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E-36

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Estimates**

Ministry of Education

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42nd Parliament

Wednesday 2 June 2021

**Comité permanent des
budgets des dépenses**

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Mercredi 2 juin 2021

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Clerk: Thushitha Kobikrishna

Président : Peter Tabuns
Greffière : Thushitha Kobikrishna

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LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF ONTARIO

ASSEMBLÉE LÉGISLATIVE DE L'ONTARIO

STANDING COMMITTEE ON ESTIMATES

COMITÉ PERMANENT DES BUDGETS DES DÉPENSES

Wednesday 2 June 2021

Mercredi 2 juin 2021

The committee met at 1530 in room 151 and by video conference.

MINISTRY OF EDUCATION

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Good afternoon, everyone. Welcome back, Minister. We're going to resume consideration of vote 1001 of the estimates of the Ministry of Education.

There's now a total of seven hours and one minute remaining for the review of these estimates. When the committee adjourned yesterday, we had just finished with the official opposition's statement. The ministry will now have 30 minutes for a reply. Minister, the floor is yours.

Hon. Stephen Lecce: Okay. Well, thank you very much. I appreciate that, Chair. It's a busy day today, and good to be back—

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): I apologize. Your microphone is not—if you could just—you're soft-spoken; I wouldn't have thought that.

Hon. Stephen Lecce: Chair, that has never been said before, but—

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): No, I know. It's very odd.

Hon. Stephen Lecce: It's very odd, but I will do better. Okay. Thank you. I want to just thank the committee members for their continued participation, and the deputy minister, Nancy Naylor, for her leadership. I want to reaffirm how proud I am to acknowledge that it is a privilege to work with this team of dedicated professionals who are committed to the success and the well-being of students in this province.

Earlier, I also spoke about the many challenges that the education sector has faced as a result of this pandemic. I explained how COVID-19 has impacted an entire generation of educators, students and families, and how we've all had to adapt and overcome many new and unprecedented challenges.

From the beginning, we partnered with the Ministry of Health and the Chief Medical Officer of Health to confirm the health and safety strategies required to protect the well-being and safety of students, school boards and child care staff. We provided school boards with guidance on requirements such as masking, hand hygiene and screening, as well as other public health protocols to ensure schools remain safe. We also provided a wide array of funding to help minimize infection rates in our schools. These

supports helped school boards, especially in the hot spots, to hire more staff, to keep class sizes low and to enhance cleaning within our schools.

We focused on improving remote learning and those opportunities associated with it, and we increased mental health supports to ensure that students could continue to learn and succeed during these difficult times.

Beyond schools, we expanded emergency child care for front-line workers and helped parents facing new financial pressures by providing them with direct supports through the Ontario COVID-19 Child Benefit.

Of course, through it all, the Ministry of Education continued to work on its other initiatives and programs. These include more capital investments, such as building and upgrading schools. We also helped increase access to child care, modernized our education system and promoted equity for our most vulnerable students, among many, many other programs and initiatives. The arrival of vaccines means there is hope on the horizon, but we must remain vigilant. While, as a government, we're focused on the present, it's essential for us to also plan for the future.

In early May of this year, our government announced \$25.6 billion in public education funding in the 2021-22 school year through the Grants for Student Needs, or what will hence be known as the GSN. This is an increase of funding of \$561 million over the current school year. It is an investment into the success and well-being of our province's two million students. This historic level of support reflects the third straight year the GSN has increased under our government, and on a per capita basis, it's estimated to rise to \$12,686.

To put this funding into context: Our ministry provides the majority of Ontario's 72 district school boards and 10 school authorities' operating funding through the annual GSN, also known as the funding formula. As part of the GSN, the educational grants cover the basic costs of an educational experience that is common to all students, which is allocated based on student enrolment and the number of students. Supplemental grants address the unique needs of students, schools and school boards related to location, student and school board needs, and board demographic profiles. I am proud to say that our government is investing more in public education, more in mental health, in reading and math and special education, than the previous government.

As always, the health and well-being of students remains our priority. Since the beginning of the COVID-19

pandemic, the government has made unprecedented investments to support student mental health, including over \$80 million projected in the 2021-22 school year, which is more than four times the investment made in 2017-18.

For the 2020-21 school year, Ontario is also providing school boards with more than \$3.2 billion to support students with special education needs through the GSN, the highest investment recorded in Ontario.

Now, in addition to the Grants for Student Needs, the funding vehicle for our boards, Ontario's Priorities and Partnerships Fund, or the PPF, enables school boards and third parties to undertake important curricular and extra-curricular initiatives that advance student success. For the upcoming school year, the PPF will include more than \$288 million to fund approximately 150 initiatives. These investments will support student success in mathematics, promote positive mental health and ensure that students with special education needs get the supports that they require.

In response to the pandemic, our number one priority remains safety in the classroom. To deliver on that priority, we are dedicating more than \$1.6 billion in targeted COVID-19 resources to support school boards in delivering a safe in-person and quality remote learning experience. These resources will help further support the health and safety measures, because nothing matters more than the safety of Ontario children, and we will continue to protect school safety while investing in the long-term success of students with more support for reading, math, mental health and special education needs. Our goal is to help every school board in the province plan ahead and ensure students and educators have the resources available for a successful year.

As part of the more than \$1.6 billion we have allocated, we've allocated \$59 million in continued special education, mental health, well-being and equity supports. That is the highest ever invested. We've also allocated \$35 million in funding for student services and connectivity supports for remote learning. We've targeted \$29 million for increased costs related to school operations and \$66 million for enhanced cleaning protocols and other health and safety measures in student transportation.

Plus, we've allocated \$86 million for school-focused nurses in public health units and asymptomatic testing and \$384 million in temporary COVID-19 staffing supports. In addition, personal protective equipment and critical supplies and equipment such as cleaning supplies will continue to be provided with our partners in the Ministry of Government and Consumer Services and the government's pandemic stockpile. To allow greater flexibility, funding will be available to students to support school boards that incur in-year deficits greater than 2% over two years due to COVID-19-related costs. As you can see, these are significant resources and are comparable to the more than \$1.6 billion in resources made available for the 2020-21 school year.

Making further improvements to our schools is also key to keeping students safe. In addition to Ontario's annual investment of approximately \$1.4 billion to support the

repair and renewal of schools and \$550 million for new schools, additions and major renovations, school boards now have access to about \$656 million in combined federal-provincial funding. This funding is being provided to school boards under the COVID-19 resilience infrastructure stream of the Investing in Canada Infrastructure Program. Getting shovels in the ground on new infrastructure programs across the province will be a critical component of our path to long-term economic recovery. Not only will this investment help communities build the necessary infrastructure to keep Ontarians safe and healthy, but these projects will create hundreds of local construction jobs and support local businesses and suppliers.

In addition to our government's COVID-related supports and investment, the ongoing vaccine rollout tells us there's hope on the horizon. As you are aware, the government recognizes the importance of vaccinations for education and child care workers to support the continued health, safety and well-being of children, staff and families across the province.

1540

As Ontario continues to expand capacity and ramp up efforts under the phased rollout of the COVID-19 vaccine distribution plan, we have continued to advocate for education staff vaccinations to be accelerated. As we've confirmed today, staff within our schools, and likewise youth, will have access to two doses ahead of September, for those who want one. As you note, May 6—since that date, we have allowed remaining eligible education staff province-wide to register for vaccination appointments, which is very important as we look to September.

I'm also pleased to share that since the end of April, licensed child care workers have been eligible to register for a vaccine appointment. As well, as of May 13, child care workers in unlicensed child care settings who directly provide care for children who are not related to the provider are now eligible to book vaccination appointments.

On May 13, the Premier announced that beginning the week of May 31, which is now under way, youth in Ontario between 12 and 17 years of age province-wide and their family members who have not received a vaccine will now be eligible to book an appointment to receive their first dose of the Pfizer vaccine.

I want to thank our schools and our school boards for their collaboration with public health, working together to get as many youth and adults who want a vaccine access to the vaccine as soon as possible. This is critical as we look to a safe and stable September in schools and, to be fair, across the country, as we work towards a two-dose summer.

Providing a safe and reliable transportation service for students throughout the pandemic also remains essential. Our goal is to ensure that students can get to school safely with a caring, reliable and motivated group of school bus drivers. As such, our government is taking action to prevent future student transportation disruption, so that students can confidently get to and from schools under the

care of hard-working school bus drivers in our communities.

We have extended the four-year School Bus Driver Retention Program into the 2021-22 school year, providing eligible providers up to \$2,000 based on continuous employment during the school year. It is estimated that this \$40-million investment will benefit approximately 18,000 drivers across Ontario who provide transportation to more than 830,000 students every day.

Now, despite our best efforts, we know that COVID-19 has had a significant impact on the delivery of education in Ontario and consequently has impacted student learning, mental health and well-being. We are obviously cognizant of the increasing challenges of mental health in the province of Ontario and across the country. As reported by schools through the Ontario School Information System, we're also aware that reading and writing grades were slightly lower for young learners. There was also a decline in enrolment projections, particularly for kindergarten.

Another concern we're hearing is that students are becoming disengaged from learning as this pandemic drags on, particularly students who have been disproportionately affected by COVID-19. We recognize that this is a historic impact faced by a generation of learners and educators.

To that end, we have been working on a strategy for learning recovery and renewal to help them overcome the learning disruptions caused by the pandemic. Our government is making available \$85.5 million to help address the effects of learning disruptions as a result of COVID-19. This investment will support student mental health and well-being, as well as reading and math for young learners and student re-engagement. As part of our plan, we have partnered with School Mental Health Ontario to provide targeted professional learning opportunities for educators and mental health professionals to support student learning. Our schools will provide mental health promotion and prevention supports to all students, and offer timely clinical interventions for students who require school-based mental health services.

For our youngest learners, we are providing funding for reading assessment supports and local programs so educators can identify the learning needs of their students and support their learning and reading skills. This coming year, we will continue to invest in our \$200-million, four-year math strategy and roll that out so that boards have access to additional resources, including mathletes and coaches.

We'll also work with school boards as they develop and implement re-engagement plans. These plans will identify local solutions to meet the needs of individual students, and we will support them with targeted funding to re-engage those students.

On top of student mental health, reading and math and re-engagement supports, we're also focusing on the following areas to stimulate learning recovery and renewal: That includes special education supports, targeted French-language supports, supporting educator readiness and summer learning.

To support students of all ages in mitigating learning loss, fostering learning recovery and supporting mental

health and well-being, we're asking school boards to expand existing summer school credit and non-credit programming. Delivery will take place through multiple delivery modes, including in-person, with local medical officer of health support; remote teacher-led learning; on-line learning; and through correspondence and self-study.

Over the last two years, we have seen the extraordinary steps and flexibility school boards have shown to support learning for Ontario students. I want to express my appreciation to Ontario teachers and education workers, school board administrators and the trustees for their leadership and innovation in ensuring continued learning for students. As always, we will continue to work closely with the sector to help ensure that the safety and well-being and academic success of students remain front and centre.

Moments ago, I mentioned online learning. Connectivity is critical for students and teachers. That's why Ontario is investing \$40 million in new funding over two years to improve online and remote learning technology. This investment will help improve present and future connectivity within school buildings, and it will provide innovative tools and resources to help ensure that students and teachers can participate in remote and online learning in response to COVID-19.

Yes, we want children to be learning inside Ontario schools and we know how critical this is to mental health and to well-being. But parents deserve a choice next September as we continue to face uncertainty as a consequence of this global pandemic. For example, young learners, especially those who may be immunocompromised, deserve to have an option to continue to learn at home and not be forced into a situation that may be unsafe for them.

We have provided every board in Ontario with direction to provide that choice of in-person learning or a publicly funded virtual learning experience for the 2021-22 school year. Amid the uncertainty of a global pandemic, we just believe parents deserve that choice. We strongly believe in a parent's right to make the determination for their child and their families. As such, we have also asked that parents receive more time to decide, especially as we look to September.

