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Mardi 10 juin 2003

**Standing committee on
estimates**

Ministry of Education

**Comité permanent des
budgets des dépenses**

Ministère de l'Éducation

Chair: Gerard Kennedy
Clerk: Trevor Day

Président : Gerard Kennedy
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LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF ONTARIO

ASSEMBLÉE LÉGISLATIVE DE L'ONTARIO

STANDING COMMITTEE ON
ESTIMATESCOMITÉ PERMANENT DES
BUDGETS DES DÉPENSES

Tuesday 10 June 2003

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The committee met at 1533 in room 151.

MINISTRY OF EDUCATION

The Acting Chair (Mr John Gerretsen): I'd like to call the meeting to order. Today we're dealing with the Ministry of Education. The committee will now be reviewing the estimates of the Ministry of Education for a total of 10 hours. We will begin with an up to 30-minute statement by the minister, followed by 30 minutes for the official opposition and 30 minutes for the third party, and then another 30 minutes for the government or the minister to use for reply. Thereafter, the remaining time, approximately eight hours, will be apportioned among the three parties in 20-minute blocks.

I'll now call vote 1001. Minister, welcome.

Hon Elizabeth Witmer (Deputy Premier, Minister of Education): Thank you very much, Mr Chair and committee members. I'm very pleased to be here today on behalf of the Ministry of Education. Joining me for the committee proceedings is the deputy minister, Suzanne Herbert.

Since I last had the pleasure of addressing this committee, our government has continued to build upon and strengthen the public education system in the province of Ontario. I would just hasten to add that I believe we have a very strong system in this province and we need to continue, certainly, to build upon it. This is the priority. Our government is fully committed to excellence in education. We want every child in Ontario, no matter where they live, to have the opportunity to gain the skills and knowledge that he or she needs to reach their full potential and to achieve personal success. We want every child in Ontario to have equal access to learning and opportunities. We want to set every child on the path to becoming a self-confident and contributing adult who will help enhance Ontario's prosperity and competitiveness in the years to come.

The parents and taxpayers of this province, as well as our dedicated, hard-working teachers, administrators, school boards and trustees, also share this commitment to our young people, to help them achieve success. This past year and in the years before that, we have all worked together on a long and sometimes bumpy road to implement a far-reaching set of public education reforms aimed at continually improving student learning.

Since 1995, our government has introduced reform based on providing Ontario's elementary and secondary school students with a quality education characterized by high standards, clearly stated expectations and frequent, straightforward evaluation. We have moved forward in four fundamental areas: (1) promoting a safe and stable learning environment; (2) developing and sustaining a high-quality, relevant province-wide curriculum; (3) ensuring excellence in teaching; and (4) supporting a transparent and accountable education system. It has not always been easy. There have been many issues and there have been challenges. But at the end of the day I am pleased to say there have also been many, many successes and achievements which have helped our students on the road to success.

I'd like to begin with the Education Equality Task Force report. When I addressed this committee, Dr Mordechai Rozanski, as chair of the Education Equality Task Force, was in the midst of reviewing the student-focused funding formula implemented in 1998. The purpose of student-focused funding is to ensure quality education and equality of opportunity for all students, no matter where they live in the province. As part of his review, Dr Rozanski examined past studies and reports on education funding and researched best practices. He met with education stakeholder groups, conducted public meetings and accepted submissions by mail and through the Web site. We were fortunate to receive his final report last December.

I want to take this opportunity one more time to publicly thank Dr Rozanski for his hard work and to also acknowledge and express my appreciation to the groups and individuals who contributed their thoughts and their suggestions to Dr Rozanski. The report confirmed that our education funding reforms are sound; it validated the funding formula. It also provided the government with immediate and long-term recommendations on how we could build on the strengths of the student-focused funding formula.

Our government considers the Rozanski report an excellent blueprint for the future. We are, as Dr Rozanski recommended, implementing the report over three years. I'm very pleased to say we've been able to move forward on several of the recommendations; in fact, several of them we moved forward on immediately. Within three days of receiving the report, our government committed \$610 million in new funding to special education, teacher salaries and student transportation. We announced \$250

million for teachers, education assistants and other specialists for students with special needs. We announced \$340 million to give school boards the flexibility to reach fair and responsible collective agreements with their teachers and staff for the 2002-03 school year in order that we would have stability in the classroom. We announced the board-by-board allocation of \$20 million to enhance the safety and efficiency of the student transportation system.

Our government responded to other Rozanski recommendations in subsequent weeks. We announced that \$66 million more over three years would be invested in computers for the classroom, up-to-date textbooks and other learning materials. We do believe that students need resources, like textbooks, computers and other classroom supplies, which will enable them to reach their full potential.

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I'm also pleased to say that we announced the \$50-million GOALS strategy to benefit students who need extra help in reading, writing and math, and in their transition to the workplace or to college or university. We also announced that \$75 million more would go toward renovating and replacing existing schools. At the same time, we announced \$74 million to help small rural and northern schools and to address the issue of declining enrolment. Some \$50 million from that total is going to be used to develop a new rural education strategy. Dr James Downey, the former president of the University of Waterloo, has been appointed to provide the government with recommendations on the development of the \$50-million strategy to help small rural and northern schools. We look forward to receiving his recommendations at the end of this month so that action can be taken before the start of the next school year. Dr Downey has met with stakeholders from across rural and northern Ontario to help him formulate his recommendations. Our government is committed to ensuring that all students have equal access to a quality education across the province. Dr Downey's report will help us ensure that students in small rural and northern schools are provided with the best educational opportunities possible.

By the time the Ontario budget was presented on March 27, our government had committed \$875 million toward Ontario's public education system based on the recommendations of Dr Rozanski.

The budget itself responded to another central recommendation. Our multi-year funding approach commits the government to an increase of almost \$2 billion in the base funding target for education by 2005-06, compared to the funding announced in last year's budget for the 2002-03 school year. We are on track to meet and exceed Dr Rozanski's recommendation that funding increase by \$1.8 billion over three years. In this upcoming 2003-04 school year, we will invest a record \$15.3 billion in Ontario's education system. This represents an increase of more than \$1 billion, or almost 8% more than the funding announced last May, while enrolment is projected to be about 2% lower. Our government is clearly

focusing the education system on where it must be: on improved student learning.

I'd like to turn now to curriculum. I'm very pleased to say that the province-wide standardized curriculum is now in place for every grade, from kindergarten to grade 12. It sets high standards of achievement for every student. It responds to the demands of parents for a curriculum that is clear, consistent and describes in detail what students should be expected to learn in each grade. And it will help ensure that all students are well prepared for success after high school, whether they choose to go to university or college or into the world of work. A total of \$370 million over five years, from 1998 to 2003, was committed to support the implementation of the new curriculum. From that amount, \$70 million will have been allocated to support teacher training and \$80 million to provide other professional supports and resources. Our government will continue to support teacher development and training in the Ontario curriculum in the future.

We've also established an ongoing review process to ensure that the curriculum remains current and relevant in every grade. There is strong evidence that student achievement is improving as a result of initiatives such as the new curriculum and under the educational leadership of our teachers and those who work in the sector. We continue to see improved results in provincial, national and international testing. I just want to discuss that later in some detail.

I'd like to turn now to teaching excellence. We recognize that there is an enormous contribution being made every day in this province by very dedicated, hard-working and capable teachers. We have implemented several initiatives to support teaching excellence. We know that parents always want the assurance that teachers have the most up-to-date skills and knowledge. The professional learning program now requires all certified teachers in Ontario to successfully complete 14 professional learning courses over five-year cycles to maintain their teaching certificate with the college. To support this requirement, our government has committed \$5 million for distance learning, on-line courses and other courses. We want to be sure that there are a sufficient number of low-cost, easily accessible professional learning resources available to teachers across the province. As well, teacher performance appraisals have been implemented. New standards will ensure that teachers are evaluated regularly, and in a consistent manner, on their ability to use their skills and knowledge in the classroom. Teachers will also have the opportunity to receive feedback and support. In April of this year, more than 8,500 prospective teachers wrote the first Ontario teacher qualifying test, and 97% passed. Those who were unsuccessful have the opportunity to write a future test.

The qualifying test promotes accountability and, again, it gives parents the assurance they've asked for that new teachers entering the system have a solid foundation of knowledge and skills to help students achieve success. We're also working to attract and retain

teachers in all subject areas, because we know how important the influence of a teacher is to the success of Ontario's young people. We have actually increased student spaces at Ontario's education faculties. From 1999 to 2003, 6,000 new spaces for students have been created at these faculties. That is an increase of 24% over the previous five years.

In October, we also committed \$1 million to recruit more teachers, especially in the areas of math, science and technology. There was a recent recruitment campaign called "Be the Spark." It was a joint effort of the government, the Ontario Teachers' Federation, the Ontario College of Teachers, the Ontario Council of Directors of Education and the Ontario Association of Deans of Education. We've also relaxed the teacher pension plan rule to allow more retired teachers to work up to 95 days each year as substitute teachers. It is important that we do everything we can to ensure that we have well-qualified teachers to teach our children. It's important.

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I'd now like to turn to early reading and math strategies. Strong skills in reading, writing and math are fundamental to the success of all children, whether in their school life or in their future. I think we all recognize that the research indicates that it is preferable and important to instill these basics from the earliest age. Our early reading and early math strategies will help ensure that all students from junior kindergarten to grade 6 gain the solid foundation they need in reading, writing and math. We presently invest \$70 million every year to improve the reading skills of students from JK to grade 3. Last year, we committed an additional \$30 million in one-time funding to expand the early reading strategy to grade 6 and to introduce the early math strategy. Both strategies include a combination of setting improvement targets and providing supports to teachers, students and parents to help them reach their targets.

One of the initiatives that we have found to be very successful and in demand is the parent guides we have developed for both reading and math to help parents support their children as they learn these important skills. In fact, we've also had a lot of grandparents ask for the guides so that they can help their grandchildren.

The early reading strategy also includes intensive support to a selected number of schools where grade 3 reading performance has been consistently low. This year, 29 schools are participating. They have each developed a plan to improve their students' reading scores. They are given additional resources, training and the assistance of early literacy experts to improve the reading skills of their primary students.

I've had the opportunity to visit some of these schools this past year and I have to tell you that I've been impressed by the hard work and commitment of the principals, teachers and other staff in those schools to helping students achieve success. I'm pleased to say that we are already seeing improvement in the grade 3 reading scores in many of the schools participating in the

program. More schools will be selected in the 2003-04 school year. I don't think there's anything more satisfying than the look on a child's face when they learn to read and know they're able to do well.

In order to more effectively teach reading and math in the early grades, our government also established two panels of education experts to determine the core knowledge and teaching practices that are required.

Teachers and principals will soon gain the benefit of additional tools and strategies. For example, as part of the implementation of the early reading strategy and the early math strategy, teachers will receive resources and training in a wide range of research-informed instructional techniques. This will include how to create and enhance children's phonetic awareness. These tools and strategies will help teachers make the informed choices they need to make about which teaching method works best for their students. It really is up to teachers to make those decisions. They're in the best position to do so.

