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**Official Report
of Debates
(Hansard)**

E-37

**Journal
des débats
(Hansard)**

E-37

**Standing Committee on
Estimates**

Ministry of Education

Ministry of Infrastructure

**Comité permanent des
budgets des dépenses**

Ministère de l'Éducation

Ministère de l'Infrastructure

1st Session
42nd Parliament

Tuesday 8 June 2021

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42^e législature

Mardi 8 juin 2021

Chair: Peter Tabuns
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

Tuesday 8 June 2021

Mardi 8 juin 2021

The committee met at 0902 in room 151 and by video conference.

MINISTRY OF EDUCATION

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Good morning, everyone. We're going to resume consideration of vote 1001 of the estimates of the Ministry of Education. There's now a total of four hours and 35 minutes remaining for the review of these estimates. When the committee adjourned on June 2, the government had two minutes and 48 seconds remaining.

Just before we go to the government, I want to note personally and I think, fairly, on behalf of the committee how all of us were saddened and upset by the events yesterday in London of the targeted killing of that Muslim household. I think it's fair for me to say that everyone on this committee extends their sympathy and support to the family and the community, and support for the police to investigate and prosecute as rapidly as possible.

With that, I turn it over to the government. MPP Parsa.

Mr. Michael Parsa: Good morning, Chair. Thank you very much. I really appreciate it.

It's nice to see all of my colleagues again. I don't see the minister, Chair, but I presume the minister is present in the room with you.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Yes, the minister is present—without a doubt.

Mr. Michael Parsa: Okay. Minister, it's great to see you as always.

Before I go any further, Minister, as the representative of the residents of Aurora–Oak Ridges–Richmond Hill, I want to take this opportunity to thank you and your team for all the work you have done in the last 14 or 15 months. It has been an incredibly difficult period for everyone, and I know there has been a lot that you and your team have had to do for students, the staff and families all across, so as their representative here in this riding, I want to thank you for all your hard work. I know that you haven't stopped, so thank you for that.

Minister, my question is about funding. I'm wondering if you could provide more context on the increased amount of funding that the ministry will be providing through the Grants for Student Needs, the GSN, for 2020-21? Also, on the Priorities and Partnerships Fund—how much funding is being provided through the PPF?

Hon. Stephen Lecce: I want to echo your sentiments and those of the Chair on the tragedy that took place in

London, the Islamophobic attack against the family, and send solidarity and prayer with the entire Muslim community in London and across the country.

With respect to the funding for the coming school year, yes, there's \$2 billion set aside specifically targeting safety and learning recovery, as well as an increase in funding for the Grants for Student Needs, which is the principal vehicle of funding for school boards. There's a \$1.6-billion renewal of the COVID-19 resources. You will note that the funding is entirely provincial dollars, absent any federal supports in the coming school year. There's an additional \$85.5 million set aside for—

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

Hon. Stephen Lecce: —for learning recovery, and that's going to help, specifically, at-risk students, and it's going to support reading and mathematics, where we've seen challenges when it comes to regression in learning—and a \$561-million increase to the Grants for Student Needs.

There's also an increase in the mental health funding, which I think is critical this year and going into September: \$80 million, a four-time increase from when the former Liberal government was in power in 2017-18. I hope that underscores a commitment to the welfare of children who faced difficulty both before and during the pandemic.

There's also an increase in special education funding to \$3.2 billion, which will represent the highest investments recorded in Ontario history.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): And with that, you've come to the end of your time.

We now go to the official opposition. Ms. Karpoche.

Ms. Bhutla Karpoche: Good morning. I want to begin by thanking the minister, the deputy ministers and all of the staff who've taken the time to be here today and answer questions.

As the critic for early learning and child care for the official opposition, I'd like to focus my questions on this file.

Before I get to the questions, I do want to quickly talk about the state of the sector in Ontario and the devastating impact that the COVID-19 pandemic has had.

Parents and families have dealt with uncertainty and disruption stemming from multiple closures of child care centres. Families continue to pay the highest child care fees in Canada by far.

Child care centres have moved heaven and earth to implement public health measures necessary to keep staff and children safe, while facing massive reductions in revenue from the severe drop in child care enrolment.

And child care workers have put their physical and mental health on the line every day to ensure that kids can benefit from the safest, happiest and most educational child care experience possible.

I want to recognize everyone involved in the child care sector: parents, families, child care centre operators, administrators and, above all, child care workers, and I want to thank them for their resilience, their unflinching warmth and kindness in the face of such a difficult circumstance, and their commitment to the children of this province.

The child care sector has been a bright spot during this dark time, but they have been ignored by the Ford government. Many child care centres have been forced to permanently close due to a lack of support from the province. Child care workers who are overworked and stressed from the past 15 months never received pandemic pay, even as they provided the emergency child care that allowed essential workers to keep doing their jobs. Child care operators and workers needed to see much more support from the government in these estimates.

We also need to acknowledge the unique moment we are in. The pandemic has left us in the midst of a shecession. Women have suffered the majority of job losses during the pandemic. So we don't just need a recovery; we need a she-covey, and we can't achieve that without affordable child care and investment in child care workers. This is a moment that calls for the kind of investments that are necessary to build the child care system we need for women's equality, for children's education and well-being, and for our province's economic recovery.

Families, parents and children in Ontario are depending on you, Minister, and this government to help them get through the pandemic and into recovery. But at the same time, you are cutting municipal transfers for child care by more than \$45 million. This government, your government, has failed to rise to the moment with these estimates.

With that, I would like to begin my questions. My first question focuses on child care centre closures.

During the pandemic, child care centres have faced huge revenue losses due to a drop in enrolment and increased costs from observing the necessary public health protocols. We've heard from child care advocates that many child care centres have had to permanently close their doors due to a lack of support from your government.

Minister, according to your records, how many child care centres have permanently closed in 2020?

Hon. Stephen Lecce: Thank you for the question.

I do appreciate the message shared about the hard work of ECEs in the province of Ontario and the broader child care sector. Over the pandemic, the government has provided continued support to backstop operators—

Ms. Bhutla Karpoche: Minister, as you know, I only have 20 minutes, and I would just like to know how many child care centres have permanently closed in 2020. It's the number that I'm looking for.

