an appraisal system to ensure they have the most up-to-date skills and knowledge and are able to apply these effectively in the classroom.

I am extremely pleased to say that as a result of the plan and the reforms that have been introduced, student achievement is improving. It is essential that we continue to build on these steps, and we will continue to do so with the support and co-operation of others in the field of education.

In the area of funding, within two days of being sworn in Premier Eves demonstrated that education is a clear priority for the government. He announced that \$65 million more would be given to school boards for new textbooks and technology-based learning materials. Two weeks after that, we announced that \$25 million would go toward expanding the early reading strategy and introducing a new early math strategy. Two weeks after that, we announced that we would increase funding for Ontario's schools by \$350 million for the upcoming school year. Then, in the provincial budget in June, we built further on our educational investment and announced another \$117 million in new funding for Ontario schools.

I am pleased to say that since April our government has announced almost \$560 million in new spending to support our students and our staff in school boards throughout Ontario. This year, we will be spending a record \$14.26 billion on publicly funded education. That is a 2.9% increase over 2001-02. Almost all school boards will receive more money, even though about half of them will have fewer students, because that is one of the dilemmas we are facing: a declining population in future years.

This significant increase means our schools will have access to more of the resources and tools they need to provide a quality education to students. It means that Ontario students will benefit from greater learning opportunities. However, we know that the funding formula that we introduced four years ago needs to be reviewed, and we are undertaking a review to make sure that we are still achieving equality and fairness to the students throughout the province.

But let me just talk about the funding formula. It's based on a foundation grant that covers the basic cost of providing an educational program to a student for one year. Additional funds are provided through 10 special-purpose grants. The purpose of student-focused funding is to ensure quality education and equality of opportunity for all students, no matter where they live in this great province. The funding formula has succeeded in guaranteeing that every child has the same chance to achieve his or her maximum potential and to leave with the skills and knowledge they need.

While the funding formula has accomplished a great deal, Ontarians have told us they do want improvements where possible. Our government has listened to these concerns and we have responded. In the throne speech,

we announced that Dr Mordechai Rozanski, president of the University of Guelph—and a strong advocate, I might add, of public education—would lead the Education Equality Task Force in a review of the funding formula. The task force has been asked to make recommendations on ways to build on the success of the student-focused funding formula and improve fairness, stability and certainty for schools and students and obviously take a look at the issue of adequacy.

Dr Rozanski has been carrying out his review in several stages, and he has been gathering input through stakeholder meetings, public consultations and submissions on the best way to fund school boards. He began by examining past studies and reports on education funding and researching best practices in other parts of Canada and the world. Then, in August and early September, the task force met with more than 180 representatives of education stakeholder groups in 12 day-long round-table discussions. Now, during September, the task force is hosting 10 days of public meetings in Barrie, London, North Bay, Ottawa, Thunder Bay and Toronto. In addition, the task force has been receiving submissions by mail and through its Web site. And with the public meetings now wrapping up, Dr Rozanski will be preparing his report and recommendations. The task force, I'm pleased to say, is on track to present its recommendations in early November, and, as we had always indicated would happen, they will be considered for implementation in the 2003-04 school year.

Let's talk about the issue of balanced budgets. It is worth noting that the requirement for individual school boards to balance their budgets has been part of education since 1933. Unfortunately, despite the fact that our government has put more money into the system this year and listened to the concerns about the funding formula, three of Ontario's 72 boards did not live up to their financial and legal obligations this year. We have acted to bring stability to the education of children in these communities by sending in an investigator to review each board's finances and to assist the board in meeting its financial obligations to ensure that schools would open in September for students and that there would be stability in the system.

Since the boards were unable to balance their budgets, we have appointed supervisors to prepare and work with stakeholders to implement a plan to return each board to a balanced financial position and to ensure that parents and students would see stability in the schools.

I just want to add here as an aside that the appointment of a supervisor is always a difficult decision. I think it's important to know that that decision was only made after our ministry had extended the deadlines to board trustees several times and made every effort to resolve the matters by other means.

1550

Looking now at the issue of school renewal, another important objective we need to be addressing, and have been, is to provide our students with effective, safe accommodation. Ontario school boards own and operate

more than 5,000 schools, with some 250 million square feet of floor space. The total value of these facilities is more than \$25 billion.

Our funding formula includes the pupil accommodation grant. This annual grant gives school boards both the resources and the flexibility to operate, maintain and upgrade existing schools and to build new schools where they are needed. In May this year I announced that the grant for school renewal would be \$241 million for 2002-03. In the budget, an additional \$25 million was added, for a total of \$266 million.

We also committed \$6.5 million toward replacing—in other words, rebuilding—nine schools that were identified as having unfeasible repair costs.

Since our new approach to funding pupil accommodation includes financing construction costs over long periods of time, these dollars will support new construction valued at \$65 million.

I'm also pleased to say that a further \$17 million will be invested over two years to assess school renewal needs across the province and to identify the most pressing investment priorities.

We understand that we must renew and maintain our schools, not just because we need to protect an important public asset, but we must ensure that our students have a safe and healthy learning environment.

I'd like to turn now to curriculum. We all know the importance of ensuring that our young people gain the knowledge and learn the skills they need to succeed.

In today's competitive world, we have a responsibility to prepare students for the challenges of the future by setting high standards of achievement, but also by supporting them in achieving those standards. Parents across Ontario told us they wanted a more rigorous curriculum with specific, clear and consistent standards province-wide. Again we have responded.

From the new kindergarten program, through the elementary grades and to the new high school program, the new curriculum focuses on the basics of reading, writing, math and science and on helping students acquire knowledge and skills.

We have been supporting the new curriculum in many ways. Since 1999 we have dedicated \$289 million to new textbooks and related learning materials. By the end of the four-year implementation of the new high school program in 2003, we will have allocated \$70 million to support teacher training for the new elementary and secondary programs, and over the same period we will have dedicated another \$80 million to provide other professional supports and resources.

I am pleased to say that the new curriculum has met with considerable success. Provincial, national and international results show that our students' knowledge and skills are improving. However, having said that, we are also aware that some students will need extra assistance and support to master the higher standards of the new curriculum, and we are committed and we will help them.

For 2002-03, student-focused funding will flow a projected \$496.1 million to boards to help these students,

including \$293.4 million through the learning opportunities grant, which includes \$25 million for grades 7 to 10 literacy and math programs; \$168.5 million through the language grant for English as a second language; \$15.8 million through the language grant for French-language students; and \$18.4 million through the continuing education and other programs grant for programs such as summer school.

A number of education stakeholders have expressed concerns that the new high school curriculum for applied courses may be too challenging for some of our students. I assure you, our government is fully committed to working with our stakeholders to ensure that the students who need support will receive the support they need. We are working with our education partners to address these issues. We want to ensure that students obtain the skills they will need whether they go directly into the world of work, apprenticeships or post-secondary education.

Test results: I mentioned a month ago that test results show that Ontario's students are responding positively to our new curriculum. I want to elaborate on this point because I've had the opportunity now to meet with many educational leaders from around the world who have identified the fact that our students are doing well and have come to ask us, "What's the secret?"

Regular assessment of progress in learning the curriculum is a key part of the government's plan to improve student achievement. We all need to know if the education system is providing the consistency and quality we want for our children. Our students are now regularly assessed in reading, writing and math in grades 3 and 6 and in math in grade 9, and during the last school year the grade 10 literacy test was administered for the first time as a requirement for high school graduation. The results of provincial, national and international tests all continue to provide evidence that our students' knowledge and skills are improving.

I would just like to give you some examples of how our students continue to meet the challenges we have placed before them. I also want to add that this would not be possible without the support of the hard-working teachers and the parents throughout Ontario.

Ontario English-language grade 3 students reaching the provincial standard in math increased from 43% in 1998 to 61% in 2001, while French-language grade 6 students meeting the provincial standard in math rose from 55% in 1999 to 60% in 2001.

The national school achievement indicators program found that Ontario English-language 13-year-olds improved their ranking in mathematical content in four years, since 1997, from 15th to 4th of 18 ranked jurisdictions. In 2001, they were behind only Alberta and Quebec. Ontario's French-language 13-year-olds improved their ranking in mathematical problem solving from 15th to 5th of 18 ranked jurisdictional groups.

Ontario's 15-year-olds also performed well in the program for international student assessment in 2000, which found that Canadian students ranked near the top among 32 countries for achievement in reading, math-

ematics and science. In fact, I would add that Finland was the only country that achieved a higher level on the key reading component of the test than our Ontario students, and in both math and science, Ontario students' scores were significantly higher than those of students in the United States and Germany.

Students, teachers and parents are all to be congratulated for these most significant achievements. We need to continue to ensure that we provide the opportunity for our students to meet the high standards of learning. These results make it clear that we are succeeding with an education agenda that focuses on students first and on learning.

Let's take a look now at early reading and early math, because we know that these activities are the foundation of a strong education. In order to help students master these basic skills early, we have undertaken some initiatives. We have undertaken province-wide tests, and we are doing this because they are a valuable tool for determining where there are problems and how we can best help students. Successful strategies for improving student performance require three key elements: measurable targets for better student learning, tools for school improvement and, of course, we need the financial and human resources to meet these goals.

1600

Last year we learned that only 49% of grade 3 students were achieving the provincial standard in reading. We needed to respond. How could we help these children? We responded by launching the early reading program to improve the reading skills of children from junior kindergarten to grade 3. To support this strategy the government invested \$29 million.

We also know that schools can't do it alone. We know that if students are going to improve their reading skills, it is important that families read to their children at a very early age in life and continue to support their children with reading activities. In May our government announced we would invest \$25 million to expand the early reading program beyond grade 3 to grade 6.

We also established a new early math strategy to help raise the level of math achievement of students from JK to grade 3. In the budget, our government announced a further investment of \$5 million to extend the early math strategy to the grade 6 level and to support our teachers and enhance the teaching skills of elementary school teachers in this area.

Both of these strategies require school boards to set measurable targets for improving student achievement. This funding will support improved teaching strategies, new learning resources and special assistance for schools whose students need extra help in achieving their goals. Schools are also required to report annually on their test results and on how well they have succeeded in meeting their individual targets.

Our government is also moving into phase two of the support for schools that need extra help program. This is one component of the early reading strategy that provides additional support to a selected number of schools to improve the reading performance of grade 3 students.

I would like to highlight the fact that in the fall of 2001, 16 schools were selected by a steering committee, with input from local school boards, to participate in phase one of the program whereby we would support schools that need extra help. This fall we will be announcing an additional 14 schools that have been selected for phase two.

To further support improved student learning, the June budget announced the creation of the student achievement fund. The budget stated that \$20 million will be provided to elementary schools. There will be \$5,000 allocated to every elementary school to address student literacy. The principal, in consultation with the school council, will be able to invest in local initiatives that further improve student learning. This program is just one more way in which our government is working with our education partners toward school excellence and higher student achievement.

Let me turn now to special education. Students with special needs are an important priority of this government. We must and we want to foster an education system that has the flexibility to meet individual special needs and that is also focused on achieving the best outcomes for all students across the province.