The in-depth training program for junior kindergarten to grade 3 teachers and elementary principals is based on core knowledge and best teaching practices taken from the early reading and early math expert panel reports.

I'd like to turn now to student achievement. Our government realized the need for early reading and early math programs because of the results provided by standardized testing. We now know how our students are doing, and we know how we can best support our students to do even better. Regular testing has provided us with an effective way of measuring how our students are learning and how they're doing in comparison to other jurisdictions. Student achievement has improved as a result of the new curriculum, the early reading and math programs and, of course, the tireless work of the students themselves, their teachers, their parents, the trustees and members of school staffs.

Provincial, national and international results show that Ontario students are performing as well as or better than students anywhere in the world when it comes to reading, writing, math and science. In fact, I want to share some of the results. They are truly impressive. I can tell you that we have people who come to this province to meet with the staff of the Ministry of Education to see why we're doing so well.

Let's turn to reading. The 2001 Progress in International Reading Literacy Study results show that in Ontario, 9- and 10-year-old students ranked higher than students in Quebec, the United States, Germany, Hong Kong, Norway and Israel, as well as at least 20 other jurisdictions. Last year, 55% of grade 6 English-language students achieved the provincial standard on the EQAO assessment in reading, compared with 48% four years ago.

In writing, last year 55% of grade 3 English- and French-language students achieved the provincial standard on the EQAO assessment. This compares favourably to 49% for English-language and 42% for French-language students only five years ago.

The 2002 school achievement indicators program assessment showed Ontario's 13-year-old English stu-

dents ranked first—I repeat, first—in Canada among English-language students, and our French students improved their ranking from 15th to sixth—impressive results indeed.

In mathematics, the Trends in International Math and Science Study shows the average for Ontario grade 8 English-language students has increased by 15 points since 1995, compared with an increase of two points internationally. Now, this is truly impressive. Only one other jurisdiction in the world saw a better increase.

Since 1997, Ontario's ranking for 13-year-old French-language students has increased from 15th to fifth among 18 Canadian jurisdictions in the problem-solving component of the school achievement indicators program, or SAIP, assessment of mathematics. Last year, 58% of grade 3 English-language students achieved the provincial standard in math on the EQAO assessment compared with 43% five years ago. Also, 63% of grade 6 French-language students achieved the provincial standard in math compared to 55% five years ago.

Let's turn now to science. According to the TIMSS, since 1995, averages for Ontario's grade 8 English- and French-language students have increased respectively by 20 and 30 points compared with an increase of only three points internationally. Again, this is truly impressive.

Our education reforms are working, and these results clearly show that Ontario students and teachers are rising to the challenge. Through our participation in the Ontario Educational Leadership Centre, we are also working to provide students with a unique opportunity to develop and enhance their personal and leadership skills through the fine arts, music, athletics, diversity education and student advocacy.

Now I'd like to turn to a group of students who have always been near and dear to my heart, the students at risk. We all recognize that not all students learn and achieve or can be evaluated at the same rate or in the same way. The new curriculum provides remedial course support for students who would have difficulty with the grade 10 literacy test. As I mentioned earlier, based on the advice of the task force chaired by Barry O'Connor, director of the Limestone board, we are implementing the recommendations through the \$50-million Graduate in Ontario by Achieving Literacy Standards, or GOALS, strategy. This strategy will help students in grades 7 to 12 who need extra assistance in reading, writing and math so that at the end of the day, they can successfully move on to the workplace or to further education. The program will include new approaches to teaching literacy and numeracy. It will provide flexible school timetables and a full-credit literacy course equivalent for diploma purposes in grade 12 to the grade 10 literacy test. So students in grade 12 who have not passed the literacy test will now have the opportunity, beginning in September, to have their reading and writing skills assessed, meet the required standards and be one step closer to obtaining their secondary school diploma.

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We've also established expert panels on literacy and numeracy and a working group to suggest other pathways

to support our students at risk. In 2003-04, student-focused funding will flow \$580 million to boards to help students achieve higher standards. This includes \$358.3 million through the learning opportunities grant for programs such as remedial reading, early literacy, literacy and math programs from grades 7 to 12, summer school programs and the new student-at-risk component; \$190 million through the language grant for English as a second language.

The Vice-Chair (Mr Alvin Curling): You have two more minutes, Minister.

Hon Mrs Witmer: Thank you. There will be \$15 million through the language grant; and \$20 million through the continuing education grant. We're also going to be flowing money for special education. This year it's expected to increase to almost \$1.65 billion, an increase of 41% since 1998-99.

I think it is apparent that the changes we have made in the system, building on the strong foundation, are allowing more and more students to achieve success.

The Vice-Chair: The official opposition has 30 minutes.

Mr Gerard Kennedy (Parkdale-High Park): Minister, with your co-operation I'd like to dispense with a lot of commentary. I would like to cover as much ground as possible. As you've noted in your remarks, there are a lot of different areas to discuss in the context of the estimates.

I wonder if I could then raise with you some of the maybe broader issues as they're seen by the public, and that is through some of your advertising that you've authorized with the public, paid for out of the estimates that we're examining. I'm wondering if you could let me know, Minister, how much money you authorized this year to be spent on advertising by the ministry, and if you have a comparator to last year, that would be helpful as well.

Hon Mrs Witmer: Mr Kennedy, I'm going to ask Mr Kurts to come forward. We'd certainly be very pleased to respond to that question.

Mr Michael Kurts: My name is Michael Kurts. I'm the executive director of communications for the Ministry of Education. Give me one second and I'll just flip to that information.

The expenditures for last year for advertising, in the 2002-03 fiscal year, were \$5.4 million: \$4.3 million of that for media purchase and \$1.1 million for the production of advertising. This fiscal year, the ministry has incurred costs of approximately \$3.7 million for advertising. That's \$3.5 million for the purchase of media time and \$200,000 for the production of advertising.

Mr Kennedy: Where in the estimates—would that come out of your budget, sir? Is that where we'd find it, under "Communications" on page 35?

Mr Kurts: That's correct, yes.

Mr Kennedy: It notes here, on page 35, transportation and communications going from an actual last year—maybe you can help me with this number, just based on what you've related. It says here the total budget in

interim actuals was \$4.9 million, and you just indicated a total of \$5.4 million in 2002-03. Does that mean that the advertising budget is spread among different line items?

Ms Donna Marafioti: I can clarify that.

The Vice-Chair: Could you state your name, please.

Ms Marafioti: I'm Donna Marafioti, chief administrative officer for the Ministry of Education.

I think we did indicate previously that the advertising costs for different programs are found in different places in the ministry's estimates, depending on what program you're doing advertising on. So you will not find all the advertising-related costs in the ministry administration line, where the communications branch appears.

Mr Kennedy: Where else might we find such expenses?

Ms Marafioti: We haven't got—

Mr Kennedy: Could we get that in writing as a response, if you don't have it?

Ms Marafioti: We can indicate to you, basically, for the programs areas which areas we've done advertising in and which program budgets would be covering the costs associated with the dollars that—

Mr Kennedy: Sure. I wonder, then, if I could come back to—

The Vice-Chair: Let me see if I understand it. Did you indicate you will get it in writing? You will?

Ms Marafioti: Yes.

Mr Kennedy: Great.

I wonder if I can come back, then, to the question about this year's advertising. The number indicated was \$3.7 million. How much is budgeted for this year, may I ask?

Mr Kurts: The figure I gave you is the amount of money that has been spent. I can't give you a figure for the full year.

Mr Kennedy: Why is that, if I may ask?

Mr Kurts: I can't give you a figure because the final decisions haven't been taken about other advertising which may occur in the year.

Mr Kennedy: Yet you have a budget line—for example, here it has increased by \$2.9 million over estimates and is more than double what was actually spent last year, just the line item we talked about, which itself is incomplete. Do we not have any plans to support that level of increase? There are no details here. Or maybe there is something else in transportation that accounts for that.

Ms Marafioti: Yes. Again, there are many other expenses that are in the transportation and communications line, so it includes travel, it includes many other expenses, not just advertising.

Mr Kennedy: But it's interesting: just for the public interest, we're here to look at the estimates, your spending plans, and there's no plan to support a number in here, which may be \$5 million or may be \$11 million. We're told we're spending \$3.7 million already and there aren't any plans to spend more, but this line item is up by a fair amount. Is there nothing we can see that would at

least sketch out what the ministry wants to do by way of advertising? There's nothing at all?

Mr Kurts: No. As I said, I can't give you a figure for the full-year costs. What I've given you are the expenditures that have been incurred so far this year. I can tell you that the expenditures under advertising are governed by the advertising and creative communications services procurement directive, which is a document that's prepared by the Management Board Secretariat.

Mr Kennedy: Yes, I'm aware of that directive and I'll come back to it very shortly.

I want to ask you, then, if you can provide me the money that you've already spent on specific campaigns. Can you let us know how much money you've spent, for example, on television ads for the special education ad, the testing ad, the report card ad, or were they bundled together? Can you let us know any details of that?

Mr Kurts: I can simply tell you that the numbers I've given you cover all of the communications or the advertisements that have been on. There have been three television commercials. The first was on special education; there was a second ad that spoke about student test scores; and there was a third ad that was on up until recently on student marking, which featured exemplars and some others.

Mr Kennedy: I'm very aware of the answer and I appreciate the opportunity to revisit that, but I was hoping that you could tell us how much money was spent on each. Or are there details about the kind of advertising you bought, the kind of media buy that there is? Do you have that kind of information that could be tabled with the committee so we could examine how you were communicating with the public? Is any of that detail available?

Mr Kurts: I do not have—

Mr Kennedy: First of all, the costs of those individual campaigns: I think you're indicating you don't have that.

Mr Kurts: As I say, I don't have a breakdown.

Mr Kennedy: Secondly, though, the details of the campaign itself: when and how many TV spots you purchased, at what price and on what stations, over what dates and periods of time—is any of that available?

Mr Kurts: The advertising began on March 3. The first advertisement, which was the special-education-related advertisement, and then the most recent advertisement which dealt with exemplars and some of the other publications that we provide to assist teachers in implementing the curriculum, ran until last week.

Mr Kennedy: Do we know, then, the other detail I requested? Is that available? Is that something that could be provided?

Mr Kurts: I don't have it with me, sir.

Mr Kennedy: Could it be provided, Deputy or Minister?

Mr Kurts: In terms of when each of the commercials ran?

Mr Kennedy: Right, just knowing what your media plan was out there.

Mr Kurts: Yes, we can provide that.

Mr Kennedy: Great.

The Vice-Chair: Just let me understand, Mr Kennedy: is it the detail of all the expenditures in time as he laid out? Would that be tabled, did you say? I didn't get that.

Mr Kurts: I can certainly give Mr Kennedy a breakdown of when each of these advertisements was on the air.

Mr Kennedy: That would be terrific.

What I'd also like to know, then, is who developed these ads. Were they done by yourself? You are, as I understand, in charge of the communications branch and part of your role is described in the estimates book as advice and services on advertising. Did you develop the ads?