Helping parents during these difficult times remains a priority, as is providing them with improved access to early years in child care. Obviously, the COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on children and families across the province. It has demonstrated the important role the child care system plays in providing high-quality and safe environments for children and helping parents, particularly women, as we look forward to our recovery.

Our current agreement with the federal government, which helps us provide families with accessible and affordable child care, has expired. For the time being, we see the Canada-Ontario Early Learning and Child Care Agreement as only the start of discussions with the federal government on how to provide working families with affordable, safe and flexible child care. As such, we await

more details from the federal government regarding their program that they've announced on the national child care plan.

Since I became Minister of Education, I've been committed to promoting equity and driving real, transformational change in our public education system so that all students have the opportunity to succeed and reach their full potential. All students can succeed, and all students should have the opportunity to succeed. That's why Ontario is committed to breaking down the barriers that disproportionately impact Indigenous, Black and other racialized and vulnerable students to help them reach their full potential.

In June 2020, we announced our equity and inclusion action plan. We remain committed to raising the standards of all Ontario students, from early years to graduation. A key element of the plan includes investing \$6.45 million, part of the safe restart of class agreement, in funding to support a wide range of equity initiatives, such as those supporting Black, First Nation, Métis and Inuit students. For example, we're providing a public accountability tool for school boards to report to communities and the ministry on the concrete actions taken to promote success and opportunities for these students.

1550

One of the most important elements of our equity action plan is the development of a multi-year plan to end early streaming as part of how we're building a more equitable public education system. Streaming and similar policies have had a consistent adverse impact on students who have been historically disadvantaged. Beginning with de-streaming of grade 9 math for the 2021-22 school year, ending early streaming will help create the conditions of all students to be successful, to be prepared for the senior program in secondary school and to pursue any post-secondary pathway that they choose. Data shows us that students streamed in applied courses feel less engaged at school and are more than four times more likely to not graduate, and less likely to pursue post-secondary education compared with their counterparts in academic courses.

We have some groups of students, including Black, Indigenous and racialized students, students living in low-income households and students with disabilities and special-education needs who have been disproportionately enrolled in applied courses. The applied stream may limit student success and access to some senior programs in secondary schools and to some post-secondary education pathways themselves.

For example, university programs and some high-demand apprenticeship training in college programs have prerequisites that include academic level math. By ending early streaming, we're able to provide students with more time to further explore options for their future. Destreaming the grade 9 math curriculum is the first step towards further destreaming in other subjects, which will better support all students in having every opportunity to pursue the pathway of their choice after their K-to-12 education.

As you can see, our shared goal continues to be building an education system that is safer and more inclusive and

promotes the well-being and the success of every student in Ontario.

In a similar vein of protecting vulnerable students, we're working with the education sector and partners to help combat sex trafficking through a policy framework. It is the first of its kind in Canada. The Ministry of Education's commitments to a policy framework is a key piece that supports Ontario's overall anti-human trafficking strategy. We're creating a strong foundation for Ontario's public school system to take a lead role in protecting school-aged children from the lifelong harm that would result from being lured into sex trafficking.

We know that awareness is the first line of defence. It's why we're taking action to help with early intervention and support for survivors of human trafficking. The goal is to help prevent, identify and recognize sex trafficking and develop responses that facilitate early and appropriate intervention.

Our ministry is consulting with victims of sex trafficking, experts from the policing and education sides, child welfare organizations, community-based organizations and Indigenous partners to help inform the new policy framework. School boards will require resources and adequate time for both training and implementation. We hope to provide more details of that in the near future.

We've also been working on a concrete strategy to help deal with the shortage of French-language educators. There are more than one million students currently enrolled in French-as-a-second-language programs in the English-language school system and more than 250,000 students enrolled in the French immersion program. Plus, there are more than 111,000 students enrolled in French-language schools this year. However, in some parts of Ontario, growth in student enrolment, combined with attrition, has resulted in a shortage of teachers for both the English and, most especially, the French-language education system.

Last year, our government introduced and announced its plan to help recruit and retain more French-speaking teachers and ensure that students are receiving high-quality French-language education in the province. Earlier this year, the French Language Working Group submitted a report which includes recommendations for further steps the government could take to reduce and eventually eliminate this major issue.

Since then, we have worked in partnership with the Ministry of Colleges and Universities and the Ministry of Francophone Affairs to develop a comprehensive strategy with concrete action to counter the problems of teacher shortages, a challenge that has manifested in Ontario for over a decade and is a national-in-scope reality. The goal is to develop a multi-pronged approach to enhance Ontario's education system and ensure the success of students in French-language schools and French-as-a-second-language programs within the province.

Obviously, our continued focus, in the context of the school year, is ensuring that we continue to provide supports directly for our schools, for our resources, for learning recovery and to enable school boards to have the

funding they need to support those children that are most at risk. I just want to note, as we emphasize the \$2 billion in additional resources that have been announced and are available for school boards in the coming year, \$1.6 billion of that is COVID resources; \$85 million is targeted for learning recovery, realizing that that is and remains a challenge that we need to contend with now and well into the future; and a \$561-million increase in the Grants for Student Needs, which will now rise to \$25.6 billion, which is the highest level the GSN has been in Ontario history. This plan includes a historic investment in mental health, in special education, in reading and math supports and recovery to support and to respond to this generational challenge.

Since the beginning, we have made unprecedented investments in student mental health. I'd argue it's more important than ever after a year of disruption and isolation. This pandemic has created many challenges for so many kids. For the 2021-22 school year, for example, as a demonstration of that commitment, over \$80 million is projected, which is more than four times the investments, as I noted, in 2017-18.

There are also more supports for children with special education. I think that's really important that their families know that special education funding will increase, and so will our supports.

Hope is on the horizon with increasing access to vaccines, including for all education and child care staff and for all students 12 and up. For anyone who wants one, they will get access to two doses before September. That has been our plan. While the intent is to ensure that students have as normal of a school year as possible, with extracurriculars and sports, we know it's critical to be prepared for all scenarios and to invest accordingly so that we can respond to whatever path this pandemic takes. That is our commitment. It's why we have provided \$1.6 billion in entirely provincial funding for the hiring of more staff, of PPE, of additional resources for remote learning technology, and support of course, as noted, for student mental health. That includes ensuring that all families in September retain the option of in-class and online learning. I think that is critical, given the unknown that we face.

In July, the Chief Medical Officer of Health will provide updated and final guidance on school safety and on the protocols, the reopening protocols, based on that health landscape. However, be assured, Ontario is ready. We have put in place a \$1.6-billion plan of supports specifically for COVID-19.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): You have two minutes left, Minister.

Hon. Stephen Lecce: Understood.

I want to conclude, again just noting that our parents in this province have shouldered so much of the responsibility—it has been very difficult on them—and to express gratitude for their incredible resolve to support their children, to wear many hats and to be committed to the learning and the mental health of their child.

I would like to thank our school boards and the staff that work within our schools for their dedication, working

to overcome challenges that have arisen at home and abroad, and our child care workers and our ECEs, who have worked tirelessly to keep our kids safe and support families throughout this pandemic, truly working tirelessly right from the beginning of the first wave and throughout. We are so grateful to them for doing that for parents and for so many in our society.

Today, I've outlined solutions to the many challenges we're facing. I've also outlined how we're modernizing our education system to help lead students and our system in the future. With all that in mind, I'm confident that we're preparing the next generation of students, of leaders, of innovators who will help guide our province as we navigate the coming decade, and I'm confident that we're building a strong education system for a prosperous tomorrow.

Thank you.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Thank you very much, Minister.

Before we go to the official opposition, I have two MPPs that I have to confirm identity and location for. MPP Stiles, will you confirm your identity and the fact that you're in Ontario?

Ms. Marit Stiles: Good afternoon, Mr. Chair. Yes, this is MPP Stiles and I am joining you from Toronto.

1600

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Thank you so much. MPP Armstrong, please confirm your identity and your location in Ontario.

Ms. Teresa J. Armstrong: Good afternoon, everyone. MPP Armstrong. My location is London, Ontario.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): All right. With that, we go to the official opposition—I assume MPP Stiles? Please confirm.

Ms. Marit Stiles: That's correct. Thank you, Mr. Chair. I want to start by thanking the minister for coming back here again today, and the deputy minister and all the other staff who are there to support him.

I have to say that when I entered this committee today, I felt a little bit like I was entering an alternate universe, listening to the minister speak like today didn't happen at all, like the announcement didn't happen just a few hours ago that broke the hearts, I would say, of two million students in this province. I can say that—I know the minister didn't want to share the news with us yesterday, but parents, education workers and students have finally been given an answer from this government that schools will not be reopening this year.

I want to acknowledge how frustrating and deeply disappointing this is for all the students and their families and for the education workers who I know are also really missing their students and their colleagues. We are now the only province where schools remain closed. We've been closed more weeks than any other province in this country. I know the Premier likes to talk about population numbers and stuff, but I don't think it's quite as simple as that. I think we all know it didn't have to be this way. If the Premier had listened to experts, this third wave could have been a lot less devastating than it has been. Indeed,

Mr. Chair, I think if this minister had listened to experts and the experts in education—that's the workers themselves, the school boards—we could have perhaps protected a few precious weeks of normalcy for our kids.

Minister, I heard you talking about providing choice to parents. I know we've got this great plan to expand this permanent online learning situation, and I gather that's what you think your legacy is going to be. Well, let me tell you this: This is a disaster of your making, of your government's making. This has not left parents with a choice. There are too many people who do not have choices out there. You talk about equity, but this situation has greatly, deeply increased inequities. The only people who seem to have had a choice here were yourself and the Premier, so it's on you.

Now, looking back, I want to start some questions, and I'm going to go back a little bit because this does impact directly the spending estimates that the province has provided for the Ministry of Education, which I think we would argue are unrealistic, to say the least. After the second wave, the schools were reopened. You claimed there were enhanced measures in place to protect students and staff and prevent more of these disruptive school closures. You said it over and over again. But despite that, I've heard from countless education workers and parents, and we've seen the evidence, that class sizes were as big as ever and that there was no noticeable change in protective measures.

We know there was no significant new investment. We know what happened next because cases went up exponentially. Classes closed, then whole schools, then all schools. So my question is, what specific measures did your government put in place—and I mean new ones—from April 12 to today to ensure that schools could reopen safely this term?

Hon. Stephen Lecce: Thank you. First off, we announced \$381 million in additional funding through the Safe Restart Agreement on February 1, 2021. That is not an insignificant investment. In addition, we had the ICIP, the Investing in Canada Infrastructure Program, announcement in the winter of 2021, about \$650 million. While it was announced, as you will know, late into 2020, the actual program—when the feds finally reviewed the submissions we provided them a few weeks after we received them in December, they then sent them back. We announced that with programs well under way to improve air ventilation, building upon the investments we made both in the summer of 2020 and again in the fall of 2020, that was going to specifically support staffing, to be fair, in addition to additional provision of supports for transportation as well as the continuation of all the interventions we've put in place.

I think I will, if I may, just turn to the deputy, who will have a bit more—

Ms. Marit Stiles: Minister, if I may, what I really want are, as I said, specific measures, not announcements in February and re-announcements. I want to know what specific measures. Perhaps I can be a little bit more specific to help you along here.

One of the key reasons why schools would be kept closed, according to the Premier both in his letter last week and his announcement today, were vaccination rates for both students and staff. I want to know if you could provide us with a number now, today, current. How many teachers and education workers have received their first dose of the vaccine?

Hon. Stephen Lecce: The Premier did note we aimed to increase vaccination rates over the summer to maximize the safety of schools. We've been very clear and consistent that while schools have been safe, our aim is to ensure, with vaccine rates rising, we can make the environments within them even safer. That's why we've opened up. We were one of the first provinces to prioritize education staff, starting April 12, and of course, as you know, effective May 6, all staff were eligible.

To date, roughly 42.2% of education workers have received the first dose. And I will note, on May 23, youth between the age of 12 and 17 were eligible to book a vaccine. This is good. We moved quickly with a commitment to a double dose. The percentage of youth aged 12 to 17 receiving their first dose is just around 24%.