Funding for special education has increased by over 17% since 1998-99 to more than \$1.37 billion in the 2002-03 fiscal year.

We are also continuing to implement our multi-year plan to improve accountability and quality standards in special education.

Currently, we are undertaking a comprehensive review of the intensive support amount files to ensure that funding accurately reflects each board's share of high-needs students.

We also plan to expedite and streamline the assessment process and to ensure that the financial support and human resources are there to support these students with special needs.

In the budget, we took action—again in response to what we were hearing—to help boards complete the assessments they need to do as part of the ISA review. Indeed our government announced one-time assistance of \$10 million to help clear the waiting lists for professional assessment of high-needs students. This additional funding will be of particular help to rural, northern and French boards, which report that assessments tend to be more costly in their communities. Of course, at times they also don't have the human resources to do some of the assessment.

In this fiscal year, our government will also allocate \$10 million in capital funding to upgrade the provincial schools for children with disabilities. I was pleased last Friday to participate in a groundbreaking at the school in Brantford.

The Vice-Chair: You have two minutes, Madam Minister.

Hon Mrs Witmer: OK. I want to talk about teaching excellence, because I want to highlight the fact that we have outstanding, dedicated and excellent teachers who

work in this province tirelessly. We need to also remember the important role that teachers play in the lives of our students, and we want to ensure that they can do the best that they possibly can. So in 2002-03 we are providing \$10 million in one-time funding to develop further professional learning resources for teachers and principals. We also want to move forward to put in place a comprehensive approach to supporting teacher excellence.

Transportation: we transport 800,000 children every day. Our government is increasing the transportation grant in order that we can ensure that our students get to school safely, on time and ready to learn.

We've also introduced safe schools initiatives, the code of conduct, and of course, at the beginning of the last school year, we made some changes to the Education Act in that regard. We recently passed the Student Protection Act to help protect students from sexual abuse. Of course, we want to make sure that parents have a strong voice and an important role in their children's education system.

I want to conclude by saying that our government is fully committed to a strong public school system in Ontario, one that supports achievement, improvement and excellence in education. We want to make sure that we work with our stakeholders in order that we can support our young people in achieving their maximum potential. Thank you.

The Vice-Chair: Thank you very much, Madam Minister. The official opposition will have 30 minutes to respond.

Mr Gerard Kennedy (Parkdale-High Park): Madam Minister, with your co-operation, I'd like to ascertain some information in this section, if that's all right with you.

Hon Mrs Witmer: That's fine, Mr Kennedy.

Mr Kennedy: Great. There are a number of propositions you've put forward that I'd like to address in the course of doing that, but in essence, I want to talk to you a little bit about your role as Minister of Education currently and the three boards that you've taken over. I want to ask you, for the people who have children in those areas, people who pay taxes and support those schools, can your ministry produce a list of the cuts recommended by your investigator that you approve of? In other words, have you evaluated your investigator's recommendations? Did you proceed to the investigator having identified that there were things that children in these three areas do not require, that are surplus to their requirements? Could you share those with us today? Could you table for the benefit of the committee which of your investigator's recommendations the decision you made was based upon that money could be cut safely away from the children in those boards?

Hon Mrs Witmer: We haven't provided any recommendations. We are awaiting a report from all of the three supervisors in the three boards as to their plan for balancing the budget of their respective boards, Mr Kennedy.

1610

Mr Kennedy: But surely, Madam Minister, in the main, you must have reached, I'm sure, some kind of responsible conclusion that what the board members in those areas were trying to do was factually in error and therefore deserving of sanction. For this committee and for the benefit of the people in those areas, what facts do you rely upon in that decision? In other words, what can you share with us today that you hold that board accountable to have their democratically acquired powers surrendered in this fashion? Are there some examples, at least, that you agree with the supervisor? Because there's a fair bit of dollars coming out of, I gather, the board budgets. But it's what we're here today to examine, the part of it that comes from the province that was spent on this exercise. Surely, after this number of weeks, there are areas that the investigators identified that your ministry, with its number of very capable people here today, have validated and said, "These things aren't needed for children." I'm wondering if you can share some of those with us today.

Hon Mrs Witmer: I think we need to keep one thing in mind, and that is the fact that since 1933 it has been a requirement that all boards of education in the province balance their budgets. I think we need to keep that in mind.

Mr Kennedy: Sure.

Hon Mrs Witmer: I think we also need to keep in mind that in the case of all these boards they were presented with balanced budgets by their staff, and a small majority of trustees chose to take an action whereby they did not live up to their obligations.

Mr Kennedy: As I think you know from other experiences of this particular committee, this is the time when I hope to ascertain information, your willingness to provide it. You'll have another chance to respond. But I was hoping for a straightforward answer. Either there are factually based assessments that can be shared with this committee—that is, your ministry's analysis of what your supervisor provided that gave you the factual basis on which to send in a supervisor—or there is not. Could you respond to that directly, please?

Hon Mrs Witmer: Sure I can, beyond what I've already said. Why would you recommend that supervisors be hired? First of all, investigators can only recommend control and charge over the administration of the affairs of the board if their investigation—

Mr Kennedy: Minister, I'm going to interrupt you, through you, Mr Chair. This time is allocated to the opposition. I'm wondering if you could first respond directly to my question. Is there, yes or no, a factual assessment of the supervisor's recommendation for cuts to those boards? If there is not, I'd like to move on; if there is, I wonder if you could table it for us today. Again, we have a precious amount of time here to engage in this discussion of accountability, and I'm wondering if you could respond in that fashion. Is there or is there not a factual assessment on which your decision was based, and could it be shared with the committee today? I really

would appreciate your co-operation in this regard, Madam Minister.

Hon Mrs Witmer: The reason that you would appoint a supervisor is because there was evidence that was disclosed of either financial default or probable financial default, deficit or probable deficit, serious financial mismanagement.

Mr Kennedy: Minister, with all due respect—

Hon Mrs Witmer: In the case of Ottawa—perhaps you don't recall this—the bank had advised the board that there would be no extension on the line of credit, that they would not be able to meet their payroll to pay their teachers and staff on September 3 and 6.

Mr Kennedy: Minister, could I perhaps rephrase this question, and maybe the deputy, who is with you, can help me to clarify. What was the charge per hour or on what fee basis were the investigators paid? Could we have a very succinct response to that? Is it an hourly rate, a weekly rate, and how much in total was paid to Mr Rosen and the other investigators? Is there an available figure that we could have?

Ms Suzanne Herbert: Mr Kennedy, there—

The Vice-Chair: Please identify yourself.

Ms Herbert: Sorry, Mr Curling. I'm Sue Herbert. I'm the Deputy Minister of Education.

In answer to your question, the investigators were hired by the government in a normal contractual form. I would tell you that we don't have a final figure yet from the two investigators who went in to—

Mr Kennedy: Would it be more than \$5,000? Would that be fair? Or \$10,000?

Ms Herbert: I don't know that guessing at a number is—

Mr Kennedy: OK. So there is no number available?

Ms Herbert: More or less.

Mr Kennedy: Back to the minister: you've spent thousands of dollars, whatever the number is—I hope that means the deputy is prepared to share that number with this committee when it becomes available. Is that going to be possible?

Thousands of dollars were spent on an investigator's report. You knew that the banks or whoever took whatever position they did before you sent in an investigator. The investigators made a very specific list of things they recommended to you in your responsibility for these children that these children are no longer going to have: special-needs assistance, special-needs teachers, substantial programs here in Toronto.

Minister, that's what you got for your thousands of dollars. That's what you sent in and that's what you required. Surely a reasonable expectation of the people of this province is that you would give us your ministry's professional evaluation of the work you had done and the basis on which you used that to decide that you were right and the trustees were wrong. Is there any factual analysis at all that you can table here today where your ministry endorses the findings of the supervisors and therefore created the basis for your decision to take over these boards? Is there anything?

Hon Mrs Witmer: Any decision that the supervisor is going to make as to how he will balance the budget in the three respective boards will be based on consultation with staff, trustees and parents, and on the investigator's report.

Mr Kennedy: Do you mean to tell me that you've paid for investigative reports, you hired what are fairly expensive—Mr Rosen's going rate is \$350 to \$500 per hour. He is, as you've often referred to him, a forensic investigator. You didn't have him do a forensic engagement, so you've paid a lot for someone who went in there and gave you a list of cuts. I'm asking you, as minister, to tell me whether you and your considerable ministry evaluated his recommendations and used that as the basis—and could you be specific—for sending in the one person to take away the democratically elected board and instead install one. Is there any basis at all to show us here today?

Hon Mrs Witmer: I don't think you understand, Mr Kennedy, that there were three boards who chose not to obey the law of this province that the budgets needed to be balanced. As a result, in order to ensure stability in the system and in order to ensure that the schools were going to open in September, it was necessary for us, first of all, to hire the investigators. Don't forget that Mr Libbey in Ottawa had been asking for a year for an investigation—

Mr Kennedy: Minister, I guess what you're forgetting is that people want to know. You've spent thousands of dollars on these investigators—thousands of dollars—and the whole argument here is that there isn't enough money for these special-needs kids in Ottawa. You're telling us you spent the whole summer basically, I guess, without any evaluation by your ministry of what was going on in those places, without any fair-minded look at it. I guess we're led to believe that this was just a political smoke-screen. You hired an investigator and now you've hired supervisors.

Minister, this is a very expensive way to help you from getting your hands dirty. You are the Minister of Education. Either you arrived at a conclusion that these boards were harming children or this is just some kind of power play. Now, which is it? Did your ministry do any studies? Right now, you're not answering in the affirmative, you're sharing nothing with us, so I guess there were no studies done. This is just an exercise.

Minister, I'll ask you personally, in your capacity as minister, do you agree with the list of cuts that your investigators put forward, services that should be taken away? For example, in Toronto, I believe that about 5% are within the category of administration and all the rest are direct services to children. Do you concur with your investigator that those services should be taken away from children? Will you take some responsibility for your actions?

Hon Mrs Witmer: Mr Kennedy, I would just hasten to add that the plan for a balanced budget that is going to come forward from Mr Christie, Mr Murray or Mr Beckstead will be based on taking into consideration the best advice they get from trustees, people in the com-

munity, staff, and the investigators' report. We look forward to the plan.

Mr Kennedy: Minister, you made a weighty decision, for the first time—there's one other board example—in that you basically convicted these boards of not having done the right job for the children. You knew before, depending on the technical reading of things, that some of them could have been in a certain kind of technical breach. You have other boards that have been in that position, that have carried deficits forward. You acted in this case, and I've given you about 10 minutes in which to provide to this group, this worthy committee of the Legislature, any basis for your action, and you've provided none. You basically said you knew at the beginning of the summer; you knew at the end of the summer. I don't understand how that warrants the kind of money, except as a political smokescreen.

Hon Mrs Witmer: Basically, these trustees had a choice. These trustees could have, as 69 other boards in the province did, balance their budget, knowing full well, by the way, Mr Kennedy—

Mr Kennedy: Let's examine that. Let's look at their choice.

Hon Mrs Witmer: —that our government had already responded to the funding concerns by setting up the Rozanski task force.