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Mr Kurts: Yes, the ministry works with advertising agencies to develop the advertisements, and then they go through a process of approval within the ministry. We do a fairly rigorous process to ensure that the advertisements that we put on the air are accurate and factual. That would involve—

Mr Kennedy: Right. I'm going to ask that question, but I wanted to get to the question of who did the advertising content, the creative—for example, is there an agency of record?

Mr Kurts: The ministry works with two agencies in terms of development of content for advertisements. One is called Draft World Wide.

Mr Kennedy: Draft World Wide, yes.

Mr Kurts: And the other is called "Flavour."

Mr Kennedy: OK.

Mr Kurts: The ministry also works with the government's advertising buying service, the media buying services. That's the agency that's responsible for the buying of advertising.

Mr Kennedy: Right. I'm wondering if you could tell me, were there any consultants at all involved in the developing of these commercials? Anybody beyond those two agencies or the ministry's staff?

Mr Kurts: The agencies work with all kinds of people—

Mr Kennedy: So, people that they would have retained rather than yourselves. Can I ask specifically, are you aware, was David Small involved in these advertisements at all?

Mr Kurts: David Small is not on contract to the ministry.

Mr Kennedy: OK, because at some time he was. I'm just asking that question. I'm wondering then, who approved the content of the adds? Who in the ministry approved the content for them? Who ultimately would have done that?

Mr Kurts: As I said to you earlier, Mr Kennedy, when we develop an advertisement, it goes through a very rigorous process of ensuring that the material that's in there is accurate and in keeping with facts as the ministry—

Mr Kennedy: I really don't want to interrupt, but I'm wondering if there is a shorter answer, just around the

question I'm asking about who, rather than the process. Is there a specific individual in the ministry responsible for approving the content? That's the main—

Mr Kurts: It depends on the content of the ad. We go to the relevant expert in the ministry who has the expertise in the content of the advertisement.

Mr Kennedy: OK, let me just ask you then—I've got here a copy of the advertising content directive that applies to your ministry. It says in there very clearly that the deputy approves the ads. Now, I'm just checking to see that this is the case in this regard. The deputy, it says, has a very special requirement in fact to deal with this, and I'm assuming that was followed in the case of the advertisements we're referring to. Is that correct?

Mr Kurts: Yes.

Mr Kennedy: OK. I'm just wanting to be sure of that.

Now, it says also—and the committee may wish to avail themselves of these guidelines, the advertising content directive. It's very straightforward, as far as I can tell. It says here the kind of requirements that have to be met and so forth. I'm just wondering, do you have something that you can table, a communications plan that shows what the objective is for these ads? Because it's required under these guidelines. Do you have that plan and could it be tabled for us today?

Mr Kurts: I don't have that with me currently.

Mr Kennedy: Is there such a plan supporting these different ads?

Mr Kurts: I can't speak to a specific plan that is related to these particular advertisements. In terms of following the content directives, I'd turn to page 2 of the content directives at the bottom, where it talks about examples of suitable uses for government advertisements.

Mr Kennedy: But, sir, I wonder if I might, I'm just asking very specifically—as you know, the directives talk about having a communications plan. It says, "Prior to commencing advertising campaigns, ministries must complete a communications plan and obtain the required ministry and central agency approvals." What I'm asking for, very specifically, is a communications plan, presumably written down that supports the good that these ads would do and how they would meet these particular objectives. I have the guidelines in front of me, and what I am asking is, were they carried out in this very specific respect: are there plans that support this \$3.7-million expenditure to say how this would benefit—it suggests in these guidelines, states in fact, there should be market research conducted ahead of time; it must be done. Was that done? Is there a plan and was there market research conducted? Could you answer those questions?

Mr Kurts: There was research that was done. As you would know, the ministry did a survey of parents in 2001-02, and one of the findings of that research was that parents—I'm trying to find the number exactly, but approximately 36% of the parents who responded to the survey said that they felt that they weren't getting sufficient information about programs that were available.

Mr Kennedy: That was the market research?

Mr Kurts: That was market research that contributed to making this decision.

Mr Kennedy: In other words, if somebody said they want general information—these are very specific ads, and I'm going to come to their content in a minute. But you haven't answered yet, and I'm sure—I put the two questions together, so let me separate them. Is there a communications plan, as required by the directive on advertising content? Does it exist? Is there such a plan?

Mr Kurts: All communications have to go through an approval process, including advertising. It has to go through the approval process that's outlined—

Mr Kennedy: Well, there are two types: one with a communications plan—and I'm asking if it exists and I'm not getting a yes or a no yet—or an exemption can be sought from Management Board. I'm wondering, which of the two types was this advertising? Did you seek an exemption from Management Board or is there a communications plan that we could see here at this committee?

Mr Kurts: There are various documents that went forward for approval. I'm not sure there's one that says "communications plan" at the top of it, but there are certainly a number of documents that went forward and received approval in terms of the appropriate process as outlined in the—

Mr Kennedy: But you're unsure whether a communications plan exists.

Mr Kurts: No, as I said, there are various documents that went forward for approval in terms of these advertisements.

Mr Kennedy: Could any of those documents, the ones that would be closest, meet the requirement for a plan? Can they be tabled here so we can have some idea about the assessment the ministry did before spending \$3.7 million? Could those be brought forward?

Mr Kurts: There are a number of issues with respect to those kinds of documents, so I would have to defer an answer to that question.

Mr Kennedy: Defer to?

Mr Kurts: I'd have to get back to you in terms of—

Mr Kennedy: OK. Pardon me, I thought you meant to somebody else.

I wonder, then, if I could ask you in terms of the role here. It certainly says—and the deputy has a very special role involved to make sure this is integrated into the efforts of the ministry and so forth. The question you deferred—can I also ask if you could supply us with the cost-benefit analysis, because it says, "No information campaign should be undertaken without a cost-benefit analysis." First of all, does it exist? Is there also a cost-benefit analysis for this particular \$3.7 million?

Mr Kurts: I'll get back to you with the answer to that question.

Mr Kennedy: You don't know, as the person in charge, or the deputy can't say whether or not there is a cost-benefit analysis at this time?

Mr Kurts: I'll get back to you with the answer to that question. There certainly were documents that went

forward in terms of assuring that these got the appropriate approvals to move forward.

Mr Kennedy: But at this time, you don't know, as the person responsible, whether that includes either a communications plan or a cost-benefit analysis.

Mr Kurts: What I would say is that we follow the advertisement procurement directives that are put out by Management Board Secretariat, the Advertising Review Board. They outline the responsibility we have in terms of the procurement of advertising and also the directives that we follow.

Mr Kennedy: That I understand. Are you also aware of the advertising content directives that come from corporate management?

Mr Kurts: Yes, I am.

Mr Kennedy: And you also follow those?

Mr Kurts: Yes.

Mr Kennedy: You understand that all I'm asking for are the things that are described in this directive.

Mr Kurts: And I'm not sure whether those are documents that we can provide to you.

Mr Kennedy: Right. The question I asked, just to be absolutely clear, was, first of all, whether the documents existed, and surely you can let us know whether you're conforming to that specific requirement: a cost-benefit analysis and a communications plan.

Mr Kurts: As I said, I will come back to that. I'll get the answer for you.

Mr Kennedy: I'm sorry that we couldn't get a straightforward answer to that, but I'll certainly let you defer, and hopefully it will be something we can get from you.

When you look at those guidelines—and I'd like to believe that they are in play in the ministry. Again, the deputy has a very specific responsibility to see that they are.

I want to ask, in the absence of documents that this committee can look at to see how you're spending \$3.7 million, what, in your explanation—you spent the money. Why did you want to show to the public—you seem to have a copy of the guidelines; maybe you could tell me how it is that the public would need to know about report cards that were brought into existence several years ago, why that required a portion of almost \$4 million to be spent. In other words, what did that ad campaign, in your estimation, try to accomplish for the people of Ontario?

Mr Kurts: I think we have a responsibility in the ministry to ensure that people get information about the resources and the programs of the government. The government has done a number of things and put a number of resources in place to support schools in developing its education reforms. They include exemplars that are discussed specifically in one of the advertisements, which give specific information to teachers and parents about the level of achievement they might expect of their children and give examples of what each of those levels of achievement actually looks like, with real information.

Mr Kennedy: I'm sorry to interrupt, but I was kind of hoping there might be something new.

Mr Ted Arnott (Waterloo-Wellington): You're sorry to interrupt?

Mr Kennedy: Mr Arnott, when you have your time, you'll be able to use it. You won't be using mine, I'll tell you that.

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Again, I just hope that you would bear with us. We have a precious amount of time to find out information from the ministry—that is the purpose of estimates—so we want to get over territory that isn't germane to that.

What I would like to know is how it is that the ad talking about a report card process put in several years ago was deemed by the ministry—and the deputy may wish to address this because she has a special duty under this. Why did the ministry now want to spend \$1.3 million or \$2 million or whatever it was talking to people about a report card? What were the particular objectives that were set for this campaign and how were they realized?

Mr Kurts: I would point to the advertising content directives, which I know you have, Mr Kennedy, and look at the bottom of page 2. It talks about examples of suitable uses for government advertising. They include: "to inform the public of new, existing or proposed government policies or policy revisions; to provide information on government programs or services or revisions to programs or services to which the public are entitled; to disseminate scientific, medical or health and safety information; or to provide information"—and I would argue that those advertisements definitely meet the first two of those things. They give information—

Mr Kennedy: But, sir, in a colloquial sense the idea of having that done—

Mr Frank Mazzilli (London-Fanshawe): Point of order, Mr Chairman: I know each caucus can use their time—

Mr James J. Bradley (St Catharines): Yes, they can. Quit blocking.

Mr Mazzilli: —the way they choose, but if—

Mr Kennedy: How is this a point of order, Chair?

The Vice-Chair: I don't think—unless—

Mr Mazzilli: You're surely welcome to do that. I think he's asking a question—

Mr Bradley: You're ragging the puck, using up the time.

Mr Kennedy: I hope this isn't credited to my time, this waste of Mr Mazzilli's time.

The Vice-Chair: Mr Kennedy, please.

Mr Kennedy: So you're saying basically that as long as it's information, there can be a campaign? There's no specific objective. You're talking to people about a report card that was put in place five or six years ago. You're making an ad out of it, and you want us to believe that it has a public purpose, but you can't state it here today.

My question is to the minister, to the deputy minister: state for us how \$3.7 million—and this \$3.7 million is about 160 education assistants in the classroom, so pre-

sumably you made this decision carefully. Sir, they want you to answer it, but I direct it back to the minister and the deputy: what objective were you accomplishing, telling people about six-year-old report cards? What was the purpose of that spending of money that could have been spent on something else? Why did you authorize it? What did you hope to arrive at?

Ms Suzanne Herbert: My name is Suzanne Herbert. I'm the Deputy Minister of Education for the province of Ontario. I believe, Mr Kennedy, that my director of communications has answered your question, which is that we know, from both our feedback forms and from the inquiries we get from the public, which are substantial, and I'll be glad to share with you the number of inquiries we receive daily from the public, that they want to understand what the government's reforms are. We have a duty to provide them with that information.