0910

Hon. Stephen Lecce: Yes. As a consequence of investments we've provided through the beginning of the pandemic, including over \$200 million with the federal government to support the operator and additional relief we've provided them—

Ms. Bhutla Karpoche: I don't hear a number.

Hon. Stephen Lecce: I'm going to get there. I just want to provide the context for how that percentage is open.

We've provided continued support through the child care sector from the beginning of the pandemic, including PPE and cleaning—

Ms. Bhutla Karpoche: Sorry, Minister. I do have questions later on where you can talk about investment. I will get to that. But right now, I'm just looking for the number of centres that closed.

Hon. Stephen Lecce: As a consequence of those supports, today, 96% of child care centres have reopened.

Ms. Bhutla Karpoche: No, I'm asking for closed, not reopened. How many centres permanently closed? As the minister responsible for child care, do you have an idea of how many child care centres closed permanently in 2020?

Hon. Stephen Lecce: I know that 96% of child care centres have reopened in the province—97% in the city of Toronto, 97% in Peel, 98% in York—

Ms. Bhutla Karpoche: Okay, so I'll let you know. Actually, this number is something that I've raised in the House numerous times. We have had a net loss of 58 child care centres in 2020. This is the first time we've had a net loss of child care programs in over a decade, and that happened under your watch, Minister. A loss of 58 child care centres means thousands of kids no longer have a spot and thousands of families won't be able to go back to work because there is no longer a space for their children.

The child care sector has been very clear since the pandemic started that they needed much more support.

Why did you not do more to save these spots? Why did you not budget more stabilization funds in these estimates?

Hon. Stephen Lecce: I'd like to turn it over to Phil Graham, the ADM, who can provide an outline of those supports from the beginning of the pandemic to the present.

Mr. Phil Graham: Thank you, Minister.

My name is Phil Graham. I'm the assistant deputy minister for the early years and child care division at the Ministry of Education. I appreciate the opportunity to support answering the question.

The ministry has put in place a number of measures to support early learning and child care over the course of the pandemic. One of the key priorities for us has been to ensure the health and safety of children and of child care workers—

Ms. Bhutla Karpoche: Mr. Graham, I apologize for interrupting, but my question was, why did the minister not invest more for stabilization funding in the child care sector to prevent closures?

Hon. Stephen Lecce: Yes, and I think in order to be able to understand what we've done, it would be helpful

for the ADM responsible to outline the supports provided to the sector from the very beginning of the pandemic.

Ms. Bhutla Karpoche: I'm going to move on to my next question because I don't hear an answer for that and, as you know, we have limited time.

Next, I'd like to focus on the 30,000 child care spaces that were promised. In 2019, your government promised to create 30,000 new child care spaces, but what you didn't say is that it actually represented a reduction from a prior commitment of 45,000 child care spaces, so 15,000—poof—vanished. You essentially made yet another cut to child care in this province, but it was announced as a new investment. Your progress on even this reduced goal is woefully inadequate. According to the Financial Accountability Office, of the 30,000 spaces you promised, only 20,807 new child care spaces have been created to this point, and the vast majority of the new spaces that were created were following the previous government's commitment.

My question to you, Minister, is, how many additional spaces have been approved or constructed since 2019?

Hon. Stephen Lecce: Thank you for the question.

Indeed, over 20,800 spaces have been approved, \$617 million towards the goal of creating up to 30,000 new—

Ms. Bhutla Karpoche: But how many did you approve? I'm not talking about spaces that were announced by the previous government. Since 2019, when you took over the ministry, how many have you approved?

Hon. Stephen Lecce: I would just note that we're on track to approve another 9,200, to get us to the 30,000 goal by 2023-24.

Since 2019, the government has approved 1,814 new space spaces, not 800 as noted in the report. We'll be announcing additional new projects of upwards of 2,400 spaces in short order as a result of two recent project intake streams we launched. The Early Years Capital Program intake for child-care-centres-only projects was launched in December 2020. Submissions were due at the end of January 2021. And the Capital Priorities Program intake for child care capital projects associated with new schools and larger school projects, which was launched in March of this year—submissions were due at the end of May.

I would just note the construction timelines for school child care projects may vary, with some projects able to be completed within one year. We're pushing the system to get them done as soon as possible. But we believe we are on track, and we're going to continue to invest, to build not just spaces but continue to support affordability, which is why we increased the Ontario Child Care Tax Credit by 20% in the most recent budget for working parents.

Ms. Bhutla Karpoche: I'd like to put on the record, Chair, that the Financial Accountability Office of Ontario, an independent office that holds this government—all governments—to account with regard to their facts and figures, says that your government only approved or constructed 800 new child care spaces since 2019. Let me repeat that: An independent office of the Legislative Assembly said that in the last two years, under your ministership, only 800 new child care spaces have been

approved or constructed. So not only are you failing to protect existing child care spaces with the closures, your rate of approval and constructing of new spaces has also fallen well behind your promises.

The FAO says that you have over 9,000 spaces remaining to achieve your commitment of 30,000. I'd like to remind the committee that that is already a reduced goal, a cut of 15,000 spaces, from 45,000. You have promised to complete these spaces by 2023-24, which is next year onwards. According to the FAO, you will miss your target by at least three years.

My question to you, Minister, is: How do you expect to build these remaining 9,000 spaces that you promised by the date of 2023-24 when you have averaged just 400 child care spaces per year to date?

Hon. Stephen Lecce: Thank you for the question. I'd like to turn it over to the deputy minister.

Ms. Nancy Naylor: Thank you very much. I'm Nancy Naylor, and I'm the Deputy Minister of Education.

If I could just briefly return to your previous question—and then I'll speak to your capital inquiry. You had asked about the number of centres, so—

Ms. Bhutla Karpoche: No, I already shared with the committee the number of centres. It was 58 centres that were closed, a net loss of 58 centres.

I'd like to hear how this government is expecting to build 9,000 more spaces in the next two years when you have averaged just 400 per year. What's the plan? Are you going to be able to deliver this promise?

Ms. Nancy Naylor: I would just like to mention that we actually have more spaces in child care at this point than we did in the early stages of the pandemic—

Ms. Bhutla Karpoche: Yes, I understand that. That's because parents are not sending their children to the child care centres yet.

Ms. Nancy Naylor: —so we are up by 2,400 spaces, or—

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Sorry, members—one person at a time. If you want—

Ms. Bhutla Karpoche: Chair, I would like to ask the deputy minister, with all due respect, to just answer my question.