Mr Kennedy: Minister, with all due respect, you will get an opportunity to respond. Let's look at their funding concerns. Do you at least agree that the board in Ottawa and the board in Toronto receive less money from you now than they did a few years ago? Do you agree with that as a statement of fact? Can you acknowledge that?

Hon Mrs Witmer: Let's first of all put on the record the fact—

Mr Kennedy: Minister, really, I have a very short time.

Hon Mrs Witmer: Do you know what, Mr Kennedy? Let's not play games.

Mr Kennedy: The Chair will be after this. I'm wondering if you could do us the courtesy of responding directly to the questions.

Hon Chris Stockwell (Minister of the Environment, Government House Leader): Chair, he asks the questions and the minister answers, as I understand it. Does she get to answer or not?

Mr Kennedy: Is that a point of order, Mr Chair? It is coming out of our time?

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The Vice-Chair: The interchange does not seem to have been disruptive to the minister.

Mr Kennedy: Minister, in 1997 the Ottawa-Carleton District School Board, according to your figures, had \$506 million to spend in operations. You offered them something a little bit more than \$486 million this year. When you take the mitigation funds and you look at how they applied them, they had \$12 million less to spend this year than they did last year. You apply the same figures to Toronto and they'd have about \$25 million to \$30 million less to spend this year than last year when mitigation is taken into account.

What we're looking for, Minister: do you at least acknowledge that it's your decision to cut their funding by ending their mitigation funds, by not giving them compensating funds, which puts them out of balance in terms of a budget? Do you at least acknowledge and take that minimum amount of responsibility?

Hon Mrs Witmer: Well, do you know what? We actually gave them their mitigation funding earlier. They had five years to balance their budget. And I want to add that there was a small majority of the trustees on the Toronto board who chose not to balance their budget. The board chair and another group of trustees actually were looking to balance the budget. They realized they had a responsibility. But I can ask the ADM—

Mr Kennedy: Minister, is there something about the questions I'm asking that doesn't deserve an answer? I really would like to have an answer.

Hon Mrs Witmer: I'm going to ask the ADM, and you know what? I think he might be able to give you the answers you're searching for.

Mr Kennedy: I would appreciate that.

Mr Norbert Hartmann: Norbert Hartmann, assistant deputy minister of education. In response to the question, Mr Kennedy, this year in Ottawa-Carleton the board received \$505,097,148. Last year they received \$492,466,000. So there has been an increase in Ottawa-Carleton this year of—

Mr Kennedy: Can you please provide to us the amount of mitigation funds that were applied in Ottawa-Carleton last year?

Mr Hartmann: The monies, as the minister has said, to Ottawa-Carleton were—

Mr Kennedy: Sir, honest, is there an amount of money, or could we then table that question and ask to have it brought back? My point is this, and I hope it's acknowledged on the government side: you provided a lump sum to the Ottawa board in the year 2000. Is that correct?

Mr Hartmann: That's correct.

Mr Kennedy: Are you aware how much of that was then sequestered, put aside, by the board and applied last year and used to help balance their books? Any idea?

Mr Hartmann: No, that we don't have at our disposal today, Mr Kennedy.

Mr Kennedy: Could those figures be tabled? I think it would be helpful to have the ministry acknowledge that. It's not a disputatious question; it's turning into one but it really is just a question. The board's figures, for the information of this committee, are that they had approximately \$12 million less available to them, not taking into account other pressures affecting them and other boards, this year once the mitigation funds were applied. Similarly, in net increases, Toronto had \$25 million less. If those figures aren't correct, could someone from the ministry please provide in some detail a comparison?

My point here, Minister, is that you made a decision to cut these boards, to pursue these cuts, and I'm wondering how you can come here today and have no factual basis on which to say that the services that were being cut were

validated or not. I wonder if you could comment on that, please.

Hon Mrs Witmer: I think the question has been answered, Mr Kennedy.

Mr Kennedy: No. My question is to you, Minister. I'm wondering, in the instance that the money has been cut from these boards—and you made that decision—how it is possible for you not to have to arrive at a factual basis for continuing to cut those funds? What are we to believe in terms of your decision if you bring no facts here to substantiate the decision you made to continue to cut these boards?

Hon Mrs Witmer: I just would hasten to remind you that these trustees who chose not to balance the budget—

Mr Kennedy: After you made cuts.

Hon Mrs Witmer: —have had the responsibility since 1933. There were 69 other boards in this province that did achieve a balanced budget, and there is a legal obligation to do so. So we have now asked the supervisors to work with the trustees, with the community and with the stakeholders in order to come up with a balanced budget plan.

Mr Kennedy: For your entire career as education minister you have been sitting on this problem with these boards, knowing that you were going to cut their money. What we've seen is weeks and weeks of expensive hired people—now public relations people, then supervisors, then investigators—and we still have no accountability from you for their actions. You won't tell us which services you believe can be cut from children. You've had detailed reports provided to you, you have the benefit of the entire ministry to draw on and you haven't provided one example today of what you think these boards were doing wrong in saying to you that they needed not to be cut in any of these services for children. I think that's a sad indictment.

I'll move on to another question. I'd like to ask you specifically about page 31 of the estimates book.

Hon Mrs Witmer: You should make a speech.

Mr Kennedy: Well, Minister, if you don't mind.

Mr Norm Miller (Parry Sound-Muskoka): Why don't you let her answer a question some time?

Mr Kennedy: It's not working so far, Mr Miller. I'm happy to have an answer.

Minister, on page 31 there is a list of some of the annualizations of promises that your government made, and they total approximately \$342 million.

I wonder if I could ask you to turn your attention to page 32. You're telling us in effect that the school board operating grant and some of the programs are being increased, but something we haven't heard of publicly yet is that some of these funds are being reduced by a total of \$94 million. I'm wondering if you or your ministry staff could tell us point by point which of these programs have produced—some of them are not well described—and the reason they are being taken out. What I refer to is vote 1002-1 and the \$94 million that you say to “wind down” but which essentially is being taken out of the budget this year.

Hon Mrs Witmer: I'd be happy to call on Carol Lawson to assist you in understanding that, Mr Kennedy.

Mr Kennedy: Ms Lawson, I wonder if you could help me. The first item on page 32 is \$30 million and the category is “other.” I wonder if you could help us with what “other” means.

Ms Carol Lawson: All of these programs that you see here were time-limited programs within the ministry's allocation. So in fiscal year 2002-03 they were taken out. It was a program that only lasted a set period of time.

Mr Kennedy: Can you identify the program that's referred to as “other” or if there is more than one program?

Ms Lawson: It's more than one. I'm sorry, I don't have the details about “other.”

Mr Kennedy: Could this committee be provided with a list of those programs?

Ms Lawson: I'll come back with a list tomorrow.

Mr Kennedy: There's a reference here to a JK to grade 3 reading skills program at the cost of \$24 million. On the previous page there is talk about an early reading and early math extension for \$20 million, but then there is the elimination of a program for \$24 million. Which program was this, how long did it run and why is it being cancelled?

Ms Lawson: The one on page 32, JK to grade 3, was a one-year program that was approved as part of our 2001-02 estimates. In fiscal year 2002-03, we had approval for an early math/extension of early reading program of \$20 million.

Mr Kennedy: So essentially one program, \$24 million, was cancelled and a new program, \$20 million, was started. Is that correct?

Ms Lawson: It wasn't that it was cancelled; it finished its one year.

Mr Kennedy: There is another reference here, and perhaps you can help me. It looks like Mr Eves's specific budget commitment of a certain amount of money to connect schools' computer purchases and so on made in the 1998 budget, here referred to as Connecting Schools. Can you verify what that is?

Ms Lawson: Connecting Schools was an Ontario budget initiative that had a four-year term, and this was the final year.

Mr Kennedy: Can you verify for me: I believe it was originally \$30 million, so half of it went unspent; is that correct?

Ms Lawson: No. We had \$15 million in fiscal year 2001-02, and in 2002-03 it no longer existed as a program, so we took the \$15 million out.

Mr Kennedy: OK, that's a better answer. Of the original \$30 million, how much was spent? Was all of it spent? How much of the original commitment was spent?

Ms Lawson: Of the \$30 million? I'd have to go back and check to get the actual figures. I don't have that.

Mr Kennedy: Could we be provided with that information?

Ms Lawson: Yes. Most of these reductions that are here are not in the school board operating grant.

Mr Kennedy: I understand, but you have an expanded line called “other transfers.”

Blueprint: can you enlighten me what Blueprint refers to?

Ms Lawson: Blueprint refers to a number of commitments for the Ministry of Education in the areas of safe schools, teaching excellence and core subject testing in the Blueprint.

Mr Kennedy: Blueprint refers to the Progressive Conservative Party’s political document?

Ms Lawson: Yes.

Mr Kennedy: I just think it’s kind of unusual, wouldn’t you agree, to have the Blueprint referred to as a government document when it’s actually an election pledge of the Progressive Conservative Party?

Mr John O’Toole (Durham): It’s not called Redprint.

Mr Kennedy: I’m sorry, but that is what it refers to? It refers to—

Ms Lawson: It refers to the programs that are approved by the government through our business plan process for teaching, yes.

Mr Kennedy: But Blueprint refers to the title of the 1999 election document of the Progressive Conservative Party. Could we have the details of the programs that were finished? They were one-time promises; is that what they were?

Ms Lawson: This is a one-time change in the cash flow.

Mr Kennedy: Yes, but that means the program ended or no longer requires funding.

Ms Herbert: If I might, Mr Chair, many of the initiatives that the government asked us to undertake, which were part of the education reform and labelled here as Blueprint—there were a number of one-time initiatives. For example, we might have started a new program and there may have been start-up costs and the purchase of learning resources. I just want to be clear that this does not represent programs ending. It may represent a legitimate funding of one-time costs.

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Mr Kennedy: If you could provide us with the details of that, we’d be in a position to know that a little bit better, if that’s possible. I guess the same goes for the rest of the programs, if some level of detail could be provided, because what we want to understand here is the actual, true new spending. In the normal course of business, governments will start some programs and end others. We have so far heard about the programs the government is prepared to fund. We haven’t heard about the ones that were ending or the government may be taking away, so I think it’s important that we have that. But I would like to say I find it passing strange that Blueprint would find its way into a ministry document.

I want to ask you then, on page 31, there is column (e) and column (f), the usual columns for interim actual. I’m looking specifically at the transfer payments. It looks here like the proposed spending for transfer payments

was underspent by about \$80 million. Is that roughly correct?

Ms Lawson: Yes.

Mr Kennedy: Further, if I’m not mistaken, a number of the announcements that the Premier made shortly after the slightly new government came into power were made from the last fiscal year. The textbooks would be an example. Would that be correct?

Ms Lawson: Yes.

Mr Kennedy: Would they come out of that line in the budget?

Ms Lawson: The textbooks, the \$65 million? Is that what you’re referring to?

Mr Kennedy: That’s right. Would that normally be where we would find them?

Ms Lawson: That’s where you would find them, yes.

Mr Kennedy: So in effect, then, what the government did was have money left over at the end of the year and allocate some of that to textbooks, is that correct?

Interjection.