We also know that the response to our advertisements—that is, people who then follow up on our advertisements—is quite significant. In fact, their desire for more information based on our advertisements, which is, "Send me the guide," for example, "that helps me teach my child and support my child in early reading and early math"—we have substantial follow-up to the requests for more information, and the Web sites and the numbers that we publish.

So our goal is a fairly simple one. It is to demonstrate to the public what the nature of the reforms are, to ask them if they are interested in understanding these better and what their opportunities are to understand these better.

Mr Kennedy: You have a special responsibility to carry out this directive. You're to make sure, for example, that it avoids partisan political aspiration. I would say, based on your answer so far, that I am disappointed.

It says on page 5 that you're supposed to ensure "that advertising initiatives are integrated into the development, planning and implementation of policies and programs," and the best answer you're giving me is that you want to get information out to the public. In other words, you can spend \$4 million of the public's money any time, any way you want. I'm sure that's not what you believe. There must be more detail, there must be some kind of rationale here. If no studies exist—and I wonder, Deputy, now that you're addressing this, can you tell me whether the appropriate communication plan exists, and the cost-benefit analysis? Because if they don't exist, you're in breach of this policy.

Ms Herbert: As I said, Mr Kennedy, we have a rigorous approval process on the content of our advertising and we follow that process.

Mr Kennedy: But you aren't answering me here at the estimates committee. You've spent \$4 million, you've told us. You won't share with us the secret of how much more you plan to spend. You won't tell us how you go about the process. You want us to accept your assurance. You will give us no details. You will not give us the communications plan that's supposed to exist. Your officer in charge of that particular program isn't

sure it exists. You can't guarantee there's a cost-benefit analysis.

Can you tell us today what public purpose is being served by \$4 million, one portion of which at least is spent talking about report cards from six years ago?

Ms Herbert: I think I've answered that question, Mr Kennedy.

Mr Kennedy: Could you answer this question, please? How much did this education report, put out by your ministry, presumably paid for with dollars that could have gone to students instead, cost?

Ms Marafioti: I believe the cost is on the cover.

Ms Herbert: I think the cost is on the cover, Mr Kennedy. I'm sorry; I don't have my copy here.

Mr Kennedy: How much is this particular program costing?

Ms Herbert: Some 4.3 million Ontario households received that document, and I think the cost was 24 cents, if I remember, for each one.

Mr Kennedy: The total cost for the document, the creative and the advertising that you used, all the money the taxpayers paid, is how much, Deputy?

Ms Herbert: I would multiply 4.3 times 24 cents.

Mr Kennedy: Deputy, you can do better than that. Is there a written document that says how much this program cost?

Mr Kurts: If I could just state that the Management Board Secretariat actually manages the contract for those reports, the householders. As you know, there's been several of those. Those are managed centrally by the Management Board Secretariat. The ministry doesn't manage the contract.

Mr Kennedy: Does the ministry pay for this particular contract?

Mr Kurts: No.

Mr Kennedy: It doesn't pay for this? This is paid for out of Management Board?

Mr Kurts: Yes.

Mr Kennedy: OK. So the fact that it has education content means that—

Mr Kurts: It means that the ministry provided the content and went through the same rigorous approval process on that document as it does on other—

Mr Kennedy: OK, let's check into that. Is there a communications plan for this?

Mr Kurts: As I said, the contract for that and the planning for those householders or those reports are managed—

Mr Kennedy: But you're talking about the dollars and you're not able to supply us with the total amount. You say it goes through Management Board. But the advertising content directive—if you develop the content, you're supposed to follow this. I'm asking you again, for the record—we're here to authorize the \$4 million you've already spent and the X million dollars more—because you won't tell us how much—you want to spend. So far I haven't seen one piece of paper to justify that. What I'd like to know is, did you approve this content?

Mr Kurts: The ministry approved the content, yes.

Mr Kennedy: OK. Then you presumably followed these guidelines. So is there a communications plan to justify this particular content and is there a cost-benefit analysis to show that that effort is necessary?

Mr Kurts: As I said, that project is managed through Management Board.

Mr Kennedy: You would delegate somewhere else that requirement? Because the question I have is, did the deputy approve this as per the guidelines or did some other deputy approve this?

Mr Kurts: In terms of the content, yes.

Mr Kennedy: OK. Then, Deputy, I want to ask you: in the guidelines it says very clearly, "The material should be presented in unbiased and objective language, and in a manner free from partisan promotion of government policy and political argument." Is education being properly funded? Yes, it says. How do I know your plan for education is working?

Minister, it says also in the guidelines, "Information should avoid party political slogans or images. This may involve restrictions on the use of ministerial photographs...." There's the minister and there's the Premier.

Now, if you can't give us some non-partisan, professional, bureaucratic—and I say that in the best sense of the word—support for why you would spend millions of dollars on these initiatives and we read into them, as we're permitted to do and as most people in the province I think do, a partisan political slant, how are we to undertake this?

I assume, Minister, by your reputation, you take these guidelines very seriously. Deputy, I would like to know, do you have something to show us about why these particular expenditures were authorized by you?

Ms Herbert: As Mike has said, this process would have worked through Management board.

Mr Kennedy: But you approved the content?

Ms Herbert: Yes. The technical content of the brochure we would approve. That's quite right.

Mr Kennedy: Did you also approve the placement of the Premier's picture and the messages and the minister's picture and so on? Is that part of the content that you approved?

Ms Herbert: I must say I don't approve pictures, Mr Kennedy.

Mr Kennedy: Well, it is part of the content. Somebody designed this and somebody approved this. So far, at least, you've said that you approved this.

Ms Herbert: I approve the content to ensure that the content is correct.

Mr Kennedy: The guidelines suggest that somebody has to approve it all. Who else would be involved in the approvals, then? If somebody else approved this particular document, who would we look to for that answer?

Mr Rosario Marchese (Trinity-Spadina): Did you see the pictures?

Ms Herbert: As I said to you, the entire project was managed through Management Board.

Mr John Gerretsen (Kingston and the Islands): They're not to blame. It's management.

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Mr Kennedy: OK. What we have so far, then, is \$3.7 million of spending. The ministry has no documentation for this spending to share with the committee. It's only the committee that's supposed to authorize the money in the first place. We have television ads for which we have no communications plan, at least none that can be tabled. There may be some documents, but you're unsure whether we'll have access to them.

I want to then turn to another part of the directive: "The information campaigns should be directed at the provision of objective, factual and explanatory information.... It should be presented in an unbiased and equitable manner." Now, I want to ask you, Deputy, because you approved this. Advertising Standards Canada found that one of your ads, the special education ad, had inaccurate information in it. In other words, an objective body looked at the information that you approved and said that it was inaccurate.

Deputy, it takes on a special significance because your minister, the Premier of the governing party and various other representatives of the government made this representation that was repeated in the ad. Advertising Standards Canada, which is an independent, arm's-length adjudicator of accuracy and misleading statements in advertising, has found you to have made inaccurate claims. I'm wondering, Deputy, how you justify having done that.

Ms Herbert: I'd be happy to explain to the committee the issue that Mr Kennedy is referring to. The ministry did indeed receive a letter from Advertising Standards Canada indicating that the complaint—there were various complaints made about that ad, many of them general in nature. Some were specific, particularly about the timing of the flow of the \$250 million which the ad addressed. The ministry wrote back to ASC in April defending the ad. The ASC wrote back on May 2 informing the ministry that the complaint was upheld by the council under clause 1, which is, as Mr Kennedy has said, accuracy and clarity of the Canadian code of advertising standards. The decision was made by a volunteer council made up of representatives of advertisers, agencies and the public.

We appealed this decision. That decision is under appeal right now.

Mr Kennedy: Would you be able to share the appeal information or any of the information that you provided to Advertising Standards of Canada about this misleading information? Do you have that with you today?

Interjection: We don't want this information at the—

Mr Kennedy: Would you have that, Deputy?

The Vice-Chair: Your time is up. The third party has 30 minutes for their response to the minister's statement.

Mr Marchese: Minister, I think the situation is just too tense and we need to ask different questions.

Hon Mrs Witmer: Oh, I love to hear your questions, Mr Marchese.

Mr Marchese: Secondly, do you have anything to do with the fact that this room is very cold?

Mr Witmer: Well, the first thing I asked when I got in here was to turn up the heat. They tell me they had this problem last week.

Mr Marchese: So what you're saying is that you have no ministerial power to change this?

Hon Mrs Witmer: I don't.

Mr Marchese: So neither you nor the Chair of this committee has any power whatsoever.

Hon Mrs Witmer: No.

Mr Marchese: I see. All of these members, staff over there and these poor ministry people and political staff and possibly others are going to have to suffer here along with the rest of us.

Hon Mrs Witmer: It will keep us on our toes.

Mr Marchese: Oh, and more than that.

I want to talk to you about school safety.

Hon Mrs Witmer: How did I know that was going to be the question?

Mr Marchese: I don't know. You have this other, sixth intuition that some people don't have.

School safety is a concern of mine. Of course, it's a concern of yours too, I know that, and it's a concern of many parents and non-parents. I'm convinced that people who don't have children are equally frightened about what's going on in and outside of our schools. So for me it's particularly tough because one of the parents whose child was approached by an intruder lives in my riding, and it was in one of my schools, Essex-Hawthorne public school. My stepdaughter actually goes to that school as well.

Hon Mrs Witmer: Which one? Essex?

Mr Marchese: Essex-Hawthorne.

But it's not because of that. As parents, we are all worried about these things. My point is we need to do whatever we can to make sure that whatever is within our control is being done. The questions I've asked of you today and the question I asked the Premier yesterday have to do with our ability as a government, with your ability as a government member and with mine to ask you the question, to see what it is that we can and should be doing. The points I raised were, if we had more caretakers in our schools—because we've lost many of them—it would be better because they would be more eyes and ears for school safety in our schools; if we had more vice-principals, it would be better because there would be more eyes and ears in terms of people who would be keeping an eye on intruders; if we had more education assistants or lunchtime supervisors, if we had such personnel, not that it would solve all the problems that could possibly happen, but we believe if you had more adults in the schools, it would be safer for our children.

Perhaps you could just tell us again, and whoever is watching, what your answer is with respect to that question.

Hon Mrs Witmer: First of all, this is a very serious issue: the need for all of us in positions of responsibility

to make sure we do everything we possibly can to keep our children safe. I guess the situation you are concerned about—the reality is that unfortunately some children in the company of their parents, with parents just a few feet away, have been approached by a stranger, and it's certainly a very serious and frightening situation, but let's focus in on the schools.

Our government recognized that there was a need to introduce the Safe Schools Act. We'd never had one until the year 2000. As I said earlier, Mr Marchese, we introduced that legislation. Unfortunately, I don't think your party or the Liberals voted for it. What it really did was move us toward making sure we could protect our students and our teachers within our schools.

The steps that have been taken include the Charter of Education Rights and Responsibilities, which outlines that every student has the right to a safe learning environment. Justice Robins released a report entitled Protecting Our Students, and our government acted quickly to respond to the recommendations to make our schools safer for kids.