I know the context. I know why we have empty spots right now: because parents and families are not sending their kids to child care centres yet, because the pandemic isn't over. But we're talking about new spaces or, under this government, a net loss of spaces.

So I would like to know, if this government has only averaged 400 new child care spaces—and we've had a net closure of 58 centres, resulting in thousands of child care spaces lost permanently. How do you expect to build 9,000 spaces in the next two years?

Ms. Nancy Naylor: I wonder if I could just clarify. Those are actual spaces—

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Excuse me for one second, please. I have Mr. Oosterhoff, who has raised his hand. MPP Oosterhoff?

Mr. Sam Oosterhoff: Thank you very much, Chair. I'd just like to raise a point of order. I believe it's necessary to

at least give time for the officials and the minister to respond to the question prior to bringing forward another question. There hasn't even been time for a response to those questions posed, so I think we have to make sure that there's a balance there.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Thank you, Mr. Oosterhoff. MPP Karpoche.

Ms. Bhutla Karpoche: Thank you, Chair. Yes, I would love to hear an answer. It's just that, as you know, we have limited time for questioning, and if I don't hear an answer to my question, then I would like, in the interest of time and for the committee's sake, to move on to the next question.

Ms. Nancy Naylor: I just wanted to read into the record that we have an increase in child care spaces from the beginning of the pandemic by 2,400 spaces.

We'd be pleased to take your questions about child care capital and the construction of those spaces, and take those back. Thank you.

0920

Ms. Bhutla Karpoche: Okay. Deputy Minister, if you'd like a minute to please answer the question about the 9,000 child care spaces—what is the government's plan? Will that promise be delivered?

Ms. Nancy Naylor: On that question, I would turn to one of my colleagues, ADM Didem Proulx, who is our director of capital programs.

Ms. Didem Proulx: Thank you, Deputy.

My name is Didem Proulx. I'm the ADM of the capital and business support division at the Ministry of Education.

I'm happy to provide some clarity with respect to the number of spaces that have been approved. I would like to take this opportunity to clarify that, since 2019, over 1,800 spaces have been approved, and those were part of the 2019-20 and 2020-21 capital priorities projects and one stand-alone project. So I would like to correct the reference to 800 places. I think that is important.

I would like to note that the approvals that were made as part of the capital priorities projects are available on the ministry's website. The breakdown of the 1,814 places can be found, for reference.

As the minister mentioned earlier, there are two separate streams for approving new child care projects and spaces for construction: One is acknowledging the fact that child care can and should be placed in schools, so they come forward as part of the larger school build projects through the Capital Priorities Program stream, and others are the stand-alone projects. As the minister mentioned, this year's two cycles, the two intakes, have already happened, and the government intends to continue those cycles on an ongoing basis. That is the plan to bridge the approvals to the commitment.

Ms. Bhutla Karpoche: These 18,000 spaces that the ADM mentioned sounds quite similar to the figure that the minister has mentioned before regarding the 16,000 spaces.

I just want to also put on the record that, as the minister mentioned, constructing child care spaces takes about three to five years, complete start to finish, and so these

are spaces that were started under the previous government. Again, according to the FAO, under this government, under this minister, only 800 new child care spaces have been approved or constructed.

Next, continuing on child care capital expenses: As you know, Minister, creating child care spaces is an investment. They are an investment in our kids, our families and our communities. But investments require funding. You're budgeting \$10 million for child care capital expenses in these estimates. The budget for child care capital expenses in the 2018-19 estimates was over \$100 million.

How do you possibly expect to create these new spaces when you have cut the child care capital budget by more than 90% from what was budgeted before you became minister?

Hon. Stephen Lecce: I'd like to turn that back to Didem to reply.

Ms. Didem Proulx: Thank you so much. I would like to note that what gets reported in the ministry's estimates is—because the government is on PSAB accounting—the capital expenses that reflect when construction happens. When the assets come on stream and their value is reflected on the provincial books, the amount is depreciated. So I wouldn't look at the number that is in the capital line and say that is all that is being spent.

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

Ms. Bhutla Karpoche: Thank you so much.

Ms. Didem Proulx: It reflects the cash flow of the projects that are being funded and what's coming on stream.

Ms. Bhutla Karpoche: From what I understand, no matter what the talking points say, the numbers show that you have cut child care in Ontario.

To summarize what we have just learned: So far, we've learned that in the last year, in 2020, we had our first net loss of child care centres in over a decade. That happened under your watch, with 58 child care centres closed permanently. We learned that you have only approved or constructed 800 child care spaces since 2019. And the FAO projects that you will break your promise of completing 30,000 additional spaces by 2023-24, which is already a reduced goal from the 45,000 additional spaces. And on top of all of that, you have not budgeted nearly enough capital funding to actually build the spaces that the families need.

I think it's pretty clear here that there is no money into child care in this province, whether it's capital expenses or whether it is the funding of spaces. We have just gone through a pandemic. If we want to see a just recovery in this province, we need child care investments, and this government, in its estimates this year, has cut child care funding. That's the direction we are heading. The child care sector has been completely abandoned by this government.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Did you have further questions?

Ms. Bhutla Karpoche: Actually, I do. Thank you.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): You have 20 seconds.

Ms. Bhutila Karpoche: Well, I'll give the 20 seconds to the minister, if he has anything to add.

Hon. Stephen Lecce: I'd just thank the member.

There were 16,000 spaces created last year under our government. We've allocated \$1 billion in capital. We've approved well over 1,500 spaces within schools this summer and—

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): I'm sorry, Minister. With that, the 20 seconds is over.

We go now to the government. MPP Cuzzetto, the floor is yours.

Mr. Rudy Cuzzetto: First, I would like to thank the minister for all his hard work in education during this pandemic, and especially in the Peel board, in Dufferin-Peel, where one of my children does attend.

Minister, can you provide more context on the funding being provided for COVID-19-related expenses for 2020-21 and 2021-22?

Hon. Stephen Lecce: I appreciate the question and the work being done to support the lives of families in Peel, particularly when it comes to countering systemic racism that has manifested within that specific board.

With respect to funding and the resources provided to deal with this unprecedented, once-a-century pandemic, Ontario's resources have really led the nation in supporting priorities like cleaning, distancing, testing, hiring of staff and the safer operations of our schools. We provided landmark support of over \$2.25 billion for safe and healthy schools.