Ms. Marit Stiles: Okay, thank you. Now, I know when the Premier announced, it was 41%, so I'm assuming it's gone up a percentage point or something since the letter last week. That's significantly less than the general population. We're at, what, 62%, 64% now. Why is it so much less? Why do we only have 42.2% if they're supposed to be prioritized?

Hon. Stephen Lecce: Well, we were one of the first provinces to open up eligibility to workers. I couldn't speak for why that's the case. They had access to apply like the general population, many of which—until the date we opened up for all education workers of the province, 80% were already eligible by their age bracket. So I can't speak to why there's that delta there, member. I appreciate it is lower than the provincial average and the general population—

Ms. Marit Stiles: By quite a bit. Considering that we're here in this situation we're in now, it seems like a marked failure.

I also want to ask you, how many have received their second dose to date?

Hon. Stephen Lecce: I'm not sure, Deputy, if you would have that data. I know that we have 42% of first doses and I also know that we're one of the first provinces to open vaccines. So I think the question would need to be asked, respectfully, to our partners in both unions or school boards. I know that they're encouraging vaccines to be received for those who want one—

Ms. Marit Stiles: Well, Minister, I expect the ministry to know this. You can't ask them to cover all of that. You must have a number. So I'll ask you to please come to the next meeting of the estimates committee with that information if possible, please.

I'm going to ask you another question, moving forward a little bit. I'm going to move on from vaccinations. I know we touched on this yesterday, but according to some confidential data that was obtained by the Toronto Star,

elementary schools were the biggest source of COVID-19 outbreaks over 30 days ending April 20, with 365—ahead of workplaces, which were at about 338, and child care centres at about 174. Despite this, you were in the House repeatedly telling us that schools were safe—in fact, you said it again today—and that your plan was working to keep them open.

Minister, I need to know, did anybody in the ministry alert you to these numbers—and if they didn't, why not—or to the fact that these so-called enhanced measures that you claim were put in place were not going to be enough?

Hon. Stephen Lecce: Well, we enhanced the screening of kids. When you asked the question of the enhanced protocols, there was an active screening requirement, an enhancement of screening of children, daily screening, as well as starting the testing program province-wide—

Ms. Marit Stiles: Minister, are you referring to the—I just want to be clear I understand. You're referring to the 50,000-a-week commitment that you made? As far as I know, we were not even getting to 8,000 a week even at the highest number.

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Hon. Stephen Lecce: We spoke about a 50,000 asymptomatic capacity provided to school boards on a weekly basis.

Ms. Marit Stiles: No, that was your target.

Hon. Stephen Lecce: No, the target was 5% of schools per week, representing 2% of children, which we reached. In fact, some school boards exceeded that target.

But you asked a question about how I can make a comment on school safety, and I want to point back to the position of the Chief Medical Officer of Health, whose responsibility as an independent officer is to provide advice to the public and to the cabinet and perspective on safety and risk. He said in October, reaffirmed in November by the Associate Medical Officer of Health of this province and confirmed by a multitude of medical officers of health from Toronto to London and Ottawa and in between—confirming that our school system has been safe.

We have also noted that schools reflect community. When community transmission rises, we have taken the action—

Ms. Marit Stiles: Minister, those same people are talking about that today. I don't understand what has changed. I think we're being led to believe that there's suddenly—that it was safe then, but it's not safe now. You guys can't mention Dr. Williams enough times, which I think must coincide with the fact that he's moving on or something; I'm not really sure. I can tell you're not going to answer this question, so—

Hon. Stephen Lecce: Well, I'm trying to, member. I just think you—

Ms. Marit Stiles: What I would really like to know, Minister, is—for a year now, you've said that schools are safe. No matter how many cases, no matter the evidence, you have been unwavering in your message that schools are safe, even after they closed. Today, you and the Premier said that schools are serious risks, that opening

them would see thousands of new cases, that parents would be infected by their kids and that variants are out of control.

Minister, are schools safe, yes or no?

Hon. Stephen Lecce: The government's position has been informed by the Chief Medical Officer of Health, who has said consistently, from September to the present—including last week, where he said that the school system in this province has been safe: low rates of transmission, overwhelmingly cases from the community into the schools. That is his position. It's the position of the medical officers of health where you and I live and of many others in the province of Ontario who have said that the protocols have worked. That can be true while also acknowledging the necessity for caution on the way forward to ensure that we're able to reopen schools in September with a higher rate of vaccination.

The variants—it's a very different world we live in. They're more transmissible. I believe Dr. Loh said today that the variant that originated in India could become the dominant strain by the end of the month. Both elements are fundamentally true. We believe schools have been safe because the doctors have said so, the medical officers of health and the Chief Medical Officer of Health have said so. In fact, this is what he said, going back to October: "As far as schools are concerned, as Dr. Brown alluded to, we haven't seen the evidence of a lot of transmission within the schools. We have had evidence of a lot of people coming from the community into the school already affected."

Dr. de Villa said on December 14, "COVID-19 in schools is reflective of the rise in infections in the community"—

Ms. Marit Stiles: But Minister, I just want to go back, because you keep saying this over and over again, but here we are today. Schools are not opening. The government batted this around again for another week or two, leading parents and education workers and—I tell you, most heartbreakingly—students along on this ride: Will they? Won't they? And here we are, and they won't be. It's a really heartbreaking day. I've got to tell you, I'm getting emails from students. I'm getting emails from parents and calls from parents, saying, "My child is in tears again." This is cruel.

Okay, I'm going back to some funding questions. Minister, you always talk about historic levels of funding, but in schools, those investments are not being seen. Analysis by economists—I'll give you one example of many: Ricardo Tranjan at the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives. We and others have been crunching the numbers for month after month after month, and they show that on average all of the funding that you and the feds have provided to all of Ontario's 72 school boards added the equivalent of just one and a half staff per school. That includes everything: caretakers, educational assistants, ECEs, guidance—everything. And all of that was just the icing you put on the cake, apparently, to deal with all the pressures from those in-school closures: the online learning, the preventive health measures, the additional mental health challenges you talk about, the growing learning

gaps. Does that seem adequate to you—one and a half new staff per school?

Hon. Stephen Lecce: What I do know is that 7,000 additional staff were hired after you had noted that there had been no staff increases; 7,000 staff were hired this year to support schools and 1,400 additional custodians for cleaning. These types of investments have made a difference, and I know that our school boards benefited from them. But I think specifically on the funding allocations, I'd like to turn to ADM Andrew Davis for further information on this.

Mr. Andrew Davis: Thank you, Minister. My name is Andrew Davis. I'm the assistant deputy minister of the education, labour and finance division.

As the minister has said, we did provide \$1.6 billion in investments to school boards for the current school year, of which a considerable amount of these resources has gone into staffing. In 2021, over \$300 million went to specific supports for staffing, and that supports over 7,340 positions that were put in place to support school boards' efforts to ensure that they had the staffing to keep students and staff safe during the pandemic. This included additional teachers, over 4,100 additional teachers; ECEs—ECEs are the ones that work in JK and SK classes, junior and senior kindergarten—436 additional early education workers; mental health support workers that were put in place, an additional 310 workers in that regard; and custodians also. For custodians, we saw over 1,680 custodians that were put in place to support the schools—

Ms. Marit Stiles: My apologies, Mr. Davis. I really do appreciate the reiteration of the numbers per or whatever, but I mean, we've done the math, too. If you average it out over the 72 boards, it's one and a half new staff in total per school. My question to the minister was very simply, is that enough? Is that adequate in the situation we are in?

I would also argue that we lost staff. We lost a lot of staff: people away sick, people away because they were dealing with stress. It's been pretty awful for a lot of people out there.

Anyways, I appreciate your time. I do want to get to one more question, if possible, before I lose my time here.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): You have two minutes left.

Ms. Marit Stiles: Okay. I'm just going to try to get this one out here very quickly. There was some more analysis done by the CCPA, and it was backed up by school board financial data, that showed that of the almost \$655 million used to hire additional staffing, 46%, or \$304 million, came from the boards themselves. You'll know this. They were forced to deplete their reserves to make up the necessary funding. The remaining 54% came from government, but at least \$119 million of that was federal funding. It is consistent with the overall COVID-19 funding that shows that the lion's share—94%—was actually federal dollars. Why did the province play such a junior role in this? Why was the share your government put up for safe schools the smallest portion?

Hon. Stephen Lecce: I'd like to defer back to Andrew Davis, the ADM, who will be able to provide context on the funding allocations.

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Mr. Andrew Davis: Thank you, Minister. First I guess I'd like to address the question in regard to reserves. It's important in responding that we have an understanding of what reserves actually are. School boards receive about 90% of their funding from the province. Reserves are actually funding from the province that a school board didn't spend in a prior year—

Ms. Marit Stiles: Oh, but that's a bit of a stretch, Mr. Davis. We know that they put aside those dollars as well to fund things that the government refuses to fund, right? That's what that is. That's money that's allocated for things the government may not prioritize but that school boards know is important, like dealing with some of the gaps among some students who have certain needs, versus others. This is what those funds are used for.

Mr. Andrew Davis: So in—

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): I'm sorry to say, with that, the opposition's turn is up. We go now to the government. Who will be leading the government? Mr. Barrett, will you be speaking for the government in this round?

Mr. Toby Barrett: I could, Chair. I think one of my colleagues was preceding me. Is there someone else who was jumping ahead?

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): I'm happy to have another person, but you're the only one I have on screen.

Mr. Toby Barrett: No, I'll be glad to jump in. Thank you, Chair.

A big thank you to Minister Lecce. I've learned a great deal today, and it is valuable, on a committee like this, to be able to garner the kind of detail that you don't necessarily get in the media.

The issue I would like to raise for discussion is special education. As we know, providing opportunities in our education system for students with special needs is challenging. It's obviously challenging for the young people themselves and challenging for their families. We as elected representatives, certainly in my experience, have spent quite a bit of time speaking with families of young people with some of the problems that they have to deal with, a lot of it not necessarily within the schools themselves, but just obviously the kind of help they need.

My question to the minister and, of course, to some of the experts on staff is, first of all, what kinds of problems are we seeing in our school system? It goes without saying that is—

Interruption.

Mr. Toby Barrett: I have a dog here. It doesn't bark, but somebody has given it a squeaky toy. Just give me a second.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Yes, okay. Squeaky toy: the first time in this Legislative Assembly.

Mr. Toby Barrett: As some will know, I live on a farm. I have three guinea hens in the spare bedroom, but they're young enough that they're not squawking.

It's important to know what kinds of challenges, what kinds of problems we're seeing in the school system with respect to young people who have special needs. In particular, given the onset of this infectious disease over the

past year or so, it requires students to distance and requires students to isolate as much as possible. It is a risk. Of course, we have to balance the risk and the benefit whether to have our schools open or to have our schools closed, and how that affects the rest of us who maybe aren't in those schools or are trying to open up businesses.

I wonder if the minister could summarize a bit for this committee just what Ontario's Ministry of Education has been doing to accommodate those who, through no fault of their own, have these special needs. We're a rich society. We look after people like this where required, where they need that kind of extra help.

Thank you, Chair.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Thank you.

Hon. Stephen Lecce: Thank you for the question. To the member: I think there are a few thoughts I'd note. The first is, the overall funding envelope for special education has increased to \$3.2 billion, as a proof positive that this is an area of priority. It increased last year to the highest amount, and it has done so this year.

We understand that for children with intellectual and developmental disability, the pandemic could have a disproportionate impact on them. I feel so much for the parents who have shouldered so much responsibility over the past year, wearing so many hats.

But that's actually why we fought to ensure—and I will say this respectfully: The members opposite in the Legislature opposed getting kids in special ed back into schools in January 2021. When we had to close schools, as you will recall, as a consequence not of issues related to the schools, but as a consequence of a spike of positivity in the community over the Christmas holiday, we made the decision, decisively, to not put at risk our kids and staff and families, closing them until those numbers came down, and then we reopened them.