The government implemented a number of safe school initiatives addressing the Robins report. In our Safe Schools Act and in regulation we mandated a provincial model for a local police-school board protocol, and mandatory criminal background checks for everyone teaching or working in schools who come into contact with our students on a regular basis. Now 86% of school boards have local police-school board protocols in place, and the other 14% are negotiating them. That's really important.

We have this provincial model for a local police-school board protocol; on December 8, 2000, the provincial was released. It's a joint effort between the Ministry of Education and the former Ministry of the Solicitor General, now the Ministry of Public Safety and Security. It facilitates a consistent approach in developing local protocols, and fulfills the requirements regarding police involvement as set out in the Ontario Schools Code of Conduct. It addresses the recommendations made in the Robins report and two coroners' inquests. It sets provincial expectations for local protocols. All school boards were required to revise their existing procedures or develop a new protocol with their local police services by September 1, 2001.

Also, our act effected the access to school premises regulation, in effect on September 1, 2000, that specifies who is permitted to be on the property. Obviously there is a consequence for persons who are on school premises without being authorized by the regulation. Again, the principal has considerable liberty. I think that's important. Significant steps have certainly been taken in recent years to ensure that our children are safe.

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I would also say that as a result of what's been happening in the city of Toronto, all communities are now meeting with police. All Toronto school board principals have been advised that security staff and safe school coordinators, along with police, are on heightened alert,

ready to assist. Schools in the affected areas have been provided with specific support by the southwest TDSB safe schools office. Principals have been asked to review their plans and procedures with all concerned.

The following considerations have been sent to all TDSB principals for follow-up: procedures for letters that may be sent home to reassure parents that the board is taking the situation seriously. The board is continuing to take every precaution to ensure the safety of children. There's ongoing daily consultations with the safe schools office. An adviser from the safe schools office is visiting schools to review security procedures and make appropriate suggestions if changes are deemed necessary. Teachers and school administration have reviewed safety procedures with all classes. They have ensured that students fully understand what actions are to be taken. It was also stressed to students that they should not travel home alone, but with a friend or parent. Students were told that all reports of mysterious or unusual behaviour on the part of adults toward students will be and should be taken seriously and reported to the appropriate authorities. The buddy system in schools is in place. The procedures for entry to schools at times other than the start of the day have been reviewed. All but the main doors to the school are locked. Staff have been asked to immediately challenge any adult in the building who is unknown or without a visitor pass and ask them to report to the office. The TDSB has heightened its security presence, in particular in the Perth Avenue and Essex school areas, with increased drive-by and foot patrols.

I will end by saying that the safe schools office is in direct communication with the Toronto police services and is keeping the schools informed of any changes. I have to commend the Toronto school board. It is a very, very difficult situation at the present time. There's a tremendous amount of anxiety. You can't go to the grocery store for fear that your child is going to be confronted by a stranger.

Mr Marchese: Thank you for the long answer. Can I ask you, how does your Safe Schools Act, the provincial model police protocol, the code of conduct, the issue of access and who is permitted, and the consequences against those who are not permitted in, how do those issues protect schools from people who might be going into the schools?

Hon Mrs Witmer: Unless you gain the approval of the principal in the principal's office, strangers are not allowed into the schools nowadays.

Mr Marchese: No, I agree. But how does—

Hon Mrs Witmer: As I think I said to you, only the one door of the school is open now.

Mr Marchese: I understand that. For some reason, you introduced the Safe Schools Act—and insisted on pointing out that we were opposed to it, of course—and I was just trying to gather from you the connection between the police protocol and the code of conduct that's contained within the bill, the punishment to those who are not permitted in and how that protects students who might otherwise be accosted by some stranger.

Hon Mrs Witmer: I'm going to ask Marie-Lison to come up here, since she has been involved in the development. She will bring it all together for you, because I do think this is really important information.

Mr Marchese: But is she going to have a whole couple of pages to read, or what do you think?

Hon Mrs Witmer: We won't read to you.

Mr Marchese: All right.

Ms Marie-Lison Fougere: I'm Marie-Lison Fougere, director of the policy and program branch. If I can try to make connections with all of those initiatives, within the Safe Schools Act that was adopted in 2000, the code of conduct was designed, really, to set standards across the province so that there would be a greater level playing field among schools and school boards as to how to manage the conduct of students and employees within the school environment and make sure there was as much consistency as possible across the province. The code of conduct applies to both staff and anyone found on the premises of the school, and also students.

The police protocol was designed as a tool to support school boards and schools in order to make sure that the ways in which schools, under board policies, communicate with the police—that once again there is a guide to make sure that the communication protocol unfolds accordingly and that also the school staff, namely the principals, are well equipped to know when and on what basis to actually liaise with the police. This was very much a negotiating process between the police—

Mr Marchese: What kinds of issues would they be dealing with?

Ms Fougere: They might be dealing with an infraction under the code.

Mr Marchese: What kind?

Ms Fougere: It could be a student who is found with a weapon, but it could also be in relation to an intruder who is not authorized to be on school property and as such is intercepted by the principal or whomever would actually see that individual on the school premises. So there's a wide range. Some of it applies to infractions committed by students; some of it applies to individuals who are not lawfully authorized to actually be on school premises. This would be a ground on which the board would communicate with the police.

Mr Marchese: I understand. Do you think, Marie-Lison, that if we had more caretakers in the schools—who have been cut over the many years that this government has been in place—that would help with the issue of safe schools? Do you think that if we had more caretakers it might help?

Ms Fougere: I think the responsibility for implementing the requirements of the Safe Schools Act and for ensuring that school safety is maintained as much as possible is very much a responsibility of the principal in consultation with the staff, and it's actually quite clearly outlined in the Education Act. It is then up to the schools and the boards to make sure there are appropriate resources to ensure the safety of students and staff, and I would say generally speaking it is the case.

Mr Marchese: Is it the case that they are generally well staffed?

Ms Fougere: No, it is the case that safety is taken very seriously and that school boards and schools do take the issue very seriously—

Mr Marchese: Of course they do. No one's questioning that.

Ms Fougere: —and make sure that there is proper action taken in relation to that.

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Mr Marchese: Of course. I thank you for providing some background to the Safe Schools Act, which we're now debating here. But I just want to talk to the minister for a few moments, as soon as she's free and available.

Minister, I have a concern. I basically am arguing that the Safe Schools Act doesn't really deal with the question I was asking. What I'm saying to you is that there are a lot of parents like me who believe that having more caretakers, vice-principals and educational assistants cut from our schools would be an important component of issues of school safety. In other words, they would be able to keep an eye on who's coming in, who's going out, and then they would be able to apply the proper protocols. If we don't have the eyes and ears, the proper protocols don't work, you see.

The question I'm asking you, Minister, is, do you think if we had more caretakers in the system, or more vice-principals or educational assistants and lunchroom supervisors, that would be helpful?

Hon Mrs Witmer: Do you know what I think is really important? I think it's important that we keep in mind that the principals in the city of Toronto are taking all the measures they possibly can to protect students. Despite the best efforts of parents, principals and police, unfortunately there is an individual there who's getting close to children.

I just want to share with you from the TDSB a letter that has gone out to all school administrators in the immediate area of Essex and Perth Avenue schools. It's from Bill Byrd, the safe schools administrator. It is as a follow-up to the incident that you mentioned with students from Essex school being approached by a man near Essex school on Friday, June 6, 2003. It provides some facts. It says, "To date there is no hard evidence to connect the person sighted near Essex to the Holly Jones situation. To date there is no hard evidence to say that the person from Essex is in fact the same person that has been sighted or involved with other incidents with children near some of your schools or malls."

Mr Marchese: I appreciate that.

Hon Mrs Witmer: I think, personally, that those in charge are doing everything they possibly can to protect the children.

Mr Marchese: I have no doubt. But you see, Minister, what I'm saying is the following: I'm not attacking the school board—I'm not and I haven't, as you know—and I'm not saying that principals are not doing their best. I haven't said that; I'm not saying that. I'm not accusing principals of anything. I'm convinced, as a result of this

incident, that many schools are going to bring about greater safe school protocols that will be better for all students in the future and less worrisome in the future for parents. I'm not disputing that at all. The only argument I was trying to make with you to see whether you and I agree or not is that the Toronto Parent Network has tracked cuts to caretakers, and they said there has been a 21% cut.

Hon Mrs Witmer: Do you have those data, Mr Marchese?

Mr Marchese: Yes. I don't have the report; I just have the numbers here that I'm using. But then you can tell me what data you have.

The caretakers have sustained a 21% cut, educational assistants in kindergarten a 25% cut, vice-principals a 20% cut, and we know your friendly supervisor is looking at making more cuts this year. We understand that he might be having 300 caretakers replaced by contract cleaners working in the evening—God bless him—and educational assistants for regular kindergartens will be reduced to 350 from 772.

You might have different facts that you might want to publish with us some day or at least share with us, but these are the facts we're aware of. What they're arguing, that I argue as a parent, is that if we had these people in place—because they perform functions that go beyond just school safety; they're obviously educational in nature, by and large—if we had these adults, beyond the educational value they also provide school safety, eyes and ears. What I'm trying to ask you is, do you agree with me or disagree with me? Do you agree with the numbers that I have shared with you? Secondly, do you agree that if they were there, they would provide better safety in the schools?

Hon Mrs Witmer: I guess what I would say to you is, first of all, I regret that there are those who are speculating about what may or may not happen in the new budget. I guess those were some of the same people who were speculating about the fact that Mr Christie would lock out the teachers, which, of course, he never did. I think we need to recognize that some of this speculation is not accurate.

I guess what I can tell you is that certainly we have been informed that there is a belief that there is adequate staff within the schools to provide for those students.

Mr Marchese: What you're saying is that, first of all, you're not acknowledging whether these cuts are real or not—are you?

Hon Mrs Witmer: Well, do you know what? I have no idea. As I say, I've been told here that some of this information may be derived from the Parents for Education report. I don't have access to those figures that you're talking about. I can tell you that there has been an increase of funding to the Toronto school board this past year and the year before. I think they're presently receiving somewhere in the neighbourhood of \$2.1 billion. Certainly, they are doing everything they can to ensure the safety of the children in their care.

Mr Marchese: Can I ask you, Minister—you or the deputy—do you track the numbers around caretakers, ed assistants, vice principals and the like? Do you have any figures to share with us, by any chance?

Hon Mrs Witmer: I just want to go back. The Toronto school board is projected to increase by over \$99 million this year. That's a 5% increase over last year, and their enrolment is going to be decreasing by 4.2%. I think that's important information to have. They have \$69 million in flexible funding in 2003 and 2004.

Mr Marchese: I will try to get to those numbers if I can, possibly later or tomorrow.

Do you or your deputy minister track the level of services? Let's not call them cuts, because you probably don't like the word. Do you track the level of service that we get in those areas—from, let's say, 1997 to the present?

Ms Herbert: We don't track—that's what I was just checking with my staff—the data in a year-over-year way. We can extrapolate data that is about two years out of date, only because of the fact that the boards report their actuals.