And just to outline at a high level before I turn it over to my colleague ADM Andrew Davis—of the \$1.6 billion, specifically, we had \$100 million to support the complement of health and safety. Specifically, we're working on things like hiring of custodians, HVAC, improvements to Internet connectivity and other critical needs; \$30 million to provide additional PPE for schools; \$70 million for temporary hiring of educators and staff; \$44.5 million for our transportation system; and, of course, a net \$650-million increase, in partnership with the federal government, through the Investing in Canada Infrastructure Program, targeting improvements to the state of our schools for air ventilation and contact-free water fountains. All of these initiatives have incrementally helped further improve safety.

Of the \$309 million the province allocated, a significant component was provided for masking. Ontario really has led the way in our masking program, as we've announced in 2021, with a higher-quality mask, a three-ply mask for both the students and, of course, continued access to materials and PPE for the staff.

Some \$30 million was provided to support supervision, when it comes to hiring and smaller class sizes.

An additional \$50 million was provided to hire 500 additional school-focused public health nurses, which has been, I think, most helpful, not just in contact tracing but in providing thousands of direct interventions with individuals, families and children within our school system; \$23 million for the surveillance testing program that was announced; an additional \$75 million to help hire

900 additional custodians—part of the broader increase we've announced; \$40 million to keep the school transportation system and our buses clean and operating with route protection; and an increase of \$10 million for health and safety training for occasional teachers and casual staff, which we thought was important ahead of the school year. We also increased mental health and special education by another \$10 million, respectively, from that.

I will turn it over to ADM Andrew Davis to build out a bit more detail on those supports.

0930

Mr. Andrew Davis: Thank you, Minister.

My name is Andrew Davis. I'm the assistant deputy minister of the education, labour and finance division for the Ministry of Education.

I'm happy to elaborate on the breakdown, as the minister has suggested, of the \$2.25 billion that has been provided for the health and safety of schools in Ontario.

In total, there was \$309 million that was provided in provincial funding.

As well, there was \$762 million in federal funding that was broken down into two key elements: stage 1, the federal Safe Return to Class Fund for Ontario supports that included \$100 million to complement the health and safety components of the school reopening plans in consultation with the local public health units, including the hiring of custodians, HVAC improvements, Internet connectivity for students, and other local needs; as well, the minister mentioned the funding to support PPE in schools that totalled \$30 million.

As well, there was \$70 million in the hiring of educators.

There was \$496 million—almost \$500 million—that was provided as part of the reserve funding.

And the last component that makes up the \$2.25 billion in support was the \$650-million investment in the Investing in Canada Infrastructure Program, or the ICIP.

As well, I'd like to provide a little bit of a breakdown in regard to the \$309 million that was the targeted provincial supports. This goes to the safety and the well-being of all the students, which is based off of current enrolment forecasts. It's now just slightly over two million kids in our system.

This funding is made up of \$60 million for PPE, so this would be the procurement of medical masks for staff, cloth masks for students; \$30 million to support pressures related to supervision and keeping class sizes smaller, and that helps keep students and staff safe; \$50 million to hire 500 additional school-based nurses in the public health units to provide rapid-response supports to schools and boards, facilitating public health preventive measures, including screening, testing, tracing and mitigation strategies.

There was funding in support of surveillance testing, something that was unique in Ontario, and that totalled \$23 million.

There was \$75 million in funding for over 900 additional custodians, also supporting cleaning supplies for schools and making sure that enhanced rigid and frequent cleaning requirements were in place.

There was \$40 million in cleaning for school buses, to ensure that at the beginning and the end of the day students are in a thoroughly cleaned and safe transportation environment.

There was \$10 million for significant health and safety training for teachers, but also occasional teachers and casual staff, who historically have not been covered. The groups not historically covered were the occasional teachers and casual staff, who were covered by the professional development that was offered. This would be in addition to the permanent staff, who typically is covered in such training.

There was a further \$10 million to support special education students in the classroom, and another \$10 million to support mental health needs of students.

We also provided additional investments and enabled school boards to use their contingency funds to respond to this challenge, which gave boards the ability to make necessary adaptations, such as accessing available community space, hiring more teachers or fully deploying non-timetabled teachers. This would include, for example, allowing school boards temporary access to up to 2% of their operating budget from their reserves, their accumulated surplus, which is its reference in technical accounting terms. For boards that did not have sufficient reserves, the government also provided an additional \$11 million to make sure that they had the equivalent of 2% of their operating reserves.

Supporting parental choice by providing \$18 million to help school boards with principal and administrative supports for remote learning—to ensure accountability in that new system that was developed.

Students had several opportunities throughout the year to re-enter the classroom environment—providing \$50 million in support of improved ventilation, air quality and HVAC system effectiveness in schools.

As well, I think it's also important to mention that, as part of these supports, there was a policy program memorandum, which we call PPMs, that guaranteed that students would receive a quality, consistent and accessible education system while ensuring that students were fully engaged in their learning. The PPM significantly strengthened the minimum expectations and certificates, for an improved experience for those who participated in remote learning.

We had a data-informed approach to reopening for schools that was adapted to changing circumstances.

For 2021-22, we are renewing the \$1.6 billion in COVID-19 supports to ensure that the next year is also safe. This would include the hiring of staff, PPE, additional resources for remote learning technology and supports for mental health. Remote learning will continue to be offered to students this fall, with a deadline for them to choose to enrol in in-class or remote learning of June 1.

We will continue to work closely with the Ministry of Health and the chief medical officer to confirm this summer further details of the health and safety strategies required for the upcoming school year in September.

Hon. Stephen Lecce: That's an update and a thorough analysis of the supports we've provided for school boards

and, really, to keep students and staff safe in the province of Ontario, which the Chief Medical Officer of Health has confirmed. Thank you for that update.

Mr. Rudy Cuzzetto: Minister, every student in Ontario's publicly funded schools has the right to an equal opportunity in education without discrimination. As a parent who has sat on the parent council for over 15 years here, at Dufferin-Peel, I continue hearing from parents in my riding that there are systematic barriers to educational success that are disadvantaging marginalized students.

Could you tell me what steps you have been taking to break down barriers for Black, Indigenous and racialized students, those who live in lower-income housing, and those with special education needs?