Mr Kennedy: What line would we find it in, then, Ms Herbert? Another line for textbooks?

Ms Herbert: Sorry, I was just commenting on your \$8-million line.

Mr Kennedy: The \$80-million line? Which line do you think the textbooks are in?

Ms Herbert: If there is underspending at the end of the year, it’s been a traditional practice of most governments to look at how they can reinvest that underspending in new programs or new activities. That’s a very common practice.

Mr Kennedy: But factually it’s correct, then, that it wasn’t new money coming from the government. There was underspending and the minister and the Premier both allocated it to some of these announcements that we heard. Is that factually correct?

Ms Herbert: Yes, that would be factually correct.

Mr Kennedy: Could I ask, then, what is the underlying reason for the underspending? Is there some analysis we could have on which programs were projected and then underspent to create that room at the end of the year? Are there some principal features of that that could be shared today?

Ms Herbert: Generally speaking, because we base our projections on enrolment early in our fiscal year and because we’re working with the government’s fiscal calendar and the school year is a different calendar, we do projections from a fair distance away. Then as the school year goes through, depending on enrolment—you will have seen in many of your local communities, and in fact I noticed this last week, that school boards have now adjusted their enrolment. It’s up or it’s down, depending on where they projected them last year and where, as they go to the end of September, their actual enrolment is. So as that enrolment adjusts, some school boards go up in their funding and some school boards go down. That’s the principal factor.

Mr Kennedy: Where would we find the enrolment adjustments, then? Could those be provided for us? What

you're saying is that your October enrolment and your April enrolment figures were different. Is that the main source of underfunding? Because what I would see there, and I'm wondering if you can verify it, is that the budget, until the last-minute promises were made, was scheduled to be underspent by some \$200 million to \$220 million, is that right, the value of how much the Premier promised at the end of the year? There were a number of programs paid for.

Ms Herbert: I'm not following your numbers. I'm sorry, Mr Kennedy.

Mr Kennedy: Just because numbers are easy to get away, is it possible to get a list, then, very specifically, of the factors that were underspent in that line?

Ms Herbert: Yes, we can do that.

Mr Kennedy: Further, a confirmation—I think we have it from ministry releases but it would be helpful to have it together—of the announcements that the Premier and the minister made that were funded out of that unspent amount. That would be very helpful.

I'd also like to ask, then, the minister's viewpoint on some of the figures that were provided to us a few days ago. Minister, you may be aware—it came over your signature and I'm sure you see every document you sign and so on. But this was helpful preparation for this committee and people have it on their desks here today. One of them was slightly updated, although I was hoping we could get an even more current figure: the number for enrolment at private schools. Very specifically, you provided us with information to show that effectively the number of people attending private schools since your government took power is up by some 42%, and then you apply that directly, so you've got almost 110,000 people. That's almost 50% more than when you came into power. The number of schools being reported—I checked with the ministry Web site and there are actually 760 schools listed now. Maybe the ministry could correct me if that's different, but that's how many are on the Web site, which is an increase of about 32% in the number of schools. So basically what you're telling us, Minister, is that even though you've articulated yourself as a defender of public schools, under your government, private schools have grown 32% in the number of schools and something close to 50% in numerical enrolment. Is that not a very negative accomplishment for any government that would claim to be very dedicated to public education? I think inference can be directly made that a lot of parents are dissatisfied with the job that you're doing.

The Vice-Chair: Two minutes.

Hon Mrs Witmer: You know, it's probably about choice, and I think it's probably about the fact that we all have an obligation, Mr Kennedy, to work together to support the students in the public school system. It's time we set aside the politics and it's time for us to focus on providing the very best learning environment for all of our students.

Mr Kennedy: Minister, you endorsed a private tax credit that encourages children to leave the public system

and go into private schools. You've created lower standards in education, and clearly people are voting with their feet. There's a 50% increase in people leaving the public system for the private system, and that's because of conflict and turmoil that your government has initiated.

What I'm asking you is, are you concerned? You're the minister of public education. Are you troubled by the increase, or do you find it a satisfactory outcome that this many people, according to your own figures, are going to private schools? I'd like your response, please.

Hon Mrs Witmer: Mr Kennedy, I might agree with you. You said private schools have to be funded, but in a way that doesn't hurt public schools. I think it's very important that we build confidence in our public schools, and I think we can do it by working together.

Mr Kennedy: Do you have an opinion or not? Are you bothered by the large increase in children being sent to private schools? For the benefit of committee members who may not have looked at the figures in detail, this is the year before the only financial incentive given directly to families and children anywhere in North America is given: a 50% increase. Does this trouble you at all, or do we believe the Minister of Education is happy with this outcome and is sanguine about this state of affairs in Ontario?

The Vice-Chair: Your time is up, Mr Kennedy. I know that you'd like a response to that.

Mr Kennedy: I sure would.

The Vice-Chair: I'm sure the minister will respond to that some other way. Mr Marchese, you've got 30 minutes.

Mr Rosario Marchese (Trinity-Spadina): Minister, I just have one question for you. I don't want you to be overly tired, because you need to save your energies for question period tomorrow.

Hon Mrs Witmer: That's OK, Rosario.

Mr Marchese: On page 30 of your remarks, it says, "The budget stated that this \$20-million fund will provide \$5,000 to every elementary school to address student literacy." If you recall, in your budget—I didn't bring the book—you said that schools that meet and/or surpass the standardized test would get \$5,000. What you say here is that every elementary school will get it. Is there something different about this versus—

Hon Mrs Witmer: No.

Mr Marchese: It's the same thing?

Hon Mrs Witmer: This is \$5,000 that's going to go to every elementary school to address student literacy.

Mr Marchese: So it's going to every school?

Hon Mrs Witmer: Yes, it is.

Mr Marchese: During the budget debate you said that only those schools that meet and/or surpass. That was in your document, because that's where I attacked you, based on that—

Hon Mrs Witmer: I'm going to tell you that we're going to be providing \$5,000 to every elementary school to address student literacy.

Mr Marchese: That's so good. Was there a change of heart? Did something happen along the way to change your mind?

Hon Mrs Witmer: We're going to provide \$5,000 to every school.

Mr Marchese: You see how she learns? She listens to the criticism and then she says, "We made a mistake." That's very good. Elizabeth, that's very good. In that budget debate I remember attacking you very clearly. I even asked you a question about that and I said how stupid the idea is. Right?

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Hon Mrs Witmer: Did you take a look at my answer?

Mr Marchese: Your answers are always brilliant. They're standardized. They never change. They're eternally the same. It's brilliant.

You said in that budget—or maybe the minister wrote it for you; I don't know—only those schools that meet and/or surpass the standardized tests will get the 5,000 bucks. It was a dumb idea. You understand why, Elizabeth, because you're a former teacher and a trustee. If you give money to schools that do well, it's pretty dumb logic in terms of how you help those other schools that are not doing very well, because the ones that really need the help are the other schools that either cannot meet and/or surpass the standardized test. So in listening to my question and my attack, presumably you listened, but you didn't send me a note saying, "Rosario, by the way, I did listen to you. I understood your question and, see, on page 30 we changed it." I just wanted to ask. Very good, Elizabeth. There's room for learning.

Hon Mrs Witmer: We're lifelong learners.

Mr Marchese: A lifelong learner. That's why you cut continuing education, adult education programs. You've got to restore some of that funding, I urge you.

But I don't want you to get tired. I want you to listen to me for a little while. Just sit back. This is not for the benefit of those ministry people, who need not worry about what I'm going to say; it's for the benefit of the people watching. That's why we have a television here, so that you can hear my take.

Here's the problem, as I see it. You introduced income tax cuts many, many years ago. You knew that would suck money out of your provincial coffers. You knew that; you did too, by the way. I suspect Chris Stockwell and others told you it's a mistake to do it. He's not here now, but I suspect he was one of them saying this is wrong, because he did admit during the leaders' debate that was a wrong thing to do. But nobody listened to Chris, although I thought he was one of the smarter ones in that regard. You have now taken about \$10 billion to \$12 billion out of our provincial coffers every year. The problem is, it is not a commensurate giving away and taking from the public for income tax and PST and the like. So here is the problem. You have to take money from somewhere. Where do you take it from? There aren't too many places you can go, because education is a biggie, social services is the next biggie and health. You see, money has been taken and had to be taken from

those other areas to balance your budgets. You couldn't do it any other way.

Interjection.

Mr Marchese: You're going to have an opportunity too, John, later on.

So the problem is, our economist—the people's economist, Hugh Mackenzie—says you've taken \$2.2 billion out of the educational system since you came into power, cumulatively. The interesting disconnect is how you can say you put in more and Hugh Mackenzie, an economist, says you've taken \$2.2 billion. But you insist, you and the others, that you've put in so much more. I wonder, if you put so much more in the system, how come we have a crisis across Ontario? No, no, Elizabeth, this is my time. That's right.

Hon Mrs Witmer: I'm not saying a thing.

Mr Marchese: I thought maybe you wanted to intervene.

This is why a little while ago, about six months ago, the directors wrote a letter in unison to say, "We have a problem on our hands." Not individually, but collectively, they wrote you a letter—not you; the former minister—saying, "We've got a problem on our hands in education funding."

I would argue that if you say you put more money in, you wouldn't have all these people out there crying about all these cuts. Being so generous and magnanimous with our money, you certainly would have satisfied all of their needs, and yet there are people out there screaming at you, at your former Premier, God bless his soul, at the current Premier and others. My feeling is that wherever I've been, people are pretty angry at you folks, not just trustees, but teachers are angry at you, the very teachers you now praise.

You've got some fine words about the teachers—this is so nice—where you say that success would not have been possible without these great teachers of ours. It's amusing to hear you say that, because over the last seven years all you have done as a government is vilified teachers. You beat them up, day in and day out. From the first day you got into power, you beat them up. So I love to see this change of heart, how Elizabeth Witmer, the Minister of Education, really loves teachers. I think Ernie does too, doesn't he? I can't be certain, but I think he likes them too.

But it's good for the Minister of Education to finally like teachers, because I think we need them. Without them we can't deliver the great curriculum changes that you made, right?

So I wanted to say that I admire the change of heart, that you publicly say, "We've got to set aside politics." That's what you said. It's in quotation marks.

Hon Mrs Witmer: I did.

Mr Marchese: It's so beautiful: "We've got to set aside politics." Elizabeth Witmer is not going to be political any more. She might have been, but no longer, because now what really matters is the education of our kids.

Mr Miller: Good point.

Mr Marchese: This is good. And we have her on the record saying these things. It's really going to matter, because all the policy wonks are going to review these things and it's going to have a great influence on the general public. When they read the Hansard of these hearings, they're going to really learn a great deal.

So you cut \$2.2 billion. We have a crisis on our hands.

Hon Mrs Witmer: These are Hugh's figures.

Mr Marchese: Hugh's numbers, of course, because you tell us—

Hon Mrs Witmer: We've never quite been able to—

Mr Marchese: No, because the problem is that every time somebody says, like People for Education, "We've done a survey," your former minister would say, "Oh, they've done that." So then I would ask your former minister, "Well, did you do one?" Of course, you don't do any studies, because it wouldn't be useful to do studies where we might reveal, like People for Education, that there are serious problems in our system. I'll get to that in a moment.