Having said that we don't track data but we can extrapolate some data, I would say that we don't track services. As you know, the funding formula is a benchmark system to get money to the boards, but the boards make individual decisions about how they prioritize the use of their spending to create services. I want to draw the distinction between services and—

Mr Marchese: Can I ask you, Deputy, does it worry you when People for Education or the Toronto Parent Network says there have been tremendous reductions in services? First of all, does it worry you? Secondly, would you not want to either prove or disprove their numbers as a way of saying it isn't happening, or it is, or let's see how one balances out with our own studies? Do you have an interest in doing that? Either of you, really.

Hon Mrs Witmer: I guess I would say to you I understand that if you take a look at the TPN report, actually only 12.6% of schools reporting could be officially tracked. It's not a totally accurate number, and I think we have to be careful with the methodology that's being employed, that we don't use figures that maybe don't give the most accurate representation of what's happening within the school system.

1700

Mr Marchese: Sure, I understand. But doesn't it worry you to have these various groups out there doing these things and that you don't offer your own methodology or your own tracking system as a way of saying, "Good heavens, these people are doing these things and they're not accurate, they're not scientific, and that makes me look bad as a minister or as a deputy. Surely, after all these years that Marchese has raised these questions in the House, we've got to do something"? Isn't that really—

Hon Mrs Witmer: But I've just shared with you half an hour of how we are building a stronger public education system.

Mr Marchese: I was going to give you more time. I almost moved a motion, seeing you didn't finish your report. I'm sorry I didn't do that.

Hon Mrs Witmer: Anyway, the deputy is going to respond further, Mr Marchese.

The Vice-Chair: You have all of three minutes to do it.

Ms Herbert: Mr Marchese, I think you've raised a very good point: the question of how does the ministry across the province collect its data and how does it track what's going on in a year-over-year and comparative way? I think that's a fair question to ask us.

As you know, until recently—1998—the ministry was more of a policy ministry than a funding ministry. It had a different role and accountability in education than the role it has now. Part of what we've been working on over the last couple of years is a fairly major information management redesign.

You may know that this year we've rolled out a new education number system for the entire province which will allow us to begin to gather data in a more comparative and useful way. It focuses first, I think it would be fair to say, on trying to collect and analyze how our students are doing and on their credit accumulation, retention rates, the kinds of things that are important for us to know from a policy perspective. Our hope is that within the next two years we'll have a very robust and useful information system. You can find the early products of that design on our Web site now, with a fair amount of detail on each board and on board profiling.

Mr Marchese: But I really think you've got to spend some money on this. I think that would be worthwhile money spent, don't you agree?

Ms Herbert: I would say that I am spending some money on that now.

Mr Marchese: On this tracking business?

Ms Herbert: Yes.

Mr Marchese: And the minister agrees with you?

Hon Mrs Witmer: Sometimes when I go to look for information, I've come to learn that what the deputy said is accurate. There haven't been data collected in the past; it really has been very much focused on policy. So that information is currently in the process of being gathered. And do you know what? You and I are both going to have access to it in the future.

Mr Marchese: Yes, there you go. It would have great educational value, wouldn't it? Possibly more so than that little booklet Gerard had. Gerard, where's that little booklet?

Interjection.

Mr Marchese: I don't mean to compare, really, because that's unfair. It would have just as much value as this, I suspect, wouldn't it? I look at Ernie smiling; he's happy still. Elizabeth, you're happy here too, by the way.

The Vice-Chair: On that smiling note, that ends your time, Mr Marchese.

Mr Marchese: We spent half an hour, you and I, already?

Hon Mrs Witmer: We did.

The Vice-Chair: Madam Minister, you have 30 minutes to respond. Of course, you can use it accordingly, or your members can.

Hon Mrs Witmer: I'm going to continue, and I think I'm going to begin with the changes that have been made in special education. This is an area that actually was first brought to public attention by the government back in 1982. We are the first government to have enveloped the funding for special education. Ministry statistics indicate that about 277,000, or about 12.8%, of students in publicly funded elementary and secondary schools receive special education services.

We want to support those children, and for 2003-04, special education funding is projected to increase to almost \$1.65 billion. That is an increase of 41% since 1998-99. So, Mr Marchese, we do have that statistic.

We are also committed to continuous improvement in quality and accountability in special education. We are actually developing program standards that set out clear expectations for the delivery of special education programs and services to help students with special needs succeed. We have received excellent advice from stakeholders. This is certainly one group of people who provide us with excellent input. The first stage of the work has been completed for all 12 exceptionality areas. In May we released a discussion paper. We are consulting on its direction, and in the 2003-04 school year we expect to pilot the new-standards-based approach to special ed in six to 10 school boards.

I'd now like to turn to another group, the aboriginal students. The welfare of the First Nations people of Ontario is important. We are working closely with the federal government and the aboriginal community to assist in providing the tools to create the best possible education for the First Nations students. The new curriculum supports the teaching of native language and culture for grades 1 to 12. The curriculum also offers native study courses for credit in grades 9 to 12. In his report, Dr Rozanski addressed the issue of the educational needs of aboriginal students and made recommendations to the ministry to improve their level of achievement. Our government is responding to his recommendations.

As a key step forward, we plan to build on the success of alternative secondary schools and native friendship centres by increasing the number of alternative schools throughout Ontario. We are committed to ensuring that all students, including those from an aboriginal background, can learn in a supportive environment and have the same opportunities to achieve success.

I'd now like to turn to our schools and the need to make sure they're safe and, obviously, provide stability. All Ontarians need to be confident that the schools provide safe, secure and, equally important, respectful environments in which to learn. In response we've introduced initiatives including the provincial code of conduct, the Safe Schools Act and the Student Protection Act. These ensure that school boards will have the resources and flexibility they need to operate, maintain

and upgrade existing schools and build new ones when they are required.

The grant for school renewal for the current school year is \$266 million. In March, as part of the response to the Rozanski report, we announced \$75 million in new funding to help school boards renovate schools across the province. This includes \$25 million to finance the replacement of at least 34 schools where the cost of repair has been determined to be prohibitive, \$25 million to renovate schools and a further \$25 million, beginning in the 2004-05 school year, to increase school renewal base funding.

Our schools of course are key provincial assets. Boards in this province own and operate more than 4,800 schools, with some 250 million square feet of floor space, and it's very important that we keep them in a state of good repair. You were a school trustee, Mr Marchese, and so was I, and I think we all appreciate that this was an issue that you took a good look at every year and tried to make sure that schools were well maintained. It helps, again, to meet the needs of our students and teachers.

This is really quite important: we have this new assessment program. It was announced in the 2002 provincial budget. We now have qualified building professionals who are inspecting every school in the province, making sure that those most in need of repair are repaired first, or, in the case of those that are prohibitive to repair, are rebuilt. These building professionals are going to complete their assessments in December of this year. However, I'd just like to say that by this September we will have seen, since 1998, the construction of 226 new schools and 291 additions, which means we'll have created more than 200,000 new spaces for students.

1710

What is important about this is the fact that 1,960 portable classrooms, or almost 15%, have been removed from the system. We know it is important for students to have access to new schools and to renew existing facilities, so that's a very important step forward. I think many of us whose children have been in school have had our children in portables. There has always been the desire to move the children into new schools and new space. We're providing flexibility in resources to school boards so they can build new schools and renovate existing ones, so this environment is important.

Our government is also investing \$340 million in 2003-04 to help school boards reach fair and responsible agreements with their teachers and staff. Again, that's part of creating a stable environment. This is in addition to the \$340 million announced in December, at the recommendation of Dr Rozanski. That was actually an increase of 3% to the salary benchmark and an investment of a total of \$680 million.

I'd like to turn now to transportation. We live in a huge province and every day we transport about 800,000 students, or 38% of the students in the province. These children travel a total of 1.9 million kilometres between home and school. There are 10,000 full-sized school buses that carry these children and 9,000 smaller buses,

vans and taxis. Again, we have a responsibility to make sure that these children reach school safely, on time and prepared to learn.

The transportation grant for 2003-04 will reach almost \$652 million, or 3.32% more than in 2002-03. This includes a \$20-million investment made in April, which complemented the \$20-million investment announced in December in response to Dr Rozanski's recommendations. We are also developing a new approach to funding transportation.

I'd like to turn now to the double cohort. We've certainly heard a lot about the challenges and some of the unique needs of the double cohort. I'm pleased to say that our government has been working over the past few years with the leaders of our colleges and universities in order to ensure that those students who want to have access to post-secondary education will have the same opportunity as in the past to do so.

Ontario universities will accept a record-breaking 70,000 first-year students this fall. Working with our partners, we have invested \$2.6 billion to create 135,000 new student spaces on post-secondary campuses to meet the needs of the double cohort. There's a point that's really important because there was some concern about marks. I'd like to tell this group here that the marks submitted to the Ontario Universities' Application Centre demonstrated that Ontario's university-bound high school students are succeeding with the new curriculum. The average marks between those who were taking the OAC courses in the old curriculum and the grade 12 courses in the new curriculum are within 1%. I think that's good news for a lot of parents and their children. Our government has made a commitment to ensure that every willing and qualified student will have a place in a post-secondary institution.

Let's take a look at school-to-work transitions. I think it's important to recognize that a huge number of students choose to go directly into the world of work, and some of these children go into apprenticeships. We need to support those young people in the same way and make sure there are pathways into apprenticeships or pathways directly into whatever workplace they may want to go into.

Having been a secondary school teacher, I have to tell you that the program we have in place today is having a very positive impact. It's making sure that students don't drop out of school. It is helping to encourage them to stay. There's a lot of focus on co-op, hands-on experience. There's an opportunity for all these out-of-classroom career-related experiences, and career planning. Certainly Mr Gerretsen is knowledgeable and familiar with the high school in his community, which has some absolutely outstanding workplace programs in place that are keeping young people in school. It allows them to graduate and go directly into a well-paying job, but it's really helping them to achieve success. So it is really important today that school boards are required to offer co-op education, work experience and school-work transition programs to all interested students.

In fact, there are more than 12,000 high school students today who are enrolled in the Ontario youth apprenticeship program. We have more than 20,000 employers who have expressed interest in helping school boards offer workplace experience to students through our Passport to Prosperity program, another outstanding program for our young people. I'm also pleased to say that in recognition of the need to support these young people, in our recent provincial budget we announced \$90 million in new funding over the next four years to improve vocational and technological education to support these young people and help them achieve success. So we just need to make sure that we're helping children, whether they're going into university, college, apprenticeship or directly into the workplace.

I'm also pleased to say that students are meeting the graduation requirements of completing 40 hours of community involvement activities. In fact, we've heard from some students who tell us that it really is too little; they're getting 80 hours, 100 hours, 200 hours. Again, it is helping them by learning community values, learning about their communities, responsible citizenship and, as well, it allows some young people to explore career opportunities and make some decisions there.