Hon. Stephen Lecce: I appreciate the question, and I want to assure the member that we are absolutely seized with countering the racism and discrimination that can manifest within our schools, affecting and afflicting so many young people from different communities, including racialized, Black, Indigenous, LGBTQ and other students who continue to face that difficulty. It's obviously unacceptable in this province, which is why we took decisive action earlier in the mandate to counter the disproportionate impact of the Ministry of Education-school board policies that really affected Black children. The fact of the matter is that we have examples where discretionary suspensions were disproportionately impacting young Black children and children with special education needs.

0940

We have a system in the province of Ontario that we inherited where we were still streaming in grade 9, one of the only jurisdictions in the OECD to do so that early. We resolved ourselves to tackle some of the systemic barriers that held young people back.

The first thing we did, for the first time in Canadian history, according to our understanding, was that we called in a supervisor in Peel, in your region, because of racism; it was the first time that it was not for fiscal or financial purposes. That underscores a commitment to challenge the status quo and really improve the lives of these young students, who deserve better.

We took action to end streaming. The grade 9 math curriculum, which will be unveiled shortly, will demonstrate that commitment and give all young people greater opportunity to succeed and really lift the potential of these young people.

We also eliminated discretionary suspensions this past September from kindergarten to grade 3—again, disproportionately impacting Black and racialized children in the province. That seemed unacceptable, and we resolved to fix it.

The research overwhelmingly suggests that students perform best when they see themselves reflected in their classrooms, in their leadership, in their school boards. We believe that there's a regulation, 274, that impeded the ability of principals to hire merited candidates of diversity. In Peel, for example, there often would not be representation, a reflection of the community within our schools, because the former Liberal government, under Premier

Wynne, introduced a regulation that denied that type of flexibility and choice to find the best candidate—yes, a merited candidate, a highly qualified candidate, but a diverse candidate—to best reflect the diversity and beauty of that community. We’ve eliminated that regulation to provide that flexibility and to achieve greater emphasis on merit and diversity.

In addition, we undertook a commitment to improve the professional development of our staff, of our school boards, of our elected trustees, of the teachers themselves, all of whom are committed to anti-Black racism and broader anti-discrimination programming. But we had not really achieved significant professional development in this area, particularly when it came to our school board staff—which we have offered, expanded and provided to so many trustees, school board leaders and, of course, to all educators in the province, when we decided, at the beginning of the school year last year, that one of our professional development days, a component of it, would be dedicated to countering racism in schools, to best empower educators to have the solutions and the confidence to continue to be allies in our classrooms and to challenge that type of hurtful language and action that can very much affect a child early in their life.

We have expanded the Indigenous Graduation Coach Program. We’ve expanded it for Black students as well, nearly doubling that investment.

Just yesterday, I announced additional supports for a variety of very thoughtful, hard-working groups and organizations that help promote Black student success and excellence, leadership development, job support and training, mental health, academic supports, and even engagement with their parents to support them, the whole ecosystem around them, recognizing that there is so much more we must do in this area.

We’re very proud of the work we have done because of the voices of so many who felt ignored for so long in our system.

And yes, it was a Progressive Conservative government that took meaningful action, in the context of equity, to empower every single child to succeed, to deny those—

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

Hon. Stephen Lecce: —who seek to perpetrate this hate from our schools.

It’s why we also worked with the Ontario College of Teachers to strengthen the sanction in their regulation against any educator who may use racist language within schools or in classrooms, recognizing that, overwhelmingly, these individuals are very much committed to inclusion. But when it happens, there must be accountability for the child and for the parent, which we have ensured through the strengthening of the Ontario College of Teachers program. And I will just underscore the ongoing commitment to do more, particularly when it comes to the lens of streaming in the province of Ontario. We’re just very grateful for the partnership of so many communities, ethnocultural, faith communities and minority communities, in the province of Ontario for using their voice and

working with this government to achieve this type of transformational change. I recognize, certainly under the current context, quite obviously there’s more work we must do.

Mr. Rudy Cuzzetto: How much time is left, Chair?

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): You’ve got one minute left.

Mr. Rudy Cuzzetto: Minister, I want to ask you about regulation 274, the benefit for students and why this change was so necessary at this time.

Hon. Stephen Lecce: Regulation 274 was introduced by the former Liberal government that provided teacher unions in the province the absolute right of hiring based on their seniority in the union. It was antithetical and contrary to the interests I think parents want of the system working for their children—hiring the best educator with the highest level of competence and knowledge and experience and, yes, diversity, to help nurture and improve the quality of learning and create the most positive space possible for these young people to succeed academically.

We knew this regulation was contrary to the interests of young people, and it’s why we committed ourselves to abolish it. We are grateful that the principals’ council in Ontario advocated for it, the trustees’ council supported it. So many—

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): With that, I’m sorry to say that your time is up.

We go back to the official opposition. MPP Karpoche.

Ms. Bhutla Karpoche: MPP Stiles will be leading, but before I pass it on to her, I just have a couple more questions.

Minister, Ontario has repeatedly downloaded the management of child care to municipalities and, as a result, municipalities are responsible for actually running child care systems in our province. As well, municipalities are having to pay for child care because, as evidenced in the estimates, the province isn’t investing enough in child care—far from it.

As Ontario enters negotiations with the federal government, we need to ensure that the knowledge and expertise that municipalities can provide are not left on the sidelines. The city of Toronto wants to be an official partner in the discussions on the new Canada-wide early learning and child care plan, and the city would like to be part of the discussions as soon as possible in order to bring the expertise of managing the second-largest child care system in Canada to the table.

My question to you is: Will you ensure municipalities, as experts and those who will have the responsibility of implementing whatever is negotiated, will have a seat at the table in these discussions?

Hon. Stephen Lecce: I appreciate the question.

We know that child care is going to be a critical enabler of our recovery, supporting labour market participation for women and men, but I definitely appreciate—

Ms. Bhutla Karpoche: Will they be a part of the discussions?

Hon. Stephen Lecce: As we’ve already committed publicly, but I will reaffirm today, our municipal partners

are critical to this. We continue to engage with them directly, including through AMO, about the way forward.