But the constant through January and including today, notwithstanding the decision made, is that for special education—the most exceptional, the most vulnerable—that those kids were provided with in-class supports: access to the therapy and the educators and the EAs that they deserve, that their parents deserve to have the government support. I'm very proud that we have done that. We have created that provision for the most vulnerable, and that compassionate lens was critical.

I also note that there has been a benchmarking increase throughout the Special Education Grant, which is consistent with the broader GSN increase. There is continued support for the special equipment amount for school boards, for purchasing relevant equipment to support these kids; as well, the increase in the maximum individual special incidence portion claim funding.

Again, all of this is designed to give boards more latitude, because overall, we're seeing a growth of over \$68 million for next year, over 2020-21, and a significant portion, \$1.6 billion alone, is going—the way our funding works, the per-pupil amount for special education: School boards get those funds up front, and they're able to use them for the benefit of these kids.

We have also allocated money in our Summer Learning Program, not losing sight of the importance of those children continuing to learn, to have access to learning virtually or in class, if permitted by the local public health unit. There is an \$8-million allocation within our Summer Learning Program specifically targeted to special ed kids. There is additional funding set aside for reading intervention programs in the summer and mental health supports, which have been annualized. We've put \$9 million to ensure that those programs, those services, that therapy continues between June and September, so that a child and their parents don't have to go from a school-based mental health worker or social worker to a community one and then back to school. That disruption is not really healthy for the child. So we've made that a real priority and we're going to continue to do so throughout the coming year.

Mr. Toby Barrett: You know, Minister, when I look at the estimates—and you mentioned that \$3.21-billion figure for the 2021-22 year, with an increase. I think you mentioned a 2.2% increase. But I see a number of other programs—additional funding for special education. There's priorities and partnership, learning and recovery. I wonder, could we dig a little deeper into—I see at least four listed here in the estimates and some other information, financial information. I wonder, could I ask you or perhaps staff to dig a little deeper into the dollar side of that and maybe explain just what are some of these other funding programs or plans? I'm assuming, probably, a large proportion of this funding goes for employee compensation, salaries and other benefits; but I wonder if I could get a bit more information on the money side.

Hon. Stephen Lecce: Sure. ADM Andrew Davis and Shannon Fuller are well positioned to speak a bit more about where those dollars are landing and supporting those specific kids.

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Mr. Andrew Davis: Thank you, Minister. Education funding has been increasing for the third straight year. As the minister noted, it is the highest level in Ontario's history, at \$25.6 billion to the Grants for Student Needs, or the GSN. There is also over \$288 million provided through the Priorities and Partnerships Fund, the PPF, which my colleague will speak to.

Overall, the GSN is increasing by \$561 million over the prior year, 2020-21. Per-student funding is also increasing to a record of \$12,686 on average per student. This delivers the commitment to support mental health, well-being and the success of students. The majority of the operating funding that the Ontario government provides for the 72 district school boards and the 10 school authorities is through the annual GSN. For 2021-22, as I said, Ontario will be providing a total of \$25.6 billion.

The GSN itself is a collection of 17 different grants. Funding allocations for school boards can be generated on a per-pupil basis, a per-school, a per-board, among others, depending on the structure of the actual grant within the GSN regulations. Approximately two thirds of this funding in the GSN is enrolment-based, meaning that changes in enrolment directly affect funding. While provincial enrolment is increasing overall, some school boards may

see funding changes resulting from declining enrolment in their schools.

There are two major components in the GSN. These make up the foundation grants and the supplemental grants. The foundation grants cover the basic costs of educational experience. It is common to all students, which is allocated based off of student enrolment, the number of schools and a variety of other factors.

The largest grant, the Pupil Foundation Grant, is \$11.4 billion, an increase by \$216 million year over year. This funding provides supports for classroom staffing; educational assistants; library services; guidance services, including supports for students in career counselling, student mental health and well-being; professional and para-professional supports; classroom teacher consultants; textbooks and learning materials; additional educational software licensing; classroom supplies; classroom computers; student technological devices.

The other foundation grant is the School Foundation Grant. That is \$1.5—almost \$1.6—billion, which increased by \$16.5 million over the prior year. This provides in-school administration leadership, library staff and parent engagement.

As I had mentioned previously, there is also a series of supplemental grants. These total \$12.56 billion, which addresses the unique needs of students and school boards related to location, student needs and the board demographic profiles; for example, as we already talked about, the Special Education Grant, which is \$3.2 billion. There's the Language Grant, which is just over \$900 million. That's an increase of \$63 million year over year. There's the Indigenous Education Grant. This was \$97 million. There's the Geographic Circumstances Grant. This was \$216 million. There's the Learning Opportunities Grant. This was \$550 million, an increase of \$53 million year over year. There's the Mental Health and Well-Being Grant. This was just over \$86 million, for an increase of \$11 million year over year. There are supports for continuing education. This was \$166 million. There is the Teacher Qualifications and Experience Grant. This covers the movement through salary grids. This is \$2.4 billion, or an increase of \$124 million. As you mentioned, a considerable amount of our funding goes to compensation.

Mr. Toby Barrett: Just to clarify, Chair: These various grants—again, this all, one way or another, focuses on the students with special needs? I just wanted to clarify that.

Mr. Andrew Davis: This funding is not specific to just special education students. This is the overall funding and grants and supports that go to support all two million of our students, which totals \$25.6 billion.

In addition to the GSN, there is also the funding under the Priorities and Partnerships Fund, which I can turn over to my colleague to speak more about.

Ms. Shannon Fuller: Thanks very much, Andrew. Hello, everyone. My name is Shannon Fuller. I'm the assistant deputy minister of strategic policy and planning at the Ministry of Education.

As Andrew indicated, another key element of ministry funding that supports students with special education

needs, but also students across the entire system, is the Priorities and Partnerships Fund. The PPF, as we refer to it, really focuses here on high-impact initiatives that directly support students in the classroom.

For the upcoming school year, the PPF will include over \$288 million to fund approximately 150 projects and initiatives that support student success, with a focus on one or more of the following priorities—and we really put a focus for the upcoming year on Indigenous education, French-language education, math, mental health and well-being, special education, student pathways, supporting student potential, system support and efficiencies as well as engaging parents and communities.

Those are some of the key elements that really form the PPF for the year ahead. Specifically, as part of an example, some of the funding is provided to support children and youth with special education needs and their families, and that support is provided through the school boards through the PPF funding line as well. Thank you.

Mr. Toby Barrett: If I could, Minister—and I really appreciate a bit of an explanation of these funding programs available to school boards—what is the relationship with the Ministry of Education with respect to W. Ross Macdonald School for the Blind, the Robarts School for the Deaf and other schools? I can't remember; are they directly under this ministry? Could we just get a bit of a thumbnail sketch of how some of these institutions are doing, these residential learning facilities?

Hon. Stephen Lecce: It's a wonderful question. We do have demonstration schools in the province which we are responsible for. They make a real difference to the lives of these young people. I've visited them—Drury in Milton. I visited demonstration schools with Minister Smith in Prince Edward county—

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Two minutes left.

Hon. Stephen Lecce: —and the intention is to get down to London and visit others.

The bottom line is, they make a difference. We have funded them, supported them, and in fact allowed a double cohort of children this year to make sure that we provide as much access to the provincial school program as possible.

Claudine Munroe, our ADM, works closely with them, ensuring that they remain safe and the children remain engaged in learning, so I would like to turn it over to ADM Munroe to build upon that work and more so about the efforts we've made to keep them safe.

Ms. Claudine Monroe: Hi, my name is Claudine Monroe. I'm the assistant deputy minister of the student support and field services division.

We're really proud of the provincial and demonstration schools and the services that they provide across four different sites in the province: Belleville, Brantford, London and Milton. The provincial and demonstration schools provide individualized education programs to students who are deaf/hard of hearing and blind/low vision, and deafblind students and students with severe learning disabilities in reading. Over the course of this school year, we've continued to provide supports even during the

COVID-19 pandemic to students in person, while that was permissible, and remotely, with the help of the fabulous staff at the provincial and demonstration schools in the province.

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In addition, the provincial and demonstration schools also provide a resource services program that serves children of preschool age who are deaf/hard of hearing, blind/low vision and students who are also deafblind and their families. Over the course of the pandemic, we've also continued to provide alternate education resources. We have an alternate educational resources Ontario department that develops and provides learning materials and media in accessible formats in both English and French for elementary, secondary and post-secondary students with perceptual disabilities.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): I'm sorry to say, with that, we're out of time, and we go to the opposition.

MPP Stiles.

Ms. Marit Stiles: I'm going to return to some questions to the minister again. Where was I? Actually, it's been an interesting day, in addition to the very unfortunate news—I keep getting more and more emails and texts from parents saying their kids are in tears. It's a really awful day, I'm just going to say. It's been a really bad day today for Ontario.

Anyway, in addition to all of that, a new report was released today, just this afternoon, on the disruptive impacts of COVID-19 on education. This was a report that was actually commissioned by the science advisory table. In it, the authors—all of them are international educational experts, people who the government should be listening to—have noted the very far-reaching impact of disruption and how that's going to necessitate explicit educational recovery strategies.

They actually say that two key strategies would have the most impact on minimizing the impact of COVID-19-related disruption: The first one, which is “a strong priority” and has been “expressed by numerous medical officers of health,” is “on keeping schools open wherever circumstances allow—a ‘last closed, first open’ policy.” The government has made clear they won't be following that recommendation today, sadly. The second is that “there is a need for an explicit education recovery” strategy “to be funded in addition to regular schooling budgets.”

Now, Minister, according to the Financial Accountability Officer, an independent body, the ministry is projected to spend \$33 billion in 2021-22, which is down \$0.8 billion, or 2.3%, from 2020-21. I'm wondering if you could explain to the people of this province—you failed on the first point. How will spending \$800 million less on education this year, as the independent Financial Accountability Office has revealed, help ensure the kind of education recovery strategies that these experts are saying are absolutely critical to a whole generation of students' success?

Hon. Stephen Lecce: Thank you for the question. I do note that the opposition party's position on school opening in 2021 was to keep them closed, so long as the—

Ms. Marit Stiles: That's nonsense.

Hon. Stephen Lecce:—are in place—

Ms. Marit Stiles: Minister, guess what? That's nonsense. That's nonsense and you know it is, Minister. No, no, I will say—

Hon. Stephen Lecce: That is the stated position of the—

Ms. Marit Stiles: I will call you out there: That's absolute hogwash. I have said to you over and over and over in the Legislature, as has our leader, Andrea Horwath, that you need to reopen schools safely. I was pushing you from the first meeting we ever had. I'm not going to let you away with that sort of inaccuracy, Minister.

Answer my question: Why are you cutting spending—\$800 million—when our children need you to be investing in their success?

Hon. Stephen Lecce: The cumulative impact of those closures would have been most perverse and most regrettable, which is why we fought hard to keep them open in 2021, including for special education children—

Ms. Marit Stiles: You failed.

Hon. Stephen Lecce: —in the province of Ontario. As a consequence of the investments in place, we have one of the lowest case rates for youth under 20 in the nation.

In the context of the FAO report, specifically, I'd like to turn it to Andrew Davis, the ADM, who will be able to speak specifically on those details.

Mr. Andrew Davis: Thank you, Minister. Again, for the record, my name is Andrew Davis, the assistant deputy minister of the education, labour and finance division.

In regard to the FAO report that you're pointing to, the ministry's base allocation, year over year, is actually up \$700 million. This is reflecting the Grants for Student Needs announcement, which is up, year over year, by \$561 million. That is on a school-year basis. As well, our numbers reflect the announcements made for COVID supports funding, which is in addition to the GSN, most of it is, of \$1.6 billion—\$100 million of that was included in the GSN, but the rest of that is outside of those amounts.