So what you've done is, you've taken \$2.2 billion. How did you do that? You centralized education financing. You had to do that, you see, because if you didn't take control away from the boards, you wouldn't have been able to handle the money in your little hands, or at least in Mike's at the time.

So you took power away. They can't levy a tax. Only Mike Harris could do that, and now Ernie. And the beauty of centralizing it is that nobody will know. You'll be able to say, "Look at all the money we're pouring in. Look at the senior citizens, how much we help them, because they no longer pay the education tax," although they still are, many of them throughout the province, and especially in Toronto, where they pay about 35%. You suck all that money out of Toronto, God bless your soul, and you send it all across Ontario, because everybody needs to be equal, you're quite right. But they're still being penalized in Toronto, heavily, with the additional taxes they're paying to help out. But it's a good principle of socialism. You share the wealth, right? I don't mind that.

Hon Mrs Witmer: You'd like that.

Mr Marchese: I don't mind that at all. If we legitimately shared the wealth in a way that we're all satisfied, it would be great. But I want to point out that everybody is hurting. That's the point.

So you created benchmarks in 1997 that were deliberately set low and that would force boards of education to cut in order to meet those benchmarks.

People for Education have done some tracking over the last little while, in the last four years or so, and they show interesting numbers. You must have seen them. I think your previous minister disproves them or simply shrugs them off by saying that they're not really serious or they're not done professionally, I suppose. But those tracking reports that they've done reveal the serious cuts we've had to librarians. I don't think you dispute that, do you, Ted, their cuts?

Mr Ted Arnott (Waterloo-Wellington): I'm interested in what you've got to say.

Mr Marchese: I know. I was just seeing what you were going to say.

But we've had cuts in librarians.

Hon Mrs Witmer: I have a good PA.

Mr Marchese: He's silent, yes. He listens.

We've had cuts in librarians. Elizabeth, you as a teacher would understand that if you cut librarians, it's a problem, right? You cut librarian hours and times when students can visit. There are fewer librarians in most schools. You probably would admit that it's a problem. As a teacher, you'd probably say it's a dumb thing we're doing, because librarians are the ones who teach students the love of reading, and for literacy purposes they're important. For the purpose of the love of learning and reading, these are the very teachers who help other teachers to pass on the skills librarians have so they, in turn, could help their students on a daily basis with books and reading and the love of it. But under your watch, your government's watch, we've lost many librarians. I didn't bring the percentages with me but I don't think it really matters, for your purposes; it doesn't really matter. But I think the cuts were in the order of about 25%. This is serious.

ESL cuts have been incredibly high, anywhere close to 60% cuts in that field. You would probably admit and agree with me, as a teacher, that cutting ESL is a dumb, dumb thing and that if we get many immigrants, we need to help them as they come. While some, if they're at an early age, need little support, some need a great deal of support. You're nodding in agreement, of course.

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Hon Mrs Witmer: I'm an immigrant.

Mr Marchese: So was I.

Hon Mrs Witmer: That's right.

Mr Marchese: They put me back two years when I got here, by the way, and I always resented that, I must admit. I lost two years. I skipped one year, so I made up one. That was a good thing.

But a lot of immigrants need a lot of support, and they're not getting it. It's happening while you say your government has increased funding to boards of education. We're arguing that you're decreasing it. ESL is a serious problem, unjustifiably so—and reprehensibly so, in my view. Because if you let the immigrant children fend for themselves, it means there will be a lot of them who will be losers, who will lose out. We don't want them to lose out, but the effect, intended or unintended, is that many will fail or struggle.

We've had tremendous ESL cuts. All the studies that the elementary teachers' federation has done—and People for Education, which is an independent body monitoring what you do—show that the cuts to ESL have been deep. You can say what you want, and that's what you say normally in the Legislature and here, but the facts are different.

We've had cuts in music teachers. We all know through studies that people who study music do well in

mathematics, and socially it's a beautiful thing. We should be encouraging it, but we've had cuts to music teachers.

We've had cuts to physical education teachers. You, as a teacher, and everybody whether they're teachers or not, will agree it's a good thing to keep people healthy. We're getting cuts in physical education. I don't know how you encourage it if you don't have physical education teachers. You could spend millions to publicize the fact people should exercise, I suppose, but I think one of the ways you do it is through physical education teachers. That's my view. We've had cuts in that field.

We've had cuts in educational assistants. You will agree with me, Elizabeth, because you were a teacher, that educational assistants are important. They're particularly important in special-education classes, because if you're dealing with severely needy children in terms of behavioural and/or physical problems and you don't have an educational assistant in the classroom, it's a serious problem. It means that teacher dealing with eight or 12 students, or possibly four students where they're in severely bad shape—they fend for themselves; they're on their own. We've had tremendous cuts in educational assistants, and your supervisors are recommending more cuts to that category.

We've had cuts to secretaries. As a teacher, you would know secretaries are key people in schools, sometimes more key than many other people. They're not teachers, but they're key almost in terms of the running of the school. They're key to making sure you answer the phone if somebody's calling with a problem, either a student connecting to the family or the family having to connect to the student, the school, the teacher or the principal, and we're cutting secretaries.

We've cut caretakers. I was in Lakeshore the other day and one principal said, "We used to have 14 caretakers; we now have six." It's across the board. Public boards and Catholic boards are losing caretakers by the thousands across the two systems in Ontario. I know they're not teachers. They don't teach kids, but they clean schools. Maybe you expect teachers to clean up after themselves and after the kids at the end of school—I'm not sure. You've cut caretakers. Somebody's got to clean.

All of that has happened under your government, Elizabeth, and all the while you poured so many more millions and millions, record expenditures, into the field of education. It's amusing to think that all these people have been fired, let go. I don't get it. Vice-principals are being fired or at least many have been let go, and principals are sharing schools. We're twinning schools so that people can run back and forth from one school to the other. We've closed schools. You say, "We've always closed schools," but you will never admit that your funding formula has forced more school closures than ever before.

People are travelling long distances to get from one school to the other because we've cut transportation budgets. While you've been investing so many more millions and millions of dollars in the education system,

we're getting cuts to the transportation line. In northern Ontario—I don't think you have to go so far north—some students travel more than three hours.

Ted, are you listening, because the minister is busy.

Mr Arnott: I'm listening intently.

Mr Marchese: They're travelling more than three hours at a time getting to school. This country's big. Ontario is three times bigger than Italy. It's a big country. You've got to invest in transportation so that students don't spend a lot of time travelling to and fro. If you close schools and they've got to travel a longer distance, it's a big problem.

When schools close because of your funding formula, I argue and say to you that it's a problem; it's a mistake. So many of our schools are the hub of social community life, they have argued. When you close one school, a whole lot of real estate people are worried about what's going to happen, a whole lot of businesses worry about what's going to happen to their community, a whole lot of communities worry about what will happen to their little community if they have to go to another one to get their needs addressed, not having a school in their area. But you and your previous ministers say, "But it's always happened. Liberals have closed schools. New Democrats closed schools." But you never say how many schools have closed because of your funding formula restrictions that have made it so very difficult for our schools.

Social workers have been let go. Social workers are an important part of the system. If people need help, they go to a social worker. I suppose they could contract that out. I'm not sure how many schools have the money to contract out that service. We're cutting back on social workers, and in some cases psychiatrists, where school boards have had psychiatrists.

The salaries line: OPSBA argues they're \$590 million short for salaries that they normally would expect from you, Elizabeth, and it's not flowing out to them. Therefore they've got a problem in terms of how they negotiate with their teachers.

Hon Mrs Witmer: They talked to us about it.

Mr Marchese: I'm sure they did.

Hon Mrs Witmer: And we're listening.

Mr Marchese: See? Elizabeth listens. That's why we're going to have a change, a different direction in education. With Ernie listening and you listening, it's going to be a great province under your watch for sure.

So 590 million bucks short, and boards don't quite know what to do. How do they negotiate fairly with their teachers when they don't have the money? Let's just say they're wrong. It's not \$590 million. Let's say it's \$500 million.

Hon Mrs Witmer: Three hundred.

Mr Marchese: Three hundred, Elizabeth. It's casino politics, I suppose. But even that is a lot of money, wouldn't you say? If they were \$300 million short, it's a lot of money, right? Of course you agree.

We have a problem, Elizabeth. The crisis isn't just in Toronto, Ottawa and Hamilton. You know that. If you didn't know that, you wouldn't have spent \$1.4 million

on public advertisements to defend yourselves by saying trustees are bad, they're dysfunctional. You're not, because you're not political. They're dysfunctional. You poured in all those millions and millions of dollars for quality education because you really care. You wouldn't have spent that money on those big ads in the Toronto Star, the Sun and the Globe just to say how great you are. How do you find the money? I thought we didn't have any money. Where do you find that kind of money? I know you're feeling some fear, so you need to continue to convince the public that you're spending heaps of money on education.

But this problem is not limited to these three boards. I know it, you know it and so do your members, because when they go to their own ridings, even if they don't talk to the boards, the boards talk to them. Even if they don't talk to the trustees, the trustees talk to them. Even if they don't talk to parents, the parents are talking to the MPPs. The MPPs are coming to your regular meetings, as they did to ours when we were in power, and they report.

1700

Ernie Eves would say, "What's up in your ridings?" and people would say, "We've got a problem. Hydro's a problem; we're getting a lot of heat." A lot of them would say, "Education is a serious problem; we're getting a lot of heat." That's why you appointed Rozanski to review the funding formula, because you were getting a lot of heat. That's the change of heart. It's not because you're softer these days, Elizabeth, but because in reading the polls and the members coming to you and saying, "We've got a problem," you are saying, "What do we do?"

The crisis is prevalent, pervasive and in every board. And everywhere I have been they've told us—in Kingston, in Guelph, Windsor, Ottawa, where I've been; Howard Hampton's been in other places. What they all say is, "We have had to make cuts to programs to balance our budgets, and we cannot do it any longer." Not only that, Elizabeth—you know it and I know it—they're using their reserve funds. Their reserve funds, you probably know, because you were a trustee—you might remember about reserve funds; people put aside money for rainy days over a long period of time. Some could have had it for 20 years or however long. It's for rainy-day kinds of stuff. So not only did boards cut programs to meet your balanced budgets; they had to use their reserve funds. So when you say, "But 69 other boards have done it," they've done it by cutting programs and they've done it by using reserve funds. They don't have any left. Many boards don't have any more reserve funds. They can't go into that piggy bank any longer.

You understand, Elizabeth, we've got a serious problem on our hands, right? As I see it, this is what you have to do. Rozanski will bring a report to you, which may be in November or February. I suspect you might delay it a little bit. Not directly; I mean, you wouldn't go to Rozanski and say, "Bring it in January." But you wouldn't push him to bring it in November.

Hon Mrs Witmer: Yes.

Mr Marchese: That's good. My suspicion is that he won't have it by November, that you're going to push it up a little bit. This is what I think you might do. The choice you have is, "Do we fix this problem now, before the election, or do we wait until April when you call the election?"—not you, but Ernie. Then you can say to the public, "If we get re-elected, we're going to fix the funding formula problem, because we are listening."