It's also why you will note that, as I've said in the Legislature, the child care costs in Ontario are borne in part by parent fees and the province of Ontario and the residuals by the federal government. We know the feds—and I think the member and I would agree on this point—have a significant role to play in upping that very small, literally 2.5%, contribution.

We're going to be negotiating, working with all parties, including our municipal stakeholders, to get the best deal for Ontario that provides flexibility for families and, ultimately, affordability, which is really important given how expensive child care is as a consequence of the former Liberal government's policies for 15 years.

Ms. Bhutla Karpoche: Thank you. I will be holding the minister accountable and ensuring that the municipalities do have a seat at the table in these discussions.

Regarding consultation, everything we've talked about so far, the closures of the child care centres, the lack of capital spending, your failed progress on the 30,000 spaces promised, the needs of child care workers—these are all well known by stakeholders in the child care sector. I've learned a great deal about the child care system from a number of groups in the last few months that I've been critic. I only got the portfolio less than a year ago, and I've learned a great deal from them.

I'm wondering, given that the minister didn't even know how many child care centres actually closed in 2020, how many times you have personally met with the Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care, the central advocacy group for early childhood education and care?

Hon. Stephen Lecce: I continue to meet with child care operators and advocates across Ontario—

Ms. Bhutla Karpoche: I'm asking about the Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care, the largest and the central advocacy group. How many times have you met with them?

Hon. Stephen Lecce: I have met with, on a constant basis—it's a record on my social media. We publicize these meetings, these dialogues—

Ms. Bhutla Karpoche: I did not see the Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care on your social media. That is why I'm asking.

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Hon. Stephen Lecce: And I'm committing to the member that we have regular discussions with all regions of the province, with district managers—

Ms. Bhutla Karpoche: Okay. How about with the Association of Early Childhood Educators Ontario, the professional association for ECEs in Ontario? How many times have you met with them?

Hon. Stephen Lecce: We have met with the College of Early Childhood Educators and a variety of stakeholders that are—

Ms. Bhutla Karpoche: Not the college; the association that represents the workers, the professional association of ECEs in Ontario. How many times have you met with them?

Hon. Stephen Lecce: We continue to meet with stakeholders to listen to the voices—

Ms. Bhutla Karpoche: Not stakeholders—I'm being very specific here. How many times have you met with the Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care, the central advocacy group for child care in Ontario, and how many times have you met with the Association of Early Childhood Educators Ontario, the professional association of ECEs in Ontario? It's a number I'm looking for.

Hon. Stephen Lecce: Yes, and I'm just affirming that we have and we continue to meet on a local, regional, provincial basis with advocacy groups in this area for the promotion of child care.

Ms. Bhutla Karpoche: Thank you, Minister. The actual answer is zero. You have never met with either group. The previous Ministers of Education in the last decades have met, but neither you nor Minister Thompson has ever met with the two groups that make up the largest advocacy groups representing the workers and families in this province.

The child care sector is in a crisis. This government has not provided the help that is needed, and they have not even listened—they have failed to consult with key groups that represent child care stakeholders across the sector.

What is the aversion to listening to the experts, the people at the front lines in terms of what is needed to be done in the child care sector? As minister, how can you do your job without consulting these really important stakeholder groups?

Hon. Stephen Lecce: Well, the ADM responsible for child care meets with them every other week.

But specifically in the context of how we make the best decisions for child care, every single week we meet with operators on the front lines, ECEs, parents who pay the fees, with individuals who have skin in the game. We have heard the expression of their perspective—that they want to see child care flexible and affordable. We've done so in the context of the reopening over the past year, just like we have done so in the context of the federal negotiations. That's going to continue with an emphasis on driving those imperatives.

Ms. Bhutla Karpoche: I will pass it on to MPP Stiles now, but I just want to request the minister—please meet with the Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care and the Association of Early Childhood Educators Ontario, and maybe you will have a realistic picture of what is happening on the ground in the child care sector and what you need to do.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Before we go to MPP Stiles, just a note, for form: If either the minister or the member wants to speak, please raise your hands. I will recognize you. We'll go from there. I've had too much people talking over each other. I need to have one conversation at a time.

With that, MPP Stiles, the floor is yours. You have 13 minutes, roughly.

Ms. Marit Stiles: Good morning. I want to start by recapping a little bit. Last week, we talked about the decision to keep schools closed against the advice of most

medical experts and the Chief Medical Officer of Health. I want to share with the minister and the committee that I continue to hear from parents who are extremely disappointed that the government failed to make schools safe enough to reopen this year. Later this week, patios, bars, restaurants are going to begin to open. Many of them still don't have the details that they need to do that properly. But I have to say, it's hard not to feel like kids are once again not a priority for this government, and that's certainly what we've been hearing.

I want to share, in their response to the Premier's "To whom it may concern" letter, the Ontario science advisory table reiterated that school closures are harmful. They said, "We believe these mental health indicators represent the tip of the iceberg and that children and youth mental health will present significant long-term challenges during our recovery from the pandemic. School closures also create ripple effects" that "include losses of skills development, losses in lifetime earnings for Ontarians, losses of social connections and, for some Ontarians, even missing meals and other critical health services. Like so much of the pandemic, these harms and missed benefits are inequitable"—we know that, Chair—"those whom the pandemic is hitting hardest are also hardest hit by school closures." And then they went on to say, "Ontario should now start developing recovery plans to address the long-term mental health and educational problems arising from COVID-19-related school closures. This will require investments."

Minister, my first question to you is, who in your ministry is leading up the education recovery program?

Hon. Stephen Lecce: We do agree that this is a generational challenge.

Yael Ginsler, the ADM who has been working very hard on our learning recovery plan, will be able to speak to the details of that plan.

Ms. Marit Stiles: I don't need all the details right now. I just want to know who is leading it. Is that the answer, the ADM?

Hon. Stephen Lecce: Yes.

Ms. Marit Stiles: Okay, that's what I need. Thank you. Let me continue. Maybe they can help a little bit later, but I want to move on.

According to the COVID-19 and Education Disruption in Ontario: Emerging Evidence on Impacts report that was just released, to date, there are no provincial data on learning loss available in Ontario. I want to say, Minister, I know these researchers. I talk to them regularly. I think this is a gap that they have mentioned and they've noted with government for many months now.