If you look at the FAO report, it's including, in 2021, one-time initiatives that are part of the overall total education budget. If you actually remove these one-time initiatives into 2021, such as the COVID child benefit, the Support for Learners and families—removing these one-time initiatives is how you get to an increase year over year—

Ms. Marit Stiles: If I may, Mr. Davis, though, just the GSN alone, we're talking about increases which—when you talk about the Ministry of Education, it's like the second-biggest item in the budget for the province. It's massive, just generally.

When you start talking about these numbers, it starts to sound like, oh, that's a significant thing. But what you're really doing, even if you take out some of the one-time funding, is you're flat-lining spending at a time when we should be increasing investment—at least that's what the experts are here saying to us. They're saying, “This is the time. This is when you invest.”

In fact, this government—and I just mentioned this earlier, a lot of money that we're talking about, the one—

time investment, wasn't even provincial; it came from the feds and it came from school board reserves, which you and I might differ on the perception of what that money is or how it should be spent. But it's coming out of somewhere. It's coming out of our schools. In fact, we're not keeping up here with cost-of-living increases. We're not keeping up with inflation.

School boards, just like anything else, are dealing with an increase to the cost of supplies and stuff that everybody else is dealing with. So when you flatline spending, you're really cutting. I think that's a point that the FAO makes quite profoundly throughout their report, which I was going to get into a little bit more. I appreciate where you were going with that, though.

Maybe I'll just keep going on the FAO analysis a little bit more, because the FAO—and I do want to point out: You aren't just disputing the FAO then; you're disputing the Auditor General. You guys kind of come at this from a very different place than all these other independent bodies, so you'll excuse those of us who feel like we should rely on those independent bodies to provide the kind of transparency and clarity that is often lacking.

The FAO's analysis of the ministry's programs and commitments concluded that ministry spending will grow at an average annual rate of 2%. So ministry expenses will grow at an average annual rate of 2% from 2019-20 to 2029-30, in those 10 years. In contrast, we know that the 2020-21 budget calls for education spending to increase by an average of just about 1.2% and that that creates an annual spending gap that's expected to reach \$2.9 billion by 2029-30.

I guess this is to the minister again: Why is your government budget so much less for education than is actually needed?

Hon. Stephen Lecce: In the 2021 school year, there is \$1.6 billion being allocated for COVID-19 resources specifically. I will note, as one of the questions previous from the member was about federal dollars, this is entirely provincial funding related to our COVID-19 resources. Now, we appreciate that September will, and we all hope, feel different, look different in the context of risk with a double-vaccinated student population 12-plus and staff and the general population—which is the broader commitment the government has made so long as we continue to get supply. Even still, with that improvement to the communities where we live, we still are funding our schools and maintaining those public health measures as we did last year, notwithstanding that significant differentiator. It's a positive one, but we want to be cautious, which is why we've maintained the doubling of public health nurses, the asymptomatic testing program, provision of additional funding for ventilation and for staffing, which I think is important.

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We have also announced specific funding on learning recovery, with the recognition it is a historic challenge. We've expanded the largest summer learning program in Ontario. We did that last year, but we've provided more resources this year, with specialized dollars going towards

at-risk communities, vulnerable kids in schools, children who have faced difficulties with reading and in math historically. I think those additional supports are going to make a big difference. The fact that the funding increases next year, again, for the third consecutive year under our government, I think, underscores the commitments to public education.

I will agree with you on one point: that this is a generational challenge.

I want to just reaffirm our commitment going forward to continue to make sure those resources are in place.

For example, critical need as addressed for many parents was the need to expand education-based tutoring, particularly over the summer, because of the learning gaps that have emerged not just in Ontario—I think you'll acknowledge it's a global phenomenon, based on the research that's happening everywhere. It's challenging for all children in this country. We've expanded access to tutoring programs this summer by educators in English and French, Eurêka! as well as Mathify—using those establishments but expanding access, at least on the English side, to reach more grades and more students.

These are the types of investments we've made to make it better for kids and to support parents—because I appreciate it has not been particularly easy for them either.

Ms. Marit Stiles: Minister, if I may, I did ask about the FAO report.

That's all very interesting, but it's a bit of a shell game, isn't it? You move a bit of money over here and then you take it from here. I think we'll spend some other time here today explaining all that to the people of Ontario.

With respect, Mr. Chair, I need to move over to my colleague Judith.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): MPP Monteith-Farrell.

Ms. Judith Monteith-Farrell: I'm excited to be able to ask some questions today of the Minister of Education, and because today was a big day in Thunder Bay—and as my colleague MPP Stiles said, many disappointed children and family members. In our region, we have been in shutdown longer than most of the province, and so our children have been very affected by this, and there are many calls to have them be able to go back to school in person.

Our medical officers of health, Dr. DeMille from the Thunder Bay District Health Unit and Dr. Kit Young Hoon from the Northwestern Health Unit, have both publicly come out quite strongly about the reopening of schools, as has Diane Walker, who is the executive director of the Children's Centre, which deals with children's mental health. She made a full-page ad in the paper, sent impassioned pleas to the Premier about our situation. The public officers of health, their position is—I think with our COVID-19 numbers, with immunizations that have been done, including our educational staff, and they're starting to roll out the 12- to 17-year-olds receiving vaccines, and with all the measures that schools have put in place, and the school boards at this point, I think the harms of having students out of school on their mental, emotional and mental well-being are greater than the risks of COVID-19.

So why did this government decide not to take the advice of the regional medical health officers as well as the Chief Medical Officer of Health and decide to keep schools closed?

Hon. Stephen Lecce: Thank you for the question and for your work in the north.

First off, just as a first principle, if the position of the opposition parties is that we should have children return to school on a regional basis, you would only make that pronouncement if you thought schools were therefore safe, because otherwise you'd take the position that we should put kids in unsafe schools. But quite obviously, by extension of the logic of support for reopening on a regional basis, it's because they are safe for children, and that is a principle I could accept.

On the basis of the why we decided this time, unlike, for example, in January in Thunder Bay, where your local medical officer of health had to make a determination based on community transmission rising, not because of schools—and they're on the record in that effect.

In this case, look, I appreciate this is not the answer families wanted. It's a very difficult day for children and for their parents. I know, having seen it just in my own personal circumstance, how critical schools are for children, particularly at-risk kids. The decision point today, to be quite frank, is one erring on the side of caution, given what is taking place globally and particularly in the context of the emergence of the variants originating in India, the B1617 variant, which, as the science table did note, creates a "significant unknown." We are advocates of open and safe schools; we've principally taken that position consistently. But at the same time, when presented with that risk, knowing that these variants, which are a game changer between 2020 and 2021 in large measure, potentially could delay the reopening of recreation for kids, sports, playing soccer in the summer, competitions for dance, maybe play dates for these kids to see each other now that the stay-at-home order is lifted—and even things like, camps, which I think are really important.

So the decision point was made in part with an aim to get more people vaccinated. We were one of the first provinces to allow vaccinations for education staff, and even still, it's hovering in and around that 42% rate. For students, we moved quickly in that respect as well—one of the first—and we're at about 24%. Now, we're making progress. That's a lot, given they've only been eligible officially province-wide since May 23. It's really an amazing amount of work, and I'm proud of that. But we want to see those numbers rise to maximize safety so that we don't take any risk for the summer, and most especially—linking it back to the estimates—in September, so that the kids are in the most improved, safest places so that that school experience can be as normal as humanly possible. They deserve that, from clubs to physical education. I'll leave it there.

Ms. Judith Monteith-Farrell: I hear your arguments, and I agree that schools need to be safe. What other plans—because we did this last year. We missed the opportunity in June to look at what schools were going to

look like in September, to open safely, and then we ended up with transmission in schools, across the GTA and in my community. What plans do you have in place other than vaccinations to ensure that schools will be safe in September?

Hon. Stephen Lecce: Thank you very much. I want to respectfully just counter the point with respect to transmission in schools. That's not the position of the Chief Medical Officer of Health. It isn't the position of medical officers of health, the Associate Medical Officer of Health of the province or—at least when asked, the head of the science table did not affirm that position, and suggested that our program on masking, on cohorting overall, especially when compared to the United Kingdom, is much better. The Chief Medical Officer of Health said that. In fact, literally, I could pull from a list of medical officers of health right across Ontario.

In London-Middlesex, for example, on April 7 of this year, Dr. Mackie said, "Transmission in schools is exceedingly rare in our area, that's likely the case in other places as well." School investigation teams "were finding outbreaks where likely the transmission wasn't in the class, it was likely in the community, or even just in students that happened to be in the same class when a COVID wave was coming through their neighbourhood."

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Two minutes left.

Ms. Judith Monteith-Farrell: I'm sorry. So you're saying that medical officers of health—which is how I started my question—are saying that children can be back in school and that they've weighed the risks, and they want them back in school, and yet this government chose not to have them back in schools. So at one point you're listening to medical officers of health, and in other cases you're not. It really is confusing for people and is actually undermining their confidence in any advice that is being provided in guidance, and it's causing extreme frustration, which I know all of us as MPPs are aware of. We'd encourage a more measured approach, a more regional approach, where you look at what's happening and listen to the regional officers of health, like we did in the past, which worked quite well, and go back to that kind of approach. It's extremely frustrating.

1700

I have one other question. Chair, do I have time?

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): You have one minute.

Ms. Judith Monteith-Farrell: All right. I'd just like to know, did you consult medical officers of health when you came up with the graduation plan to allow children to have—I think, yes, we should be celebrating our children; they've done remarkable things. But I also know there are many children who have fallen through the cracks, who are missing, especially in high school; they've dropped out or they're failing. I hear stories from parents who are frustrated and don't know what to do. But now we're going to have a celebration. Is that safe? Did you consult with anyone on that?

Hon. Stephen Lecce: Yes. We worked with the Ministry of Health on that proposal closely, and local school boards will be required to work with, and get the support

of, their local medical officer of health. Of course, they are best positioned to decide, but we are encouraging it. The kids earned it. By then, outdoor gatherings will be permitted—

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): With that, I'm sorry to say, you're out of time. We go to the government. Who will be leading the questioning? MPP Coe, the floor is yours.

Mr. Lorne Coe: Thank you, Chair, and through you to the minister: Minister, thank you very much for your leadership on this particular discussion today. My question is focusing on child care and, in particular, the free emergency child care. You will know, Minister, that, during the necessary lockdowns that were put in place, our essential front-line workers—they worked tirelessly to keep the essentials moving and to keep hard-working Ontario families safe through the pandemic. It's also true that parents of school-age children may not have been able to support their child's learning and care at home because they were performing those critical roles in communities like mine in Whitby and other communities in the region of Durham.

Minister, I wonder if you could speak to the supports the government provided to front-line workers, including our health care heroes who are helping to combat COVID-19, and just tell us a little bit more about the free emergency child care that was provided a number of times and the difference that it made.

Hon. Stephen Lecce: I want to thank the member from Whitby for his leadership for young people in Durham and across the province, a former education critic for the party and someone who has provided good counsel on how we can keep children safe both in schools and in child care.

To answer the question, we took action when we closed schools, as all provinces have inevitably done over the past year as a consequence of community transmission. We made a decision that we were going to stand up and stand with our front-line workers, particularly in the health care space, because they've been on the front lines literally helping to save lives. We thought for congregate settings, for long-term care, hospitals, for nurses and so many individuals who have worked hard, including grocery store clerks—people who make a difference, put food on the table, keep our lights on, front-line responders who keep us safe—those individuals deserved care.

In the first and second waves, we provided emergency child care, which is free child care, to those workers, to approximately 5,200 children per day. In the third wave, I'm very pleased that number has risen to roughly 11,000 children a day who benefit from this program that we've initiated, that we've funded for the benefit of our front-line workers, who are really making a critical difference in our communities.

We also ensured very strong protocols within our child care settings. We strengthened them with the support and approval of the Chief Medical Officer of Health, as we did in our school system systematically from September to the present, and we ensured that there was consumer protection. I think this is an important measure, because when schools were closed and, particularly, when child care was

closed in the first wave, for example, we did not want parents to be on the hook for costs, for fees of child care for services that were not rendered. And so we took action by negating or denying the operator from automatically withdrawing fees from parents and we backstopped the operators to make sure that they were whole and they were supported.