So these are the two choices as I see it, in terms of what you're going to do. But you know you have a crisis on your hands. You do. You just have to pretend that you don't, and you just have to pretend that the trustees of the Toronto, Hamilton and Ottawa boards are just being bad. All those Liberals and New Democrats are just beating up on you. That's really what it is. It's not the others; just the Liberals and New Democrats playing politics with you. It's not because they have a serious problem with funding; it's politics.

I have to remind you, Elizabeth, when I was a trustee in the Toronto board, we attacked the Conservatives. By the way, I got re-elected even though we accepted an increase.

Hon Mrs Witmer: A small one.

Mr Marchese: But just to come back to this, because you were so generous or gracious in not answering my question with something other than what I asked you. We argued then that we, as trustees, who were doing full-time work deserved to be paid like city councillors because we felt education was important. That was the rationale for the trustees saying, "We should be paid like city councillors," because we felt education was a full-time job. We got re-elected, all of us, which must have meant that the public supported the work we were doing, in relation to the answer you gave to my question. But that was an aside.

What I wanted to say was that the trustees, no matter who was there, attacked any government that did not treat boards well. We attacked the Conservative government, we attacked the Liberal government, and they attacked the New Democratic Party when we were in government—all of them, unanimously—not because they were New Democrats, Tory or Liberal but because they defended public education.

You might say that these days these three boards are all so political and it's different than it was in the past. But I'm telling you, the trustees were there to defend public education, and it didn't matter who was in power. New Democrats were our most vicious opponents when we were in power, just for your own benefit.

Private schools: private schools are a serious problem, Elizabeth, and you know it. You know that when the system is in crisis, whether you do so deliberately or not, whether John Snobelen really knew what he was talking about or not, when the people believe that the educational system is in crisis people begin to consider the private school system.

The Vice-Chair: You have two minutes, Mr Marchese.

Mr Marchese: How time flies.

The growth of students in the private system has been very, very steady and deliberate. People who are angry with the public school system in terms of how bad it's getting are running to the private school system. They ran before you gave them the tax credit, as was mentioned earlier, and now they will run even faster to it. You have contributed to that increase by deliberately creating so many deficiencies in our system, by deliberately making our system so bad and vilifying our teachers so strongly that a lot of them said, "I've had enough," and they went to the private school system.

Elizabeth, I wanted you to have the benefit of my remarks so that we wouldn't interfere with each other in terms of questions and answers. Thank you for listening.

The Vice-Chair: Madam Minister, you have 30 minutes to respond to that eloquence and some of the questions that were raised in the last hour.

Hon Mrs Witmer: I do appreciate the comments that have just been made by Mr Marchese. I know that Mr Marchese is sincerely committed to the educational system and the students in the province of Ontario and has worked very hard on their behalf.

You mentioned the fact that people have attacked governments in power and criticized education funding. I think that's what you said.

Mr Marchese: Trustees.

Hon Mrs Witmer: Trustees have done that. I would suggest to you that the word "attack" is too strong. Based on my own personal experience, having been a trustee between 1980 and 1990, yes, we were critical of the government in power, whoever that government might have been, but I don't believe we ever attacked that government.

I will just draw something to your attention that I found last evening. When I was chair of the board in 1989, at the inaugural board meeting, and that was my fifth and final year as chair of the board, I identified three personal objectives. Number one was I wanted to draw attention to the critical underfunding of public education. I believe that's what you're talking about doing as well.

I mention that simply because this is an ongoing issue. Regardless of the party or government in power, there has long been perceived to be a critical underfunding of public education. I think in the past the way boards have dealt with the issue vis-à-vis the government has probably been different in how we approach the issue. I just wanted to stress the fact that this whole issue of funding of education is not one that is new. It has been around for a long, long time.

I just want to also highlight the fact that we are increasing funding for Ontario's public schools this year by almost \$400 million. That's more than the \$360 million that we announced last year.

Mr Marchese, you referred to the fact that there were these reductions that had been made in employees, whether it's librarians or social workers or what have you. You and I, being trustees, both know there are grants that flow to school boards that allow them to make those decisions. It's not the provincial government that

determines the type of position that's going to be funded or how many teaching assistants are going to be funded. Those decisions are made by local boards of education in response to the needs of their community and obviously in response to the input that they receive from their community.

Again I would say, we continue to expand the level of funding, and it's up to the school boards to determine how they can best make the funding available to meet the needs of their students.

1710

I want to add that with our increased investment our spending on public education today has just increased from \$13.86 billion to \$14.26 billion. That's a 2.9% increase and we know that enrolment has not increased by that number. I've mentioned that before. In fact at least half of the boards are seeing a drop in the numbers.

We also need to remember that simply increasing funding is not going to guarantee our students receive the best education. We need to make sure the funding is allocated to students in a way that will provide a maximum benefit to the students. That's why we introduced the funding formula. That's why we have really stressed the need to focus on providing equal opportunity to all the students in Ontario.

I'd like to quote from the president of the Ontario Catholic School Trustees' Association who said, "The foundation of equality of educational opportunity for all students upon which the funding model is built must be maintained." She goes on to say, "This model is a significant improvement for all students who attend school within assessment-poor boards. These include Catholic, French and rural public boards as well." She also goes on to say that the model is not adequately funded. I want to put it out in totality.

We need to build on the funding model. We need to make sure that we continue to have the equality and the fairness, and we need to ensure that we are able to adequately meet the needs of students in Ontario. We appreciate the input and the advice we are getting from people across the province.

I would just hasten to add that Dr Rozanski certainly intends to present us with his recommendations in November. I would also tell you that, as we've said from day one, they will influence the funding of education in the year 2002-03. That's also the year we introduce multi-year funding to school boards so they'll have a better ideal of the long-range commitment the province is prepared to make, something they've asked for for a long time.

We are going to continue to work with our school board partners, with our trustees. These are hard-working individuals. They don't get the salaries trustees used to receive. They are doing a lot of hard work and are trying very hard to respond to the needs of people in their community.

I want to talk a little bit about transportation. It is important that we make transportation safe and efficient and accessible. Right now we are taking a look and

refining the transportation grant. We have an advisory committee that has been working with the ministry, and we are developing, as you know, a new model of transportation funding. We hope we can put that transportation funding model in place in the very near future, because it is important that all boards receive their fair share of the funding allocation.

I would just like to let you know that we are providing this year a total of \$631 million for transportation. That's very important. The provincial budget also extended the Ontario school bus safety tax incentive to January 1, 2006. Student transportation funding is an area of interest. It's an area where the Education Equality Task Force will be looking at recommendations from the public to make sure that the money that is presently allocated is indeed responding to the needs of the students.

You mentioned ESL. I actually responded to that question in the House today. We have increased funding to boards for English as a second language every year since the introduction of the student-focused funding formula in 1998-99. In fact, the funding for ESL in 2002-03 is projected to rise to \$168.5 million. That's an increase of \$57 million, or over 50%, compared to ESL funding levels in 1998-99.

In fact, I'm just going to review: in 1998-99, we gave \$111.3 million; in 1999-2000, \$122.3 million; 2000-01, \$154.3 million; 2001-02, \$156.5 million; 2002-03, \$168.5 million. We are strong supporters of English as a second language. In fact, this province does a wonderful job of responding to the needs of immigrants arriving on our shores.

I would agree with you, Mr Marchese, that we need to continue to make sure that when our students arrive they have the opportunity to develop strong English language skills. We know that's going to help them to achieve success in life. Actually, I've had people from other countries come and take a look at our program here in order that they can make sure that they support new immigrants coming as well. We're doing our part. I just wanted to let you know about the commitment of our government to those who come to our shores seeking to take up residence in our province, and certainly I appreciate that.

As far as student achievement, I talked about a program that I think is doing a lot to help with improving achievement in reading skills. It's that support for schools that need extra help. What we are doing is we are having literacy specialists working with school improvement teams to diagnose areas for improvement. We are setting specific targets for improving reading achievement over three years. We're providing support and resources, and there is additional support for schools that need this extra help. We believe it's going to contribute to the long-term capacity for success in these schools. We're working with the key members of the team, and that is teachers and parents. They're helping to set the targets as members of the school improvement team. I mentioned that there were 16 schools that already are in part one of the program. Another 14 schools are going to be identified to participate in this program.

Certainly, again, we need to recognize that there are always going to be people who need extra help. We have to make sure we work with teachers and the community to ensure that students will have the success that's going to be necessary for later life.

All in all, I appreciate the comments that you've made. Certainly, Mr Kennedy, I appreciate—I guess they weren't so much comments as questions. You've obviously demonstrated that you're quite interested in the supervisors whom we have appointed.

I just want to talk to you a little bit about what I perceive to be the successes of the supervisors. I'd like to turn to Mr Beckstead, for example, in Ottawa. Mr Beckstead, number one, has ensured that the schools will open safely and on time in Ottawa. I think I mentioned the fact that the bank was not prepared to extend the line of credit to the Ottawa board. There was some concern about the ability of the schools to open and also whether or not teachers were going to be paid. Mr Beckstead has made sure that the bank did not foreclose and shut down the board. He has ensured that teachers and staff were paid.

1720

Another very significant point is that he lifted the hiring freeze for teachers, which has made room for young, innovative teachers to be hired by the board in Ottawa. In fact, there were approximately 150 teachers hired who are now working in the classrooms as a result of him lifting the hiring freeze. I think that's really important as well.

If we take a look at the Ottawa-Carlton board, their funding is projected to increase by \$12.9 million this year. It's an increase of 2.6% over the current school year. Again, Mr Beckstead is going to be working with all of the partners in education to make sure that the budget can be balanced over the long term. I think that's important. He's certainly doing what he has been asked to do.

I would just remind you, Mr Kennedy, that the decision to appoint the supervisors was not made lightly. I would remind you again that it is a legal requirement that the budget be balanced. Unfortunately, a small majority of trustees in each board chose not to balance the budget, and as a result it became necessary to send in the investigators. Their recommendation was to appoint supervisors. We accepted that recommendation.

Having said that, there is stability in all three of these school systems. We have been in communication with parents. For most parents, what they really appreciate is the stability in the school system. I think, as we move forward, we all have a responsibility to work with one another and focus on building on the strengths of the system and continuing to ensure that there's stability in the schools and putting the students first.

I just want to talk about teacher recruitment and renewal. I have always been a strong advocate of teachers. I think they do a fantastic job. In fact when I go back to the December inaugural board meeting of 1989 and my three objectives for the next 12 months, aside from

drawing attention to the critical underfunding of public education, I also said that I wanted to affirm and recognize the central role that our staff play in providing quality education.

Knowing that dedicated, qualified teachers are the backbone of our system, knowing that we need to have an adequate supply, we are now funding 6,500 student spaces at Ontario's education facilities. That's up 30% from 1998-99. Between 1999 and 2004, we are investing \$45 million to fund these spaces in our faculties of education. We're also working with the Ontario College of Teachers and the Ontario Teachers' Federation to develop an action plan in order that we can recruit and encourage the best candidates to the teaching profession.