The same report cited estimates by Quebec economists, who estimated a decrease in overall learning of approximately 1.4 months due to 3.2 months of school closures in the spring, and that the socio-economic skills gap could increase by as much as 30%. We know teachers and education workers are going above and beyond to help reach these students and keep them engaged, but Ontario schools have been closed for more than 20 weeks.

How is the ministry measuring the impacts of the pandemic with respect to education recovery when you don't have the data, and how are you setting any goals to address that?

Hon. Stephen Lecce: Thank you for the question.

There is \$85.5 million specifically targeting learning loss, but I would like to turn it over to Yael Ginsler to provide context on that.

Ms. Yael Ginsler: Thank you. My name is Yael Ginsler. I am the ADM for the student achievement division here at the Ministry of Education. I'm pleased to respond.

I will say that, to understand the impact of learning disruptions, the ministry has reviewed Ontario data. We have looked to other jurisdictions as well, and we've also heard from stakeholders, including school board leaders, teachers, principals, parents and students, as well as community partners.

Some of the data that we've looked at includes the decline in enrolment—so we have seen a decline, particularly in JK and SK students in kindergarten. As a result, we know that we have to put specific attention to early reading, and so Ontario's Learning Recovery and Renewal Plan does provide specific investment funding, and efforts and supports for teachers. There will be work that we're doing over the summer to help educators, including a guide on effective instruction in reading. So that will be an area of focus, for sure.

We have also looked at reports around mental health and well-being. This is a big priority for us in the ministry, and we have dedicated funding to support mental health and well-being going into the next school year as well.

We've also looked at some of our big boards that have significant and sophisticated research departments—so school boards like Toronto District School Board and others that have been serving parents and students—regarding this year and the impact of learning disruptions this year. What they've seen, again, is some decline in reading, so that remains an area of focus for us.

The other big piece for us is engagement. We know that students have become increasingly disengaged. We do believe that school boards are best positioned to know their students and know why they've disengaged. Students will disengage for a variety of reasons. For some, it may be the context in which they're learning at home. For others, they are working—

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): I am sorry, ADM; I have a request from MPP Stiles.

Ms. Marit Stiles: I apologize, ADM, but I found that helpful, in terms of where you're getting the data from.

I will say, just as an aside, it's great that the Toronto District School Board collects so much data. They really have an exceptional research unit. But they do this in isolation, in spite of the government's inability to collect all this data. It has been really disappointing to see. I know for the researchers who track this, there's a massive data gap that I hope the ministry is considering addressing at some point. I can't think of a better time than now.

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I do want to leapfrog off of something that the ADM just mentioned. She mentioned the missing students. While we know that Ontario schools have been closed for longer periods of time than any other jurisdiction in Canada and, indeed, I think in North America, school boards reported significant numbers of students who didn't return to in-person learning and didn't register for remote learning, and that's not even counting the disengaged students who were mentioned just now. In fact, there was a March 5 memo from the ministry that I came across that said—when I saw this, it jumped out at me—that last fall, school boards reported “significant unexpected enrolment decline as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic of about 40,000 fewer students.” Some 40,000 children did not show up for school. Irvin Studin of the Institute for 21st Century Questions has called these kids the “third bucket.” They aren't in physical school. They aren't in virtual school.

My question, then, to the minister is, what do we know about where those students went, and what have you been doing to track them? I can tell you that for the teachers, the other education workers out there, the researchers, this weighs heavily. How many went to home-schooling? How many are in learning pods? How many moved to—your preference—the private sector? Minister, I want to know what you've been doing to track down where those 40,000 missing students are.

Hon. Stephen Lecce: Thank you for the question.

First off, I should note that when the enrolment decline took place last year, we provided an over \$300-million stabilization fund to the sector to not see any decrease in funding, which I think was well received by the school boards across the province.

There is specific focus on student re-engagement, and I'd like to turn to the deputy minister to outline that.

Ms. Nancy Naylor: Thank you. To the member's question, I just want to say that we have been tracking enrolment. The enrolment declined this year. It is a significant concern for school boards and for us.

One of the things we could do this year, as the minister said, was make sure that funding was stabilized so that the capacity to serve those students is maintained, and we have repeated that—

Ms. Marit Stiles: Sorry.

Ms. Nancy Naylor: —in the upcoming school year—

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Excuse me, Deputy Minister.

MPP Stiles, you had a point?

Ms. Marit Stiles: Yes. My apologies, Deputy Minister, but my question is, where did the students go? Are you tracking them? I've heard now a couple of points about how much money you stabilized the system with.

I just want to point out to those watching and for the record, basically what the government is saying they did is that—under the GSN, Grants for Student Needs, funding formula, those reduced enrolment figures would usually trigger reductions in the amount of funding that school boards get, and the government said, “No, it's okay. You

don't have to give it all back.” But they did in fact claw back about \$85 million from school boards as a result, and I just want to mention that and put that on the record.

I also want to say to the minister, what I'm trying to find out is, where are the students? Where did they go, and what is your government doing to track these students?

Ms. Nancy Naylor: I was getting to that.

Hon. Stephen Lecce: Yes. Chair, the deputy minister was about to respond and if you'd permit her just a minute, she will do so.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Deputy Minister?

Ms. Nancy Naylor: Thank you. There were clues about which students were missing and where they were in some of the funding and—

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): I apologize. Again, introduce yourself by name and title.

Ms. Nancy Naylor: My name is Nancy Naylor. I'm the Deputy Minister of Education.

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

Ms. Nancy Naylor: As I was saying, there were clues in the data that we were getting from school boards. First and foremost, school boards themselves know their students, and they were reaching out in every possible way to find those students, to encourage them to participate in the school year, either virtually or through any means.

Many schools hired extra attendance counsellors. They hired retired principals. They reached out to families that had decided to home-school and offered to provide packets of information. They offered school support services for students who weren't participating actively in class, and they committed to track those students and bring them back as soon as possible and as soon as they felt comfortable—

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

Ms. Nancy Naylor: —returning to class. In particular, a group of students that boards and the ministry were very keen on were the international students and the ESL students—

Ms. Marit Stiles: If I may—

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Ms. Stiles?

Ms. Marit Stiles: Sorry. What I'm hearing from you is that boards did a lot of this work, which I appreciate. Frankly, they've shared that information with me too. I was looking for more on what the ministry had actually done.