It's really critical also, the going forward, because child care is not just about those that work there and the kids, but their parents, on the affordability side. I know it's an issue in Durham. It's an issue in York. Quite frankly, it's an issue province-wide. It's a legacy of the former Liberal government, and I think parents deserve more affordable and accessible access to child care. That's why, in the most recent budget, the government announced a 20% top-up to the child care tax credit. That will provide upwards of \$1,500 per child per year in savings. I would argue that's going to help in a pretty significant way, incrementally, with parents and the fees associated with raising a child.

It's also why we've urged the federal government to increase their expenditures from what is today roughly 2.5% to 3% of the total budget in Ontario. For our entire costs associated with child care, the feds today expend around 2.5% to 3%. Now, fair enough, they have committed in their budget to increase that. We seek to get further details from them and continue our negotiations with them to leverage as many dollars and actually see that commitment come to fruition.

But the province is leading the way with our child care program, making it more accessible. We have 20,000 spaces that have been approved for construction or are under construction in the province. We invested \$1 billion in child care just to build more spaces. As I noted, we've taken action through the CARE tax credit, which our government introduced earlier on in our mandate and which we just enhanced in the most recent budget, because we know child care has to be safe, has to be accessible and, most especially, affordable for the people of Ontario.

Mr. Lorne Coe: Thank you, Minister. This initiative was really a very critical part of our province's fight against COVID-19. Can you share with us the feedback that you would have received, or your staff would have received, from some of the first responders about the benefits of what we provided; for example, police officers and firefighters and other front-line workers? I'm sure you received a lot of positive feedback to this initiative and the impact it had on their lives.

Hon. Stephen Lecce: I think we've all spoken to front-line workers who have, in part, benefited from the program. What I can say is, when I spoke to front-line workers, in one case, at Mackenzie Health, not too far from my home in my riding, an individual just noted that, in the absence of having the program, she probably, as a single parent, would not be able to work. If you scale that, there are probably many individuals who, absent some care for their child throughout the day or whatever shift they work—that would disable their ability to work in the labour market.

Not all things are equal. This is an individual working the front lines in a hospital, providing care to COVID

patients and other patients. We need these individuals to keep working, and we're grateful to our front-line heroes for being so selfless from the beginning of the pandemic to the present, not having taken a day and complaining along the way. They've just simply worked hard, and I think it is our obligation to provide that support, which is why we did.

Not only did she express gratitude for the program, but just realizing what that could have cost—my own grandmother is a long-term-care resident at Mackenzie Health. Removing a nurse, keeping that individual home because they couldn't find care for their kids, means diminished care for the most vulnerable. So all these things intersect. It's personal for all of us, and I think we're all just very grateful for the work they've done in Ontario. They literally have been light in this darkness, and we owe them a great deal of gratitude.

Mr. Lorne Coe: Thank you, Minister, for the work that you do and that your staff are doing and the impact it has had.

Chair, through you, to MPP Oosterhoff, please.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Thank you. MPP Oosterhoff? I don't think we have him at the moment.

Mr. Lorne Coe: I think he's connecting.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Yes, he's connecting now.

Mr. Lorne Coe: There. Here we go.

Mr. Sam Oosterhoff: Sorry, my son is—I'm in the middle of taking care of him real quick, but I'll be right there. One sec.

Mr. Lorne Coe: Okay. Thank you.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Real life intrudes.

MPP Coe, I'm going to turn the floor back to you.

Mr. Lorne Coe: I'm sorry, Chair. I didn't hear you.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): MPP Coe—ah, MPP Oosterhoff has rejoined us.

1710

Mr. Sam Oosterhoff: Yes, sorry about that. Thank you very much, Chair, for giving us the opportunity. My thanks to the minister and this team at education. I know there has been a lot of work that has gone into the efforts around this year's funding as well.

I'm wondering if we could hear more about the importance of investing in mental health. I know there are some substantial investments in mental health in the Grants for Student Needs. I'm wondering if that could be elaborated on, and the importance of those investments.

Hon. Stephen Lecce: Thank you very much. I know you've been a passionate advocate for mental health supports, both in community and in our schools, and I think a lot of young people are benefiting from this.

I'll just say, before the pandemic began, we doubled the mental health allocation in our schools. I did it proudly at CAMH, on World Mental Health Day. We announced 180 permanent, additional full-time staff—psychologists, psychotherapists, social workers and others—providing direct support and intervention within our schools. Of course, during the pandemic, we stepped up that investment significantly.

When you benchmark the investment, the expenditure of 2017-18, at the peak of Liberal spending—and as you know, that government was quite comfortable doing so. Even still, they were expending in and around, I believe, \$18 million per year on school-based mental health. Today, the budget, as allocated and as presented in the estimates, is in and around \$80 million. It's more than a four times increase. I think it's important that that is elevated in our discussion today, because the world has changed, and so too has the demand in supports.

I would also just say that for children with autism, ASD, that funding envelope was specifically doubled within our education portfolio. Special education funding has increased as well this year. And I think if you look at the Mental Health and Well-Being Grant, it's projected to be \$86.3 million, which is going to, again, assist in a meaningful way of reducing wait times and increasing supports.

Yesterday, the Deputy Premier announced an additional \$31 million in community-based supports for children and youth, which will directly support and complement the work we're doing within our schools, with partners like School Mental Health Ontario and Kids Help Phone, where we have dramatically stepped up supports for them in the province of Ontario.

We also provided professional development and training for our educators in this respect, and an action plan, if you will—a tool kit provided to educators that was tailored for them to use for different audiences to really support positive mental health promotion and discussion within the schools over the past year. That, I think, really demonstrates the increase of staffing.

As was noted off the top, I believe, by ADM Davis, we are representing in and around an additional—I believe it's over 300 mental health workers, specifically 313 mental health workers hired, net new. That's going to make a big difference. It has this past year. Obviously, with the continuation of that funding, we believe it will continue to support those most in need.

Mr. Sam Oosterhoff: Could you speak a bit about what you've been hearing from boards with regard to the need for this funding, what sort of changes have been happening over the last year and a half, specifically the impacts of the pandemic, and then also some of the specifics of where this funding is allocated, what we've seen of its impact in the past and what it's good to do going forward?

Hon. Stephen Lecce: I think I'll turn it to ADM Claudine Munroe to provide a bit of context on where the dollars are landing and how they're supporting children.

Ms. Claudine Munroe: Hello, I'm Claudine Munroe. I'm the assistant deputy minister of the student support and field services division.

We've been hearing a lot from school boards over the past year or so just in terms of the impact of COVID-19 on our students' mental health. They have been seeing anxiety, depression, as well as attendance issues. We know that schools are an ideal place for mental health promotion, prevention and early intervention, and the supports that we've put in place over the current school year and

that we are putting in place in the next school year will really help to elevate and enhance mental health promotion, prevention and intervention for all students.

We provide funding to every school board in the province to have a mental health leader, across all 72 school boards within the province. The board's leadership team really works in conjunction with the mental health leader that we fund through funding in the Grants for Student Needs to lead the development and implementation of the three-year mental health strategy and addictions plan that school boards are asked to have in place. They also collaborate specifically with district school board staff as well as child and community mental health partners to ensure that students have adequate pathways to care and transitions, for those who are struggling.

In addition, we fund mental health workers in secondary schools, who provide direct supports to students who may be struggling with their mental health. This support is instrumental in ensuring that students have access to the supports they need at the right time if they're struggling.

In addition to that, as the minister mentioned, we work really closely with our implementation arm School Mental Health Ontario. They're a great partner. They provide clinical expertise, with a mission to support all 72 school boards in the province in their efforts to implement and scale up mental health promotion, prevention and early intervention. They have worked with us to provide supports and resources to school boards upon the reopening of school during the current school year. They also developed a student mental health action tool kit to assist educators across the province in teaching students how to look after their own mental health.

In addition to that, the province has also provided a number of different COVID-19-related supports that school boards are able to use in order to meet local needs, such as professional learning, collaboration with child and youth mental health agencies, as well as to ensure that an adequate number of mental health staff are available to support students who are struggling.

We also provide funding for our mental health and well-being bundle—again, funding to meet local priorities. It's really focused on helping school boards to ensure that they have safe, healthy, inclusive and accepting learning environments for our children.

In addition to that, we also fund Kids Help Phone.

All of these investments have been instrumental in supporting students over the course of this school year, as have the wonderful staff in the education sector—all of our education staff, as well as our school-based mental health professionals—in terms of noticing the signs and being able to support students who are in need.

Mr. Sam Oosterhoff: Excellent. I'm wondering if you can speak a little bit more about some of those organizations that the ministry is working with beyond the school boards. I think you referenced a few there, and I'm wondering if you could go into a little bit more depth as to those partnerships. I think it's absolutely crucial that there is a multi-sectoral approach. I know it's something we hear a lot from Minister Tibollo's team and the Ministry

of Health. Mental health is obviously an inter-ministerial issue, one that needs to have all hands on deck, and that includes our community partners. So I'm wondering if you could build on those relationships, on those partnerships—what the funding looks like through those partnerships, how that process is decided as to who is going to be involved in that, or which particular organizations are going to be working with boards. How much is done through the boards directly or through the ministry directly? If you could just lay out some of those particulars, that would be appreciated.

Ms. Claudine Munroe: Absolutely. I would start off by saying that schools are a really important part of the integrated system of mental health and addictions care in the province of Ontario. That means that school boards and the ministry have to work in an integrated way with child and youth community mental health, because we know that there are needs that cannot be met in schools. When students are presenting with a high level of need and they need treatment outside of the school setting, there needs to be a way to be able to connect to those resources in the community. School Mental Health Ontario has been instrumental in working very closely with the lead agencies within the province and other child and youth mental health organizations to help build that connection and that support so that students are able to access the supports they need when they need them. As a ministry, we work very closely with the Ministry of Health to ensure that integration.

I know that the Ministry of Health made an announcement yesterday of around \$31 million in investments in the child and youth mental health sector, so that will help the overall system of care for children and youth in the province, which really benefits everyone.

In addition to that, as I mentioned, with the COVID-19-related supports and funding that we provided, we specifically asked school boards to work directly with child and youth mental health agencies to help ensure that the right supports are in place for students, because we know that it really takes the whole community to ensure that students are receiving the supports they need.

In addition, as I mentioned, the ministry provides funding to Kids Help Phone.

1720

There are also a number of other organizations that the ministry does fund to broadly support student mental health and well-being within the province.

Mr. Sam Oosterhoff: Yes, I know one of—

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): You have one minute left.

Mr. Sam Oosterhoff: One of the conversations that I've heard a lot as well is, of course, guidance counsellors and their changing role with time. Obviously, it's not just giving pamphlets for which university or trade school or college you are going to go to. It's a lot of engagement also around these types of issues. I'm wondering if you could speak to some of the professional training aspects of the funding and where that's going to go and in what sort of context that will be spent.

Ms. Claudine Munroe: Yes, for sure. In terms of the professional learning that's in place, the professional learning is provided by School Mental Health Ontario, primarily, and they really have acted with the intention to ensure that training is available to regulated mental health professionals in schools and non-regulated staff that are working with students who may have mental health concerns, as well as ensuring that educators also have access to mental health literacy supports as well as guidance counsellors, as you had mentioned.

It's important for everybody within the education system to play their roles. We recognize, for example, that educators and guidance counsellors are not mental health professionals, but they have—

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): I'm sorry to say, with that, you are out of time.

Just before we go to the opposition, I need to note: MPP Karpoche, I believe you have joined us, and I'd like you to confirm your identity and your location, please.

Ms. Bhutla Karpoche: Yes, sorry. I am here. Hi, everyone. MPP Bhutla Karpoche in Toronto. Thank you.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Thank you, so much. Just a reminder to all participants, turn off audio notifications of phones or computers. The dog squeaky toy was really good, but everything else, really, is not allowed.