It is an honourable profession. I continue to get pretty excited when my daughter's friends and my son's friends tell me they're going into education. Myself, having been trained to be a teacher, I can tell you that you have the opportunity to have a tremendous impact and influence on our students, and to also support them in developing self-esteem, in order that they can achieve personal success in life.

We've also established a government stakeholder working group to address teacher recruitment. We relaxed the teachers' pension plan rule, to allow more retired teachers to work up to 95 days each year as substitute teachers.

So, again, we are going to work very hard with the partners in education, our teachers, to make sure that we have dedicated and qualified teachers in our system.

Special education is an issue that will always be, I think, an area where we need to continue to listen carefully and try to respond as best we can to the needs of our students. I believe we're doing a much better job today than we did many years ago, but I think there's always more that needs to be done. We need to remain vigilant and to provide the appropriate funding and the human resource support to those students who have special needs, because they need the opportunity to develop to their maximum personal potential.

As a government, we have increased special-education funding since student-focused funding was introduced, an increase of more than 17%. More importantly, what we have done, which did not happen before—Mr Marchese, you would know that as a trustee—is that our government has kept its promise to protect the funding for these students who have special needs. We are holding special-education funding stable at \$1.37 billion. It's more than any other government in Ontario history has ever contributed. We are making sure the money goes to those students with special needs. Also, I can commit to you that no board will receive less intensive support funding in 2002-03 than it received last year. We will continue to take a look at where we can help those students who have special needs. We provided \$200 million in flexible funding this year and boards can use that money to respond to local priorities in areas such as special education.

We need to continue to work with teachers, parents and people in the community on a multi-year plan to

promote continuous quality improvements for special-education programs. We need to provide, as parents have asked us to do, greater accountability, province-wide standards and more funding. We've also identified this as an issue for Dr Rozanski. We've asked him to tell us specifically whether the current approach to funding special education is the most responsive way to meet student needs. Personally, I'm looking forward to hearing those recommendations because, as I say, this continues to be an issue of priority, particularly for those parents who have students with special needs. We need to ask ourselves, is the funding approach we have today really the best one? If not, if it's not the most responsive way to meet student needs, we've got to look at another model, because we have a responsibility to somehow meet the needs of these students.

I want to talk a little bit about the fact that we have two pots of money for special-needs funding. We have the SEPPA funding, which is the special education per pupil amount, and we have what's called ISA funding, which is the intensive support amount. The special-education grant provides funding for exceptional students and students with special needs in two components. The special education per pupil amount, which is approximately \$730 million, is allocated to boards on the basis of enrolment to cover most of their expenses in meeting the needs of their exceptional students. Then we have the intensive support amount ISA, which is approximately \$640 million and is determined through a validation process that requires school boards to submit claims to the ministry for student files that meet ISA criteria.

We need to remember that ISA funds are not attached to individual students. They're provided to boards in delivering programs and services to students who have particularly high needs. What we are doing is responding to the key recommendations of the ISA working group. We're reducing the amount of paperwork. We're making the validation process more predictable and more responsive. We've got to make sure we do everything we can that ensures that the results and the information provided to us responds to the needs of the students within our care and support. I'm pleased that, in the budget, we announced this year that we would be helping boards with one-time assistance of \$10 million to address the waiting list for professional assessment of those students who have very high needs, because it's important that we complete the ISA assessment in order that we can appropriately provide funding to the boards for those students with very high needs. Again, the whole issue of special education is one that I can tell you is of great importance to people in Ontario. I know it's certainly an area of interest to and strong support by our Premier, and we need to continue to do what we can in order to ensure that we are able to respond to our students' needs.

1730

The Vice-Chair: There are just over 60 minutes left, to be divided into 20 minutes for each party.

Mr O'Toole: I thought there was five minutes left.

The Vice-Chair: OK, you may use that five minutes.

Mr O'Toole: Thank you, Minister, for presenting here today. I have the greatest respect for the genuine nature of your presentation today. I think the word I am very comfortable with is the word you've repeated a number of times, "stability." I think when you're dealing with children, the most stable environment you can provide for learning is certainly something that's been lacking with the somewhat controversial environment that children have had to survive for the last couple of years.

Looking at page 26, the first thing is the testing results, where you took some time to recognize the achievements as a result of introducing province-wide testing. I know that a comment you make here really sums it up for me. It says, "Students, teachers and parents are all to be congratulated for these significant achievements." I applaud you for recognizing that and putting it on the record. I'll certainly be sharing that with my constituents, schools and school councils that I visit on a fairly regular basis.

I think, more importantly, if I look at the sections as you've broken them down, the section on teacher excellence—again, you went out of your way. When pondering your comments today, I'm sure you put a lot of time into providing your views and your personal signature in recognizing the important contributions of excellence in teaching.

On page 35—I think it's important to say—"We believe our teachers deserve support in their ongoing efforts to continue learning and upgrading their skills." As we know, the world of technology and convergence demands that each of us improve our daily commitment to keeping abreast of change. You've added \$10 million in one-time funding to develop further professional learning resources for teachers and principals. I think actions speak louder than words, and sometimes, certainly, your actions have spoken louder than some of the critics I've heard. I commend you for your input here today.

I do have a couple of what I'd call reasonable comments, one of them because it's sort of close to where you live. When I was parliamentary assistant to the Minister of Finance, they had the finance and economic affairs committee meet in Waterloo in March 2002 in preparation for the budget. I have a comment here that has really still troubled me, because it's all on this whole debate of special education and ISA funding. I'm going to quote from Warren Grafton, who is part of a union group Together In Education. I know from your remarks today that this isn't the tone you want to set, but I want to make it clear there is that tone out there on the other side that is not productive. It says:

"This ISA process, this special education process that has been developed in the last few years by this government, has turned special education into a numbers game. I'll make it very clear to you: we can play it. If you want to play it, we'll play it, and we're getting better at it. Back in the year 2000, this board had 60% approval of their ISA claims. This year we put 120 new claims forward and 119 of them were approved. If you want to play a numbers game, we'll do it." This frightens me: "We'll do it at a cost to the student."

Now, I can go on, and I don't want to characterize this individual, but if that theme rests there as this belligerent, "we'll win at the end of the day"—the vulnerable children we're speaking about, the ISA children. I was told in that meeting—and I don't have the direct quote here, but you can quote the day—that they spend \$6,000 to \$7,000 per assessment. Using the numbers in the system, they're wasting a ton of money on these multiple assessments. That won't leave me. That will be with me in this whole debate.

One more comment. The rigorous opposition by OECTA, which I monitor quite rigorously myself—reporting on the minister's plan to professional development, this is a quote from their latest circular that goes through our schools—

The Vice-Chair: Your time is up.

Mr O'Toole: —"OECTA reiterates its opposition to any policy that imposes compulsory professional development and ... re-certification." It goes on to talk about its boycott of those facilities, like Queen's University, that want to offer these professional courses. That's outright blackmail. That profession, under the union leadership, is mischaracterizing individual teachers in their legitimate efforts.

The Vice-Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr Kennedy, 20 minutes.

Mr Kennedy: Minister, I'm sure you appreciate the help you're getting from Mr O'Toole in extending an olive branch to teachers and so on.

I will take up his absolute mischaracterization of the special education formula. Your predecessor has had a number of opportunities to talk about the ISA funding. What Mr O'Toole refers to, in fact, is a requirement of your ministry, a documentation of need, a duplication, a triplication, a deduction away from individual children in need, which apparently Mr O'Toole endorses.

I just want to give the committee fair notice that that will be a focus of future questions here, and we will bring in the families who are negatively affected by this. Because, Minister, according to the Ontario Principals' Council, according to individual school boards, millions of dollars are being diverted by your ministry away from children to justify reductions in funds.

The part I'd like to address right now with you is, when it comes to special education and other components of the funding formula—you ran as a leadership contender in the Conservative Party and said to us that the funding formula could be reviewed in 90 days. We're far, far past 90 days. I'm wondering, Minister, should we believe that your government is less than capable because the review isn't complete at this time? Some of us were less than serious leadership candidates in the sense that we didn't have government experience. You knew what you were saying, I presume, and I extend that courtesy and respect to you. You said 90 days. You said that within 90 days the funding formula would be reviewed, and that 90 days held out a prospect that you would change funding in time for the current fiscal year.

I heard you say, by the way, and I just want to verify, that you will use the recommendations of the Rozanski

commission for changes in the 2002-03 year, which is of course the year we're currently under. I would like you to comment.

So what I'd like to ask you is, the funding formula changes, you've said they could be done quickly. How should we take the fact that they haven't been completed, that in fact we're many, many weeks beyond the 90-day limit you put for yourself?

Hon Mrs Witmer: Mr Kennedy, I think I erred. The Rozanski recommendations—when it was announced that Dr Rozanski would undertake this review, which he is doing presently, the recommendations will be influencing 2003-04.

Mr Kennedy: Thank you for that clarification.

Hon Mrs Witmer: However, that's not to say that some of his recommendations might not have an impact on interim funding this year. I guess we don't know that, Mr Kennedy.

Mr Kennedy: That's exactly what I'd like to know. Minister, you have had the benefit of input. You made a number of comments about problems in the funding formula, and yet here today, for example, you spoke about ESL as if it were a *fait accompli*.

Now, I talked to the coordinator of ESL in Peel region, and they would need to double the resources to go back to the levels they had before your funding formula started.

You were kind enough to tell us what happened from 1997 to now, but before 1997 they offered a higher-quality program. Minister, in a number of boards in this province, children who come to this country who need to learn English are being put in special-needs classes because your funding formula has reduced, not increased, their chances of learning English.

I want to give you a chance to clarify your fulsome celebration of your government's policy on English as a second language. Does that mean your mind is closed and there will be no fixing that problem where York region, for example, says they have three times as many students in that board as they have funding to provide English as a second language services for? I just want to be clear. Are you listening to that, or have you made up your mind?

1740

Hon Mrs Witmer: Mr Kennedy, I think you're very aware of the fact that our government has been listening and has been responding to people in this province since 1995. In particular, since Mr Eves has become Premier we have been most responsive when it comes to the whole issue of the funding formula in order to ensure that the model best meets the needs of students.

Whatever recommendations are being made to Dr Rozanski, we will very carefully consider all of those recommendations. But I would remind you, as I reminded Mr Marchese, that local boards have a tremendous amount of flexibility as to how they choose to allocate money. I guess the funding formula has become a scapegoat for all of the ills of the system. I can tell you

that our minds are open and we are prepared and will always be prepared to be responsive.

Mr Kennedy: It's hard to interpret. I attribute your conclusion as one you're entitled to, but I would think any reasonable person listening would wonder whether, when you say it's been set up as a scapegoat and so on—you were more fulsome when you were a leadership candidate. You said the funding formula was flawed. You said it could be reviewed in 90 days, with the implication that something could be done about it. Now you and the Premier together—maybe it was just a rejection in cabinet—decided not to do anything about the funding formula this year, decided to not do any substantial changes to the funding formula despite the evidence that's been put in front of you time after time.