Let's now take a look ahead. On April 30 the throne speech, which of course is a document that always looks forward, was presented to Ontarians, and it renewed our commitment to education. Over the past eight years we have worked to enhance the educational experience of students and worked to provide them with opportunities to achieve success. Certainly the throne speech indicates we're going to continue in that way. We're going to continue to focus on—the vision is pretty simple—helping students achieve success, which means we'll continue to focus on making sure they can read, write and succeed in the area of mathematics. We plan to take innovative new steps such as enhancing our students' educational experience with learning expertise from individuals who are specialists in their fields. We're going to give parents more choice to enrol their children in schools within their board, knowing of course that first-placement priority will continue to be provided for those who live in that geographic area.

I guess I want to conclude my comments by saying one more time that we have a remarkable education system in this province. I think we are extremely blessed. I believe we are the envy of many other provinces and many countries in the world, based on the number of visits we have to this jurisdiction. I think we owe a tremendous debt of gratitude to all those who have been part of the building of this strong educational system. It didn't happen just by chance, it didn't happen overnight, but I think we owe a debt of gratitude certainly to the trustees who have worked diligently and hard over many years. Having been a trustee myself for 10 years, I know the amount of work that's involved and the types of decisions they continue to make on behalf of students.

1720

We have to thank our outstanding and committed teachers and certainly all the people within the education sector, the dedicated staff, and we need to say "thank you" to the parents. One of the things I see that's different from past years is that parents have asked in recent years to be much more involved than ever before. As a result, we have parent councils in our different schools and so a lot of the decision-making today involves a partnership; it involves consultation with the stakeholders who are interested in the system in this province. I think it's up to all of us to continue to build on the strong foundation and continue to move forward in a way that helps our students achieve success. I believe that, based on where we're going, by working together we can build an even brighter future for our students.

I would just add that that completes my comments.

The Vice-Chair: Thank you.

Mr Arnott: Mr Chair, on a point of order: I'm going to use a moment of our time to express a concern I have. I had the privilege of being Vice-Chair of this committee around 1994, 1995. I consider the estimates committee to be one of the most important committees of the Legislature. It's important that members have an opportunity to ask questions of ministers and ministry staff, but surely if the questions are sincere, members would want answers to the questions and not repeatedly and systematically interrupt ministry staff.

I would respectfully request that in future rounds, if a member of the Legislature repeatedly and systematically interrupts ministry staff, you call that member to order. It is the responsibility of the Chair of this committee to maintain order and decorum in this committee. I would respectfully request that you exercise your authority as Chair to do that, if indeed another member of the committee repeatedly and systematically interrupts ministry staff while they're trying to give answers to those questions.

Mr Kennedy: On the same point of order, Mr Chair.

Mr Mazzilli: This is our time.

Mr Kennedy: It's the same point of order. It's been raised as a point of order. It goes to the process. I would just ask, Mr Chair, that this estimates continue to be a forum that takes seriously its obligation to get answers—

Mr Mazzilli: That's not a point of order.

Mr Kennedy: —and that if in fact—because we're talking about the process that will be followed—any of the respondents don't address the question, the Chair should then intervene to obtain the answer and therefore negate the need for any interruption and so forth and make sure we have productive hearings. I take from the intervention of the member opposite that he wants to have us do our business here, not simply waste time but, rather, get the public interest answers we need. I submit that to the Chair as my input for the guidance that was offered from the other side.

Mr Marchese: Given that he made a point of order, which you haven't ruled on one way or the other and allowed some comment, then it's useful to remark on it.

The remarks the member makes would not allow a member to say to staff or even the minister, "You're simply not answering the question; you're just taking too long and not answering the question." You've got to allow the member the freedom to really say yes or no or, "That doesn't answer my question." You can't not allow the member whose time it is to be able to get to the questions he or she needs to ask, because, if the minister decides not to answer it, but decides to take five or 10 minutes in not answering, let's say, that would be equally wrong, you will admit.

Mr Arnott: That's not what happened this afternoon.

Mr Marchese: It never happens.

Mr Mazzilli: On the same point of order, Mr Chair.

Mr Marchese: The point to that point of order he was making is that members must be entitled to the answers they're looking for as quickly as they can.

The Vice-Chair: On the same point of order?

Mr Mazzilli: Certainly to support Mr Marchese and his comments because I think it is very important to ask questions, but as the Chair knows, sometimes people don't like the answers they get, and that seems to be the problem. As Chair, you're going to have to decide whether the question was answered and the member just did not like the answer. I will leave that with you, Mr Chair.

The Vice-Chair: Is this on the same point of order?

Mr John O'Toole (Durham): No, I was just going to ask a question.

The Vice-Chair: I don't want to get another one. I just want to stay on this point of order. Let me say too that I have chaired this estimates committee and also acted as Vice-Chair. I listened very carefully to the interchange last time. I think all the questions and answers were appropriate. In the sense that sometimes those who are asking the questions are not satisfied, it seems that's all part of the game itself.

Mr Mazzilli: It's not a game.

The Vice-Chair: May I finish? Did I interrupt you, Mr Mazzilli?

The fact is, that interchange went on, and I think all that was appropriate today. I did not see any violation of any order here today. But I understand exactly what you're saying, Mr Arnott, and in the future I will be looking out for any abuse of that kind of process itself. I've also watched, and questions which were never tabled are being read for an extensive time, and I entertained that. The fact is, I didn't see anything out of order, and I wouldn't regard this as a point of order.

We have eight minutes remaining in the time here. Do you want to proceed?

Mr O'Toole: That's a very short period of time to—

Interjection: He was generous.

Mr O'Toole: Minister, I listened to and appreciated your comments today. The part where you were speaking about students at risk attracted me, and you said it was near and dear to your heart. I genuinely accept that, your being a former teacher and trustee. Just to lead into this whole thing of students at risk, I think back to my time as

a trustee in the 1980s. I did chair SEAC, the special-ed advisory committee, and I have a sister who is a speech-and-language pathologist. I've always felt, as you have, that it's those children who most need our attention and support. I hearken back, because it was Bill 82 in 1980 or 1981 that initiated, under a Conservative government I might add, integration and special education to be specifically funded. I think if I were to retrace my steps, it's probably the reason I'm here.

Quite honestly, each of us believes that education is probably the most important gift we can give to children and young people. My wife's a teacher, and one of my children is currently teaching in England, but she's a qualified high school teacher here. I commend the ministry for trying to move ahead in a context where some of the programs you've outlined today, the children-at-risk part, are extremely important, and I thank you. I firmly believe, despite all the politics and rhetoric, that you genuinely are committed to excellence in education. I think all the resources and time that you bring to it are extremely important, and I compliment you and the ministry for that.

I can honestly say, having chaired three school board budgets as well as chairing special ed, I know there are more resources, and not just under the special ed kind of name, but in other areas. I find this booklet rather useful. You might carry it around with you as a quick index, Mr Marchese. In this case here, it does talk about \$1.6 billion for kids with special needs. It's all there. It's a public document. I think the ministry's done a great job in terms of communicating—

Mr Marchese: You can put it in your pocket.

Mr O'Toole: I do. In fact, we carry it around with us. It's sort of like the Bible. Well, it's a smaller version, of course, but it's according to St John.

I really do commend you, Minister. Perhaps you could share with us, in the couple of minutes that I've left you, where this goal—our goal—leads to special education. I'm going to make it an even more difficult question: how much more is to be done in special ed? I've heard lots of comments recently on the whole issue of assessment. That's a very controversial area, this assessment business. Dr Bette Stephenson's report comments specifically on the whole assessment process. How much money is potentially being wasted in some of the assessments that aren't particularly well-focused? In the time left—we've increased funding by 41%—how do we continue to improve access for children with special needs?

Hon Mrs Witmer: I don't know if we're going to have ample time to complete the question.

1730

Mr O'Toole: I'll continue tomorrow.

Hon Mrs Witmer: First of all, you're right. The government is now funding special education at an all-time record level. Let's begin with the fact that special education funding is projected to increase to about \$1.65 billion this year. That is the increase of 41% that we've talked about since 1998-99. What we did immediately after Dr Rozanski gave us recommendations was that we

permanently increased special education funding by \$250 million on an annual basis, and in December 2002, the ministry allocated additional funding of \$130 million, based on the interim results of the ISA review, which is a review of children with very high needs.

I'm pleased to say that, based on the final results of the ISA review, boards are now receiving a further \$71.5 million for the 2002-03 school year. This reflects the full-year funding for all eligible ISA claims for students enrolled in the current school year. When new files are submitted next year, the ministry projects that ISA funding will increase by another \$50 million, for a total of \$250 million in 2003-04.

You might ask, what does this money do? This money does what it needs to do, and that is more money to hire special education teachers, education assistants and other specialists who can help these children in our classrooms who have special needs.

Interjection.

The Vice-Chair: You've got a minute.

Mr O'Toole: Again, I'm just making some reference to continuing this. I'd encourage members of the committee to have a look at Dr Stephenson's report and your commitment and follow-through on it, not just to the Rozanski report. I think what's most important, if I really look in some context of the longer view of educational change or reform, the Royal Commission on Learning, for me, probably represents a benchmark of the need for reform. I actually commend the NDP for commissioning the Royal Commission on Learning. It was difficult. That's why you had a royal commission: the system was in some paralysis. I think there are other agents of change, and I think your government started it. Education Minister David Cooke started the Ontario College of Education, the curriculum reform, most of it. Actually, it started under him. I can show you the documents. So it isn't political—and Mr Kennedy missed most of this because he wasn't here, and I still don't think he is. But, the thing is—

Mr Gerretsen: Excuse me. That's unparliamentary.

Mr O'Toole: No, quite honestly, I don't mean it that way. He is here now. I really feel that we're following up on most of those reports, the Royal Commission on Learning—

Interjections.

Mr O'Toole: Well, Mr Kennedy was actually running a bank at the time when this was discussed.

The Vice-Chair: Thank you, Mr O'Toole. Order. We have now reached the 20-minute rotational time. The official opposition has 20 minutes.

Mr Kennedy: I'm glad Mr O'Toole is amusing at least himself with that.

I'd like to follow up on one of Mr Marchese's questions, Minister. I also have a child in the school that was in question today from time to time. My daughter is at the daycare at Hawthorne and Essex.

I want to ask you about the information Mr Marchese talked about. There is, under your decisions, no other elected official, not one in the province, that can secure

the information that parents of that school are seeking about the impact of cutbacks on the ability of their principal to provide safety for their children. So I'm asking you, as the person who made the decision to impose a supervisor to take over the board and to run the board, to provide information to those parents and that school community that would allow them to assess objectively whether or not the kind of safety and security they have a right to expect from their school system is being provided to the same extent as in the past. I'm asking you whether you're willing to ensure that the Toronto board, which has that information—comparative information, as Mr Marchese indicated, about caretakers, about adults on the premises, about vice principals; that school was consolidated, 700 kids, and so forth. But rather than speculate, it must be information that your board, the board that you're running right now through your supervisor, could readily provide to these parents. You're the only elected official they can turn to to get those answers, and I'm asking if you'll make those available through this committee.

Hon Mrs Witmer: I don't know if you are aware of this—perhaps you are—but I can certainly tell you, having been a trustee, a chair of a board and a teacher, that it is the responsibility of school boards throughout the province to ensure that there is a safe environment for their students.