With that, we go to the official opposition: MPP Stiles.

Ms. Marit Stiles: Where I think I left off before we went to MPP Monteith-Farrell was we were talking about the Financial Accountability Office analysis. I will add that the FAO is an independent wing of government and works with the ministry's own numbers. I want to just make that clear to anybody watching as we go through this.

We talked a little bit about the annual spending gap that the FAO has noted in this government's estimates and that that's expected to reach \$2.9 billion by 2029-30. I had asked previously, why did the government budget so much less for education than what is actually needed? I want to say, cumulatively, that gap between what, Minister, your government has budgeted for education and what it's actually costing will be about \$12.9 billion in just nine years. That is a significant number, to say the least, probably even historic. There are only two ways to close a gap like that. One is to increase spending to match reality. The other is to introduce new and I'm going to say "spending restraint measures," as the FAO refers to it. What I would call it is cuts.

We know that this government, when we headed into the pandemic, was embarking on quite a plan to reduce our teaching and other education worker staff by 10,000. They were going to lay off 10,000 education workers. They were going to save money by increasing class sizes—which is kind of hard to even imagine in this moment—and by actually forcing kids into mandatory online learning. I'm curious—because I think we all know what this government's agenda has been and that there is really this lack of commitment to publicly funded education, which permeates the government's plan. I wonder if the minister would comment on what cuts they are planning in order to make up that \$12.9-billion difference?

Hon. Stephen Lecce: I want to thank the member for the question. I will note that the FAO report—when you compare the ministry's spending against the FAO's projections, we've made it clear that the FAO uses a different methodology based on the cumulative spending gap of nine years between the FAO forecast and our outlook. Their projections are higher as compared to ours because the FAO projections assume compensation increases for school board staff while the long-term ministry projections do not. It doesn't negate the ability when it comes to compensation in the future. He makes assumptions of what those increases should be; we do not. They're negotiated by the government of the day, as you will know. But I do believe, specifically on that gap in methodology and on our continued investments—increasing investments—in the system, I think I'll turn it over to ADM Andrew Davis to provide details on the difference.

Mr. Andrew Davis: Thank you, Minister. Yes, absolutely correct—and I'll just elaborate a little bit on the minister's remarks. The key difference between the projections in the FAO report and the government's projections is simply the assumption in regard to compensation—and a very different approach. The FAO has built in a forecast after the collective agreements expire of an additional 2% annually going all the way out. The ministry, on the other hand, will build in compensation forecasts based off the actual collective agreements in place. We won't go beyond that because that would be disclosing the government's mandate on bargaining to everyone, and that would be hugely disruptive and biased, and impact bargaining.

Instead, what the government does is that it budgets for compensation centrally rather than building it specifically into our allocation. So to break that difference down, a salary per point is \$200 million. So two points as assumed in that is \$400 million times the additional seven years beyond our collective agreements, which is \$2.8 billion. That's a simple arithmetic calculation. That doesn't take into consideration compounding.

Ms. Marit Stiles: Right. If I may, Mr. Davis, it's true that the FAO uses historic references to make those projections, and what the minister and what the government is basically saying is that you're going to keep driving wages down or laying off more staff if you're not keeping up with that. Wage increases, the 2% or whatever, that's like cost of living, right? That's cost of living.

Let's be clear also that the reason your compensation estimates, I guess, are lower is also because your government has imposed a wage freeze that is, by the way, still before the courts.

Anyway, I'll move on, and we can agree to disagree on that point. I do think it is interesting to hear the way it's described as—because, for me, it's a bit of a shell game, right? I fully appreciate the work of the FAO, because what they do is lift up those shells and shine a light in there on some of the trickier things and manoeuvres that governments make, which I think is really important. Because that's what we're going to talk about, is actually, at the end of the day, what this really means—not the government's

announcements and the budget. At the end of the day, like we've seen with the COVID dollars, the minister can say that they have the capacity to do 50,000 tests a week, but if 50,000 tests a week don't happen, the capacity doesn't make any difference. It's not happening, right? You're only testing 8,000 students, so therefore, just by way of example, and not really related to the FAO report exactly, you really don't know. It's just like when you said that the schools are safe: You really didn't know because you really didn't have those numbers because you weren't doing the testing.

Moving on: In the FAO analysis, there is one other interesting piece. It shows that ministry spending for 2021-22, so the coming school year, is about \$0.2 billion higher than what was budgeted—expenses, let's just say. Ministry expenses are actually \$0.2 billion higher than what was budgeted. The FAO expects that the ministry is going to be able to fund a portion of this from its existing allocation, but not all of it. Again, this is coming from the FAO looking and working with the same numbers the ministry has. Will you be requesting a spending plan increase during this coming fiscal year to make up that quite significant shortfall?

1730

Hon. Stephen Lecce: First off, I think it's notable that a public servant had just confirmed that the difference here deals with compensation. Now, you've taken the position that compensation should be increased. That is your prerogative, but in the Ministry of Education, we're not assuming that a future government will increase compensation for workers. I'm cognizant that—

Ms. Marit Stiles: Well, to be fair, Minister, it's not just compensation, right? There is also enrolment growth. There is enrolment growth, as well, which is another major factor that we haven't heard you guys really address at all.

Hon. Stephen Lecce: That's captured in the GSN, and we provided stabilization last year when there was a decline of enrolment, I believe well over \$400 million in one-time funding for school boards—

Ms. Marit Stiles: But going back to it, my question is about, how are you—are you going to be coming to us again with a spending plan increase this fiscal year? Because you've got this shortfall in your own plans for this year. How are you going to make that up?

Hon. Stephen Lecce: We're going to continue to increase investments in public education, as we did in the fall economic statement, in the budget, each and every year. That's a commitment that I think is borne out in the numbers.

Now, member, you did mention, again, school safety, and I think it's important to just address the matter. It's a consequential issue. You've raised it numerous times in those questions. I just want to note, you've asserted that I have taken the position that schools are safe, and I've always suggested that the medical officers of health in the province and the chief medical officer—

Ms. Marit Stiles: Oh, minister, you have said it so many times. I can show you in the Hansard.

Hon. Stephen Lecce: Chair, I'd just like to finish a thought, if that is possible—the medical officers of health

in Toronto. So I just want to know—we know Dr. Loh said, on April 5, "Let me" state "unequivocally," that "schools are safe with the measures and the precautions" taken. But we should say that "certainly, with case counts rising, with our third wave ... starting to take off in the region of Peel, what we were seeing was certainly not more transmission within schools, but what we were seeing was more and more cases being introduced into schools...."

This is what Dr. de Villa said on April 7: "Our schools have been safe, and the actions we took were aimed at keeping them that way." Of course, I would be remiss to not mention Dr. Williams: "I don't think schools have been a factor." They are more the recipient of it.

Given their unequivocal pronouncements from 2020 to 2021—doctors, leaders, independent officers who have made a decision based on their expert analysis of transmission, of the source of cases—I guess the question is, why wouldn't you accept the judgment of the medical officers, the Chief Medical Officer of Health? Even Sick-Kids in the fall said, at a rate of lower transmission in the community, the school system has been safe. Dr. Jüni, the head of the Ontario science table, said—

Ms. Marit Stiles: Sorry, Minister, this is not—

Hon. Stephen Lecce: He said the school system has been safe—

Ms. Marit Stiles: You're not actually responding to my questions here. I have questions and you're just off on some rant about—I'm sorry, I think the minister is losing track of things here.

I appreciate it's not been a good day for you. I get it. It's been a bad time for everybody. But I do have questions related to the FAO report that I really need to get to because this is a really important part of what we do here. I appreciate that you want to try to blame everybody else, but I'm actually not the Minister of Education today; you are. I hope maybe that will change one day, but I'm going to go through this with you now. I'm going go through some more questions with you.

Looking ahead to next year, 2022-23, there is a gap of—this is the next year; there is a gap of \$0.6 billion. So you can see the widening of what's been budgeted for by your government and what the projected spending will be. It's the following year where the planned spending comes up against another promise, which is your commitment to add 30,000 new child care spaces. I know my colleague the member for Parkdale–High Park will have more to say on that during her questioning, but the FAO says it will not be possible for you to keep that commitment with an increase of just 0.5%, unless—and I quote from page 8 of the FAO report: "unless the province introduces program changes that reduce costs."

So I'm going to ask again: What cost-reducing program changes do you intend to make in order to close that gap? That's just two years away, so decisions you make right now impact those decisions. Can you please explain what cost-reducing program changes you're going to make to close that gap?

Hon. Stephen Lecce: We're going to continue to increase supports for special education, as we did, at \$3.2

billion this year. We increased mental health four times, to roughly \$80 million—

Ms. Marit Stiles: But what does that have to do with the child care? I'm trying to understand the child care piece there, remember?

Hon. Stephen Lecce: Yes, I heard the question. I'm just underscoring a continuous investment in our public education ministry, which includes both public education and child care. I think that's important. That is a proof positive: From the first year to the current year, that number has risen, including the Grants for Student Needs benefiting our school boards.

Now, with respect to child care, we allocated a billion dollars as part of our plan to build 30,000 child care spaces within our schools. The province of Ontario and parents disproportionately shoulder the fees for child care when compared to the feds. They contributed roughly 2.5% to 3%; the rest is borne by parents and by the province of Ontario.

We allocated over \$390 million for our new tax credit, because we believe in choice—which is a contrasting position, I know, in the Legislature. We believe in giving parents that choice and giving them fiscal flexibility by giving them a direct tax credit, which we just topped up by 20%—another net increase in supports for families, given the need for accessible child care.

We have, in addition to this, increased investments over the pandemic to stabilize the sector: funding specifically for PPE, for cleaning, and monies where operating dollars were lost during closures, when the province closed in the first wave and we supported funding flowing to them to help make up those gaps. So operators were better off; parents, certainly, with financial supports, including nearly \$2 billion of direct financial support—

Ms. Marit Stiles: But where are the savings there? I'm sorry; I'm trying to understand this, Minister. I'm just trying to understand the tack you're taking here. Again, you said you're going to create these 30,000 child care spaces, but the FAO is saying that's not going to be possible based on what you've budgeted and what you're estimating to spend. There's a real gap there, and I don't really understand your response on that. Either you make cuts somewhere else, or what? How do you pay for that? How are you going to make that up and keep the commitment?

Hon. Stephen Lecce: We continue to increase investments on an annual basis through both the budget process as well as the fall economic statement. We've seen net increases. In fact, there are 22,000 spaces that have been approved by the government of Ontario—part of that 30,000—during the pandemic. Just in the context of when I announced schools, we announced, I believe, over 1,700 net new spaces just in the last calendar year—granted, two fiscal years—when we announced the new capital, the new funding to build new schools in Ontario, which includes child care in many of them across the province.

We have been absolutely focused on creating more capital investment, more operating dollars to support and backstop the sector, and we know that today the overwhelming majority are open, the overwhelming majority

are supporting kids, not just on the front lines but all families in the province of Ontario, and every parent, those roughly 300,000 who are eligible, will also benefit from that direct financial support.

My point, to your question, is that operators, parents and the staff themselves are receiving more supports from the government, and that is going to continue year over year.

Ms. Marit Stiles: Well, again, I'm just going to point out to you—I hope you are listening to what the Financial Accountability Office is saying to you, which is that there's a gap there. At some point, you've got to pay the piper, right? So when you talk about, "Well, it's in the budget, and we have this announcement," it means nothing.

At the end of the day, as I explained at the start of our committee meetings here at estimates in my questioning of you yesterday, the estimates are really, "This is how the government intends to spend." The budget is kind of like the cover sheet, but it's not really the detail. This is the detail, and when you look at this detail, there are these gaps. It may be inconvenient—I understand that—but I think this government has yet to address that, and I just want to put that on the record.

I'll also add, Minister, that when you talk about these tax credits and choice, I have to add that there is no choice when you don't have a space, and the reality is that most Ontarians don't have a space and they can't afford the spaces that are available. There is not enough affordable non-profit child care. Anyways, you've not answered my question there, but we'll move on.