I know we only have a couple of minutes left, so I want to move on, because I want to say that the ministry—it was acknowledged here just now. The minister announced that he had clawed back \$85 million from boards because those students didn't come back. In May, the minister announced \$85 million “to support learning recovery and renewal in response to the ongoing pandemic”—that's a quote from their press releases.

Minister, is it a coincidence that the budget for learning recovery is the same amount as the savings left over from last year's loss of those 40,000 students?

Hon. Stephen Lecce: I'm not sure what \$85 million the member is referring to.

What I can speak to is the fact that we put in place a plan months ago for learning recovery that focuses on—

Ms. Marit Stiles: You should know, Minister. You clawed back \$85 million—

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): MPP Stiles, raise your hand. I'll acknowledge.

Hon. Stephen Lecce: What I can confirm, because I have no context of where the member discovered that \$85 million—what I can say about our plan is that it's focused on early reading and math. There's an educator guide outlining evidence-based, high-yield classroom strategies to support effective instruction in reading for students from kindergarten to grade 3, as well as another \$20 million specifically for reading assessments and supports.

There's \$40 million for the math strategy to support school boards, to hire board- and school-based positions to support curriculum implementation and educator training. There's expansion of tutoring through Mathify and Eureka! in English and French—

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

We go back to the government. MPP Barrett.

Mr. Toby Barrett: I am very interested in the new math curriculum, so in my 20 minutes I do wish to raise that issue—but before I do that, just a bit of a follow-up on MPP Cuzzetto's questions.

As we know, regulation 274 was revoked in the interests of bringing in a system with respect to hiring practices of teachers, to better reflect a merit-based system and to better reflect the diversity of much of the province of Ontario.

My question on this one, before I get into the math curriculum, is: Why was this done? What is the benefit for students as far as this new emphasis on merit and diversity?

Hon. Stephen Lecce: Thank you very much for this question.

For over a decade under the former government, teachers in the province were hired, really, through a convoluted system that preferred seniority over skills and really emphasized seniority over ability, over diversity and lived experience of teachers. We believe, our government and our Premier have been absolutely clear, that the system has to work for and serve students. This is why we are here. This is who we are here to advance those interests for.

In a prior negotiation with the teacher federations, the former Wynne government allowed for seniority-based hiring as a concession to the unions in that negotiation, which was absolutely contrary to the best interests of students in Ontario and their parents, who demand that the best educator, with the greatest level of knowledge, experience—lived experience—and especially diversity, triumphs in the hiring of new educators in this province. It was under our government that we eliminated that regulation and restored a meritocracy in this province for the benefit of all students, so that the best candidate, a diverse candidate, can be hired, can be promoted and can lead instruction and inspire the next generation of young people in the province of Ontario.

We believe these changes will further enable principals to swiftly hire the best candidate for the job. That is, I think, a fair expectation of parents in the province of Ontario—that the best individual will lead instruction within their class. That's exactly why we took action, following the advice of trustees and principals for over a decade, calling for the restoration of that principle.

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That's why we have put in place a requirement for that regulation to have been rescinded and for boards to return to a system that really emphasizes qualification, diversity and merit. We are very proud of that work, part of our broader aim to improve the system and to ensure that excellence in teaching continues in this province.

We also acknowledge as part of this that there's an equity angle to this as well, and the member will note that. It's not just about ensuring the best individual being selected by the principal for that community; it's also permitting an element of discretion for the principal to hire an educator, for example, who's highly merited but who reflects the community with which they now work or live.

I think that is an important change and transformation that will improve education for students in Ontario and assure parents, who have the reasonable expectation that the very best individual be selected at the front of the class.

Mr. Toby Barrett: Thank you for that, Minister.

Just to wrap up that previous discussion: I had an opportunity to raise that issue a fair bit in my riding last fall. I'm not necessarily in an ethnically diverse riding compared to so many, but I feel that's very, very important.

To go back to the question I do wish to ask as well, about the new math course at the elementary level, I will say, that's something I've been hearing about for years and years—the issue of the teaching of math in school. We do know that under the previous government, math scores dropped under the evaluation system. This was very well documented.

I use an example: A friend of mine is an ironworker, a senior member of the ironworkers' union, and has responsibility for training for new people coming in—very important in that business. We worked together on farm machinery and tractors and things like this. Oftentimes, I'll show up with a young fellow who wants to help out. The first thing my friend the ironworker says—I introduce the young guy. He looks at him. He doesn't say hello. He says, "What's 7 times 8?" And depending on the answer, or lack of an answer, we take it from there. I won't ask members of the committee; I hope everybody knows the answer. He uses that as an example of what we lost in the past with respect to multiplication and addition, of course.

There's one reason I favour the introduction of this new curriculum at the elementary level. I would like to get some more detail on why we brought this in. And secondly, what do we hope to achieve, what are our overall goals?

Hon. Stephen Lecce: I appreciate that question very much.

The fact is, in this province, under the former government, we saw stagnation, at best, or a real decline in

math performance. The majority of students in grade 6 did not meet the provincial standard and pass that standard. That's down 61% in 2009, and only 58% met that standard in grade 3.

It's quite obvious that we needed to make a real change to how we educate students with respect to numeracy and strengthen the everyday math problem-solving application that was missing from the curriculum.

The last time the elementary curriculum and the grade 9 math curriculum, in fact, were updated and unveiled in Ontario was 2005. YouTube had just been launched. Twitter did not exist. The first iPhone had not even come out yet. The world has changed, the marketplace has changed, the economy has changed, and yet the curriculum had not. So we saw real regression in math scores year over year—unacceptable and contrary to the economic interest, the competitive interest that our young people need when they graduate our K to 12 public education system, going into the post-secondary system or into the job market. That was a missing skill set that they needed.

We undertook a review of our curriculum with one aim, which is to empower young people to use everyday mathematical problem-solving, to further enshrine financial literacy in the early grades and to better prepare students for today's competitive marketplace, with an emphasis on those jobs of tomorrow by helping them learn how to code.

These are real-life changes—coding, financial literacy—all of which have now dropped down to grade 1, introducing those foundational skills. That's part of our four-year, \$200-million math strategy to lift up math scores and to ensure that the curriculum reflects the needs of young people, including making the curriculum more relevant to the life of a young person, distilling this information down from theory into everyday application—helping a young person understand the concept of debt, of interest, of rent, of a mortgage; understand the real-life applications and decisions that a