We have been given the assurance by those in charge at the Toronto District School Board that they are taking steps to ensure that safety is not compromised. I know they take that responsibility seriously, just as every school board in this province takes that responsibility very, very seriously.

Mr Kennedy: With all respect, Minister, there is no school board. You stripped the elected officials of their ability to access information and to provide both assurance and meaningful information to people—parents, members of the community—who would like to be able to determine what kind of situation has arisen for their children.

I think you would agree, and in fact I think there were comments of the government to this effect, that the first useful step is to let people know what is and is not happening. You're their only political conduit. You're the only elected official who can stand accountable for what is being done in the Toronto board.

You're asking us to have faith in those unelected officials, and no one is suggesting at this moment that we should not. But I think the people who have children in that school are within their rights to ask you to provide the information about the standards of adult supervision and so forth available in that school, because there's nowhere else for them to turn. I know it's unusual in that respect, but there is nowhere else they can go.

I don't want to take up too much more of your time, but we just wonder if the information about the adult supervision, the caretakers, the secretaries and so on in that particular school setting, which has certainly been

upset and made anxious by incidents that happened on the premises, is something you're willing to provide.

Hon Mrs Witmer: I think you probably understand that despite the fact that there is a supervisor within the Toronto board, I believe that trustees do continue to play a role with the board.

Certainly today or recently, there are streetproofing tips that have gone home with students. I can tell you that the Toronto police are working very diligently with the Safe Schools administration team at the board of education. There have been notices going home to parents, which are being shared with superintendents, principals and teachers.

I have been assured by the supervisor that all steps are being taken to ensure the safety of the children in the care of the Toronto school board. I think we need to appreciate that a lot of people are working very, very hard and are doing everything they possibly can to give assurance.

Mr Kennedy: Minister, again, I'll leave that with you, because I take from that that you're not willing to provide the more specific information the parents are looking for. That's really the effort they would appreciate from you, because they have tried but cannot get that information through their trustee. But I'd like to leave that, because I've asked you three times.

I want to know if you're bothered by the fact that apparently there is no communications plan for the approximately \$4 million that you spent and that you authorized. Presumably, you authorized this money. You said, "It's important for us this year to spend money on advertising. We need to be doing this." I wonder, does it bother you that there isn't a communications plan that we can look at here today to explain the \$3.7 million in advertising? Does that trouble you?

Hon Mrs Witmer: I'm going to ask the deputy to—

Mr Kennedy: Minister, having had the opportunity to speak to the deputy, I just want to clarify my question. I'm asking for your opinion as the minister. The deputy has some very specific responsibilities here. Some of that is in question, I want to admit, and I'm hoping there may be some further information provided. But I'm asking you—you're here; you're the person we see as being responsible for those \$4 million—does it bother you that there isn't a cost-benefit analysis or a communications plan, as your government policy requires there should be? Is that troubling to you, you as the minister?

1740

Hon Mrs Witmer: I think it's really important that the public has the opportunity to be well-informed about the educational programs that are in place in the province of Ontario. There have been some very significant improvements made in recent years, building on the strong foundation, and part of that of course involves letting parents and taxpayers know about the changes that have been made in supporting students with special needs. That's one of the areas where we continue to get a lot of inquiries from parents about what is available. Unfortunately, there are still some parents today who are

not aware of the tremendous opportunities within our schools in order that students can get the special assistance they need. So we do believe it's important that we continue to make that information available to the public in order that we can help our students achieve success.

Mr Kennedy: Minister, you may be aware that there were dozens of parents all around the province who wrote—and I have copies of e-mail here—to the Advertising Standards Canada about the special education ad, because they still don't have any funding for their particular children.

Franceska Gnarowski said that she thought it was a travesty, given the litany of neglect that we hear about from parents of children with special needs and the general sorry state of our education systems, that there should be that money spent on advertising.

We have James Ireland at the Robert Bateman school who says that his principal does not replace special education and English-as-a-second-language teachers as a means of saving money and that this happens in many schools that he's familiar with. So he says he has not seen one difference since the beginning of the school year, even though the ads proclaim that.

Another comes from a parent, Lies Weijs, who says, "The most recent TV ads are especially abhorrent to me ... I would like to know the budgets for those ads"—indeed, we would like to have questions like that answered—"I would like to know how many special-needs students could be supported in the public system...."

Now that we know it's \$4 million, I wonder if you, as the political person responsible, could help tell some of these parents why it's more important to have \$4 million worth of advertising instead of approximately 160 education assistants so that a number of these parents, like Joanne Dies and Steven Katz, could get the assistance they need in their schools for their children.

Minister, I'd like to know, can you justify spending \$4 million on that instead of on the children whose parents, whom you say you had in mind when you took these ads out, would rather have the money spent on?

Hon Mrs Witmer: I'd just like to go back to the point that there are many people in Ontario who are looking for information from government about new programs and services that they can access either for themselves or for their children. In fact, a survey was undertaken by the Canadian information office of the federal government, and it found that a mere 14% indicated they receive enough information from their government. It also indicated that many people are unfamiliar with government initiatives; that deals with governments of all levels. I think it's important that we remember that governments have an obligation to communicate and share information with their taxpayers.

Mr Kennedy: But I asked you for a very specific response. These ads are political in nature. They speak in generalities. None of your ministry staff so far can give us one piece of paper to show what objective they serve.

In one instance they talk about—and I'd like you to comment on any of these that you think help that laudable objective you just talked about—telling people about standard report cards, seven years after they've started. A special education ad that turns out to be in error, inaccurate, misleading, because the content isn't correct: how is that helping these parents who need more resources for their kids, and then testing that talks about a four-year-old test score?

Can you justify, because none of your staff has so far justified, that this \$4 million should be spent on those specific objectives? Can you specifically give us your reasoning? You approved this money. You said it was more important than education assistants, more important than other things, so you must believe in these very specific ads. I'm wondering if I could get you to respond specifically to the ads that cost \$3.7 million. Can you tell us why they were very, very important to communicate at this great expense and trouble?

Hon Mrs Witmer: First of all, Mr Chair, I take exception to words that Mr Kennedy is supposedly attributing to myself. I don't think I've ever said any of those words. I think he needs to be very careful in how he attempts to represent what I may be saying, or what my staff have been saying. We're trying to present information, and certainly I think it's important that facts, information and words attributed to us be factual and correct. We just want to make sure that the public is aware of the changes that have been undertaken.

If you take a look at student marking, parents need to be assured that the standards will ensure that the work of students throughout the province is marked fairly and consistently, so that an A in Toronto is an A in Thunder Bay. That is the objective of the advertising. It's important to let parents and taxpayers know how achievement has improved. Obviously, we now have a record of achievement. They also need to know of some of the changes that have been made in special education, especially with the increase in the funding.

If you take a look at student testing, we believe that the provincial testing program is providing valuable information for schools and the government. That is allowing people to work together to further improve student achievement.

Mr Kennedy: Minister, I'm sorry that you couldn't answer the very specific question of how the \$4 million would be justified but I guess, in general, I will take your answer that you do believe the \$4 million is worthwhile for the reasons you've just stated.

I'm wondering, since you wouldn't comment on your ministry not having followed the process, if that's not worthy of your comment to this committee. You spent \$4 million. We don't have the communications plan or the cost-benefit analysis. I've asked you a number of times, and you've declined to comment on that. I'd like to ask you or the deputy about the partisan nature of some of this advertising. Those guidelines—and this is the run-up to an election period. You're spending so far, by your own admission, \$1 million more than last year. Last year

at this time, you said you'd spent \$2.7 million, and now you've spent \$3.7 million. You're buying ads that are general in nature, but I'd just like to ask whether the due diligence happened to ensure that these were non-partisan ads.

Deputy, I wonder if I could ask you to relate these particular comments. You have two pages for the Premier, who talks in the first person, gives his opinions about the education program, and then you have one page for the minister—both of those politicians with their photographs—answering general questions like, "How do I know your plan for education is working?" and citing selected test results. There are other test results that show that it's not working. How could this possibly meet the guidelines? It says, "Is education being properly funded?" The Premier answers in the affirmative, yet there's an argument in Dr Rozanski's report that we'll get into in these hearings about whether or not that's true. But you let a political claim get made in this advertising.

I wonder how you justify allowing the Conservative Party to use the budget of your ministry. You have an obligation, specifically in here, not to let it be partisan political. At least three out of the 10 pages here are inarguably partisan in nature, first-person opinions from the Premier and the Minister of Education. I'd like to know what scrutiny—do you have outside opinions, perhaps, which would say that these pass these guidelines? Is there someone you would run this by to make sure that your ministry budget isn't being abused in this fashion? Do you have something that you can share with us to let us understand how these partisan comments could be approved by you, the deputy, working for all the people of Ontario?

Hon Mrs Witmer: Obviously, if you choose to use words like "partisan," that's your opinion. What we have done is communicate with the public in the province to let them understand the changes that have been made to the educational system, to give them the opportunity to communicate with us and receive additional information. If you turn to the booklet, they have an opportunity to see the plan for education. They have an opportunity to receive the parent guide as to helping your child learn to read and learn math.

Mr Kennedy: Minister, if you're going to shield your deputy and instruct her not to answer this question, that's fine, but I will move on, then, because the question was for the deputy, and obviously she needs your permission to answer. I'm not asking her to go around that. But there are guidelines. It says, for example—

Hon Mrs Witmer: Mr Chair, I take exception to that.

Mr Kennedy: Minister, then please let the deputy answer.

Hon Mrs Witmer: My deputy is quite capable of responding, and she's quite prepared—

Interjection: She was asked the question.

Mr Kennedy: I asked the question, Minister. You're just—

Interjection.

The Vice-Chair: Could we cut that noise over on that side—

Mr Kennedy: I'm happy to have the answer, Minister. Deputy?

Mr Mazzilli: No, you don't get to pick who. You can ask the minister.

Hon Mrs Witmer: I hope we can treat one another with respect in here.

Mr Kennedy: Minister, respect starts when you answer the questions I put on behalf of people. We have only a short amount of time. You intervened. I asked the deputy a question from your own guidelines. These are your guidelines that speak to partisan political. Will the deputy answer, or do I move on? Apparently not. Yes? Deputy?

Ms Herbert: Mr Kennedy, I would answer that, as Mike has already talked to you about, we have a rigorous approval process and my belief is we're following the directives.

Mr Kennedy: Deputy, do you have any outside opinion or any other evaluation—is it your considered opinion that this is not partisan political, that all of the advertising we've spoken about today has no partisan political content?

Ms Herbert: Mr Kennedy, I believe that's an inappropriate question.

Mr Kennedy: No, but—with respect, Mr Chair.

The Vice-Chair: I'm going to make a very important decision here now. I've got two more minutes of your time, Mr Kennedy.

Mr Mazzilli: On a point of order—

The Vice-Chair: Maybe I'll take your point of order tomorrow, because the fact is I've got a bell ringing. There are two more minutes, and I'm going to adjourn this sitting now until tomorrow.

The committee adjourned at 1752.

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