In the recovery period, which the FAO has beginning in 2023-24 and continuing—I mean, this is a long period—right up till 2029-30, we see that the gap really, again, widens. In those years, your government has budgeted 1.2% increases for education. The FAO projects that education spending is going to grow by almost double that: 2.3%.

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We know that there are only a few ways to reduce that gap. Either you cut staff or you cut their wages, as you tried to do in 2018-19—and that by the way, doesn't happen without a cost to students, right? Because that means larger class sizes and fewer supports for our kids. I think Ontarians have told you already very loudly and very clearly how they feel about that.

One way might be to try something radically different like, say, moving more kids and teachers out of physical classrooms and into permanent remote learning. I want to know, Minister, is that the motivation for your plan, to move kids into this permanent remote learning plan that you have? Is it to reduce spending on public education?

Hon. Stephen Lecce: I would note, and to your earlier point, 80 cents to the dollar in the Ministry of Education generally goes towards compensation for wages and benefits. That is just the reality. So when not forecasting increases in potential compensation for benefits and pay for staff, of which 80 cents of the dollar goes to—that will have an impact on the overall fiscal projections now and

into the future. We can only confirm what is within our agreements, as any responsible government would do based on the fact that we negotiated them. The next government of Ontario will have to make those determinations on wages, which will inevitably require adjustments to the fiscal with respect to what that increase may or may not be.

Obviously, our commitment is to ensure that as many dollars go into classrooms, which is what we fought for in the negotiations, and with that—

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): I'm sorry to say, with that, we're out of time for this round of questioning.

We go back to the government. Who will be standing for the government in this round? MPP Pettapiece, the floor is yours.

Mr. Randy Pettapiece: Thanks to all those who joined us today. I want to thank the minister and his staff for their answers to questions. I want to assure the minister that any answers that you give me today, I will listen to intently, with respect, and that goes the same for your staff. Your staff is an integral part of answering these questions, and when I ask a question, I will listen. I will not interrupt them. I will listen to their answers and make my assessments from there.

I'm going to ask you a question about broadband strategy, Minister. It's interesting that they gave me this question because I didn't grow up with the Internet. I didn't grow up with broadband but I'm learning as fast as I can; if you ask my staff, they say I'm not learning quick enough.

I think back to the days when I was in public school, that if we would have had the connectivity that we have today—we worked on the farm as kids; we had chores to do—my father might have said, “Well, jeez, you guys can take your schooling off the Internet so I'll get more chores for you to do and work you harder.” So it's kind of an interesting time we're in right now.

But I want to talk about the broadband strategy to protect elementary and secondary students' privacy and help to reduce cyber security risk. We've heard stories of cyber security being an issue, and certainly there was a story—I think it was a couple of weeks ago—about somebody who shut down a pipeline in the States. They hacked into it. This is certainly a concern that we have. As more people, including yours truly, get involved with the Internet and Internet security, this is an issue that for the privacy of our students certainly needs to be addressed, to help reduce this cyber security risk.

I wonder, Minister, if you give us an outline of how your ministry is approaching this issue.

Hon. Stephen Lecce: Thank you very much for the question and for the work representing rural voices, students, families and, of course, education workers in the province of Ontario.

We are very much committed to strengthening our cyber security network. We think that is critical given that we are seeing compromises happening, to be fair, right across society and the economy. You mentioned an example in the US; there are far too many here at home. We

want to make sure that we can build up that infrastructure and the privacy protections so that children and staff are constantly protected and so that they avoid disruption of learning, which is important, and avoid any potential harm as a consequence of those disruptions or breaches. We've placed a high priority in this respect.

The modernized network implemented in the ministry's broadband strategy introduced a common level of limited cyber security controls at the school level, like next-generation firewalls, which can block traffic defined on a set of security rules, so that has been of value. There are foundational levels of content filtering to prevent students from accessing malicious sites—and the intrusion detection, which monitors traffic moving on networks to search for suspicious activity and known threats. It also isolates schools on school networks, which helps to contain the impact of cyber attacks without impacting the entire board. We have increased supports in this respect, and we recognize how critical it is.

We also recognize the importance of having access to broadband in the first place. While we want to make sure it remains safe, we want to make sure it's also accessible for all families. That is especially true in the context of rural and remote parts of the province. The member will know, even in my riding, in a GTA riding, in a GTA community, we have broadband connectivity issues—for those who have had to hear me from a caucus meeting or an interview from my home, you'll hear it far too often. So we've expanded and accelerated the delivery of broadband connectivity within our schools—all high schools have them this year, are connected to Internet this year, and broadband connectivity for elementary schools no later than September. So we've made some real progress on getting that infrastructure up for the benefit of students.

We've enhanced the protections for kids during this period, including training to make sure that our school board leaders and our educators have the appropriate knowledge of what the early signs are, and, of course, the work we've done in areas like human trafficking to build up knowledge of the signs of victimizations—often cyber, but not necessarily—I think it underscores our commitment to the safety of children, be it in the class or online. I think that's really important.

Mr. Randy Pettapiece: I sometimes liken the Internet to atomic energy. It can be used for great things and good things. It can also be used for other things that aren't so great and aren't so good, and we are finding this as we go through.

Just so you know, my one son is a police officer in Guelph, and he worked on these issues with human trafficking. He worked on issues with young folks who were caught up in some pretty nasty things. I think it was five and a half years he worked on these types of things.

Unfortunately, there are bad actors out there who like to tap into your Internet or a school's Internet and try to do some things that aren't very nice.

I wonder if you could expand upon the appropriate safeguards that should be in place to ensure the protection of students and privacy and their well-being online.

Hon. Stephen Lecce: I'd be more than pleased to do that and turn it over to Soussan Tabari, our CIO, to speak a bit about more of the cyber security work that has been done to date and the work that we'll be unveiling in short order to further strengthen those systems. But if I could quote an educator from the Upper Grand District School Board in the context of how the Internet connectivity has been benefited—the quote is, “I just wanted to let you know how much the improvements in our broadband capacity have benefited my classroom. As a core French teacher, I use a lot of online materials, songs, videos, Kahoot! games etc., to make French more interactive for my students. I very much appreciate the increased access. Thank you again for the efforts in this area.”

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The Thames Valley District School Board had a notable quote that was shared with us: “I'm in our schools regularly. I see our students are embracing mobility for learning in a much greater degree, primarily due to the fact that we have great Internet access. It's changing the classroom.”

The point is, we embrace the option. We believe, respectfully, unlike other parties in the Legislature, that choice should be made by the parents, especially this September. That choice wouldn't have been provided to Ontarians, which almost one in four families exercised, be it for an immunocompromised child or an intergenerational household. Whatever the rationale was, we trust parents to make the best decision for their kids and for their homes, and that's why we offered them the choice this year and we've required boards to do so next year, knowing that we've increased the remote learning investment by \$225 million in additional funding in the most recent budget to further strengthen connectivity, the infrastructure, as well as further supports for tablets.

There are literally over 196,000 tablets that have been procured and roughly 10,000 internet connections. That has, in a profound way, modernized the education system so that when kids return full-time, in class, in September, for the vast majority, the classroom could still be more dynamic, aided by technology, aided by video and more dynamic forms of learning that can complement in-class instruction. I know many educators want to see that innovation embraced. We do, which is why we put those dollars in place to build up the Internet capacity, get more tablets to more people, strengthen the privacy protections, as I've outlined, and, obviously, further cement Ontario as a leader when it comes to innovation in learning and pedagogy.

We are proud of those supports and we uniquely stand as a political party in this province who would have delivered them for the people of Ontario, then and now. In fact, the choice would have been denied by the members opposite. I just can't fathom why they would know better than a parent in Ontario, why they would know better than a guardian, who, I think, is best positioned to decide what's best for their child and, more importantly, within their respective communities, given the changing landscape and how different it is, perhaps, in Toronto than it would be in Tillsonburg.

With that, I will turn, actually, to the deputy minister just to speak a bit more on the cyber work that has been done to strengthen our system today and in the future.

Ms. Nancy Naylor: Thank you, Minister. My name is Nancy Naylor. I'm the Deputy Minister of Education, and I'm pleased to add to your comments on this topic.

As a ministry, we've been proactive about planning for broadband modernization in our schools, and we are looking forward to completing a three-year program of broadband modernization, which will bring high-speed, modern and secure Internet to all of our schools. Along with that, of course, comes priorities such as those that the member has mentioned, such as student privacy, online privacy and cyber security protection.

Over the past year, given the pandemic conditions, we've also led investments in access to the Internet outside of school properties to support remote learning, and we have worked with telcos through our future state modernization investments to experiment with opportunities to bring broadband Internet to students and communities in areas where commercial telcos haven't been able to reach to date. Our CIO, Soussan Tabari—who, unfortunately, couldn't be with us this afternoon—has been leading that work, and we are seeing very promising results.

My apologies. I just see my colleague Soussan appear on screen. Perhaps, Soussan, you'd like to speak for a moment or two about those investments.

Ms. Soussan Tabari: Thank you, Deputy. Can you hear me?

Ms. Nancy Naylor: Yes, we can.

Ms. Soussan Tabari: I'm sorry. I didn't realize—my name is Soussan Tabari. I'm the CIO, assistant deputy minister, for the I&IT community services cluster in the Ministry of Education.

Just to follow up from the points that the minister and the deputy made, I just wanted to give you an update: We have completed the implementation of adequate, secure broadband access for all of the students at 3,985 schools across the province. That includes 1,075 rural schools, which constitutes 98% of our rural schools, and 487 northern schools, which constitutes 97% of our northern schools.

To follow up from the points that were made, we have isolated the schools on the school network, which helps contain the impact of cyber attacks without impacting the entire board. That's a very significant improvement that we've made. With the common network architecture that we are implementing in the boards through the broadband program, we have created a network platform that can serve as a foundation for future multiple-board opportunities such as enhanced cyber protection.

We continue to provide guidance to boards to support understanding of appropriate safeguards that should be in place to ensure the protection of students and their privacy and well-being online, and accountability for the protection of information that is received, created or maintained by the boards. To further help reduce the cyber security and privacy risks facing our school boards, students and educators, we also continue to support the work of the

cyber security division and the Broader Public Sector Cyber Security Expert Panel.

Mr. Randy Pettapiece: Thank you very much. That's very informative. I want to thank the minister and the ministry officials for explaining that to us.

As you know, I live in a rural riding. I represent a rural riding where the Internet is very important to us. These types of cyber attacks can be very devastating to us, especially when not only farmers are using it quite a bit but our schoolchildren depend on it. Because of these difficult times during COVID, our schoolchildren do depend on it.

I have six grandchildren enrolled in school out here and they have been able to take advantage of using the Internet to do their studies. It's not in-class, which they do miss, but certainly they have been able to take advantage of the opportunities that our government has given them, not only being able to get on the Internet and do their studies, but also, as the minister mentioned, with the amount of equipment we've given our school boards to help students progress with their education.

I do appreciate the minister and all your staff for the work that you have done on this file. We certainly hope things get back to normal in September and I have a good feeling that they will, that our students can go back to school and to in-class learning, because they certainly do miss their friends, and I can understand that.

In rural Ontario, our government has made huge amounts of money available to make Internet more available to us out here. We just announced another Internet service that was completed in a little town called Wallenstein, which is on the southeast side of my riding, and it goes up to Arthur, which is going to connect a lot more people. Our government continues to make these investments.

But certainly cyber security and all that goes with it—and I'm certainly glad that the education minister and your ministry officials have made sure that our students can be secure when they're using the Internet to make sure that it's not shut down by some of these people who make their living doing these things.

I believe we're out of time, Chair. Am I correct that way?

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): You are within seconds of being out of time.

Mr. Randy Pettapiece: Have a good day, sir.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Okay. With that, there are two minutes and 48 seconds left to the government in this round of questioning. We've reached the end of the day.

The committee is now adjourned until Tuesday, June 8, at 9 a.m. Thank you all.

The committee adjourned at 1800.

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