You have with Mr Rozanski a more modest process. You've had in the past an effective schools task force with Mr Cooke, formerly of the third party. You've had other pieces of advice around amendments to the funding formula. You chose, and your government chose, not to act on those fundamentally. I guess what I want to find out from you is, if Mr Rozanski or if other people establish that there are flaws in the funding formula—I want to put the criteria this way—if children's education is suffering this year, will you reverse your decision and make changes to the funding formula this year? Will that happen?

Hon Mrs Witmer: I think you're not listening, Mr Kennedy.

Mr Kennedy: Minister, it's slightly different than what you said before. You said you would be open to Mr Rozanski's changes, but I want to know, if even ahead of Mr Rozanski some of these long-established areas can be proven—are we waiting for Godot, waiting for Mr Rozanski, or are you still the operating Minister of Education?

Mr Marchese: That was a good play.

Mr Kennedy: Yes, it was. Would you make changes to this funding formula? Is your government prepared to do that ahead of Mr Rozanski if the proof has been put to you?

Hon Mrs Witmer: We already have, Mr Kennedy. Again, I would just remind you, and I know sometimes you forget these things because you're focused, we have announced a considerable amount of new money. In fact, we've announced the \$65 million for new textbooks, \$25 million for the early math and early reading strategy, \$350 million—

Mr Kennedy: Minister, I'm going to ask you to pause there, because if there's—

Hon Mrs Witmer: —\$117 million—

Mr Kennedy: If you don't mind, we have such a short period of time.

Hon Mrs Witmer: You don't want to hear the answers.

Mr Kennedy: I do. The question was different. With respect, there's only so much time. This is the opposition's time. You will have a chance with the members of your party to indulge however you like. If the answer is

sort of yes, I'd like to accept that and move on to other subjects.

Hon Mrs Witmer: We have been already very responsive and we will continue to be so.

Mr Kennedy: We'll see from some of the detail forthcoming, but what we've learned so far in this short time is that the money you offered to boards was money that you didn't spend anyway, so that wasn't new money in terms of the textbook funds.

Hon Mrs Witmer: I would just remind you that that allegation is unfounded and it is untrue.

Mr Kennedy: Minister, I had confirmation from your deputy that the funding for textbooks came from money that wasn't spent last year.

Hon Mrs Witmer: That is the only area, so I would not—

Mr Kennedy: Well then, Minister, please don't contradict me if it's accurate.

Hon Mrs Witmer: —categorize all of the new funding as being from last year.

Mr Kennedy: We'll get into the other funding. We also established that \$94 million in funding was ended this year, and we're going to get some more detail about that. One of those was an early reading strategy that ended, and then another early reading or math strategy started. It so happens that the one that ended was worth \$4 million more than the one that was started. We're going to rely on your staff—and I hope it will be forthcoming for our next session—to provide some details so we can better evaluate that.

On the funding formula front, you say it's a scapegoat. What many people still don't realize is that you set their property taxes. You control it all. If you don't become responsive to local needs, children suffer, children go without.

What I'd like to ask you, from the standpoint of the funding formula, is the amount of money, for example, that you have for transportation. Transportation was set up in 1997. Most boards experienced a reduction in their figure. If you look at the information on transportation, you'll find that until very recently it was basically flatlined. Every board that has come forward has said transportation is inadequate. There is no sophisticated funding formula. We have asked for it. There's supposedly a new model being developed with boards. It's been promised for three years, just to run the buses properly in this province—three and four years. Since 1997, every board has said—this part of the funding formula you control every bit of. Whether or not buses are available, whether kids walk long distances or not, comes from you.

I wonder if we could cut through a little bit of the smokescreen that Mr Rozanski's effort may represent. Has your ministry already arrived at a new funding formula for transportation? Are there staff that are prepared to share that with us today, to table it for the benefit of the committee? Has that been completed?

Hon Mrs Witmer: The simple, short answer is no, but the staff probably are in a better position to give you

the type of detail and information that you would be looking for. I know Mr Hartmann would love to come forward.

Mr Kennedy: With all respect, if they would table that detail, I'd be happy to have it. But you answered no, so I don't think there's much more detail that comes behind a no.

What I am wondering is, you gave Mr Rozanski a mandate and you asked him to look at a number of things, and words like "fairness" and "equity" appear in it. But what doesn't appear in it is the word "adequacy." I'm concerned about that, because part of the argument made about transportation, about special education, about the curriculum casualties that are out there—kids who are suffering because of that—has simply been that the amount of money isn't adequate. From the standpoint of many parents and many children out there, they are not getting services.

You've decided not to make changes on your own this year. You've told us today that you will make changes if someone persuades you of them. I'm wondering if you can tell me why Mr Rozanski wasn't asked to address the adequacy, the amount of money available to the boards and in each of the envelopes that constitute the funding formula.

Hon Mrs Witmer: In looking at the whole issue of fairness, equality, stability, let's face it, the whole issue of adequacy becomes an issue that is being considered. Dr Rozanski has talked about that issue and I have talked about that issue and the Premier has talked about that issue.

Mr Kennedy: Who are Mr Rozanski's research staff? Are they independent people that he's hired, engaged for this project?

Hon Mrs Witmer: I think the deputy is in the best position probably to tell you about the staff.

Ms Herbert: Mr Rozanski has a small group of staff working to support him logistically. Those are contracted staff. He also has a couple of researchers that he has engaged himself. He has also asked, as one might expect, for the use of our research services within the ministry.

Mr Kennedy: Minister, is there any kind of task force or liaison with your ministry, or is Mr Rozanski deliberating entirely on his own? Are there regular meetings with your ministry staff and Mr Rozanski about his progress?

Hon Mrs Witmer: I do believe there are meetings of our ministry staff from time to time with Dr Rozanski. What we're really looking at is to ensure that we can improve the stability of the education system in the province of Ontario and in the best way possible meet the needs of the students, no matter where they live.

1750

Mr Kennedy: The test of that is, though, and I don't often quote Mr O'Toole, in the action.

Hon Mrs Witmer: Oh, I would agree with you.

Mr Kennedy: There has been a lack of action, for example, on changing the criteria for special education so that we waste less money on the process, which Mr

O'Toole tried to turn into some kind of attack on teachers.

There has been a tremendous amount of pressure experienced in terms of transportation and consolidation of routes. Children in rural areas are missing extra-curricular activities for years on end because the transportation has been taken away from them.

My point is that, probably because of your interest in education, even though you served in other parts of cabinet, you know this. Your ministry knows this. I fail to see what Mr Rozanski is going to be able to tell us that you wouldn't have known from the Effective Schools Task Force, that your ministry supposedly have told all the boards out there that they're working on a variety of issues related to the funding formula.

If the ministry has the information already, I'm wondering why you made the political decision not to go ahead and implement some of these changes. You had \$80 million left over at the end of last year. There could have been some efforts made to make at least a down payment on the funding formula. Instead, we find that kids are still struggling, as we've heard from the various presentations to Mr Rozanski. Why did you make that political choice?

Hon Mrs Witmer: Perhaps you don't believe it's important to listen to people in Ontario or to review the history of the funding formula and make sure the model that was introduced is best going to provide us with the stability that we need in the province. We do.

We believe it was very important for us to build on the success of the model, as we have been told by many who have made presentations that the model has been successful, but we also wanted to make sure we gave people in the province another opportunity to tell us about how we could improve the fairness, the stability and the certainty for all schools and students. We believe in consultation.

Mr Kennedy: Minister, with respect, the question I had was why—you can listen, if that's suddenly a new virtue—there are a huge number of people who tried to be heard for six and seven years and some of their children's education was compromised. Some of them ended up in private schools—numbers we talked about earlier. But nothing in that precludes you from acting on some of the worst parts of the funding formula where the most children are being harmed right now. In fact, Minister, I would put to you that had you done so, you wouldn't have been in the position of having to take over school boards, because you wouldn't have been in the position of cutting those boards the way you ended up doing.

Again I want to ask you why you made the political decision, because your ministry has a tremendous amount of knowledge. They've been working on a transportation funding formula for four years. They know about the special education problems in an immense amount of detail. Why didn't you, as the new minister who said a review could be done in 90 days, who certainly, when you joined the ministry, found out that they already knew all these things about the funding formula—why do we

have this delaying tactic of Mr Rozanski that precludes any action on your part? Why didn't you act instead, and then put Mr Rozanski to work?

Hon Mrs Witmer: Again, Mr Kennedy, we have taken considerable action. When we heard about the shortage of textbooks in the province, we responded. When we heard about the need to provide additional literacy and numeracy support to the students in the classroom, we responded. When we took a look at the amount of funding that was going to be required for school boards next year, we responded. We have responded on an ongoing basis and we will continue to do so. We look forward to getting public input in order to ensure that the money that is allocated, whether for special education or student transportation, is the most responsive way to meet our students' needs.

Mr Kennedy: Minister, what you are doing, though, is avoiding the responsibility of making decisions. I'd ask you again to table what work has been done on the transportation funding formula for the benefit of the members here. Four years of work by your ministry certainly isn't going to end up being hidden somewhere. We know Mr Rozanski will have the benefit of it, but so should members of this committee. Otherwise we can't ascertain: is Mr Rozanski just a delaying tactic or has this formula been done, as we hear, been tested, and should it have been in operation this year?

I would ask that that information be tabled here, and I'm wondering if you or the deputy can tell us whether we can have access to the work that has been done on the transportation formula, because it has been promised to boards for four, and possibly five, years.

Hon Mrs Witmer: Do you know what? Mr Hartmann would be just so thrilled to respond to your question, Mr Kennedy.

Mr Kennedy: Can he provide us with some written material?

Hon Mrs Witmer: Mr Hartmann, would you like to come up here and just respond to this question about the transportation funding policy?

Mr Kennedy: What I would ask for, Mr Hartmann, is a yes or no. Are you in a position to give me written material on the transportation progress and the funding formula? Are there models? Are there things that you can provide for the benefit of the entire committee?

Mr Hartmann: Not at this point, Mr Kennedy.

Mr Kennedy: I'm sorry to learn that, because the work, I understand, has been extensive.

I would like to ask another quick question of the minister. The special education requirements of the individual children who've been proven—they've been through your horrendous assessments, an incredible waste of person-power away from classrooms and on your documentation, filling computer disks that, if they were paper, would fill tractor-trailers. Minister, are you prepared this year to fund all the special education cases who have jumped through the hoops for you, who have met your criteria and been approved? Will you fund them this year? Will you do that?

The Vice-Chair: We need a short answer to that one, because the time is up.

Hon Mrs Witmer: The deputy is going to take that one.

Ms Herbert: The review is over a three-year period of time, and the review is not complete yet.

Mr Kennedy: So does that mean no? Deputy, does that mean the ones that are approved now will not be funded this year?

Ms Herbert: It means just what I said: the review is not complete yet.

Mr Kennedy: With respect, I think it deserves a straightforward answer. Are those approved cases going to be funded this year? Yes or no?

Ms Herbert: The review is not complete yet.

Mr Kennedy: Will it be complete—

The Vice-Chair: Thank you very much, Mr Kennedy. We stand adjourned until tomorrow after routine proceedings.

The committee adjourned at 1756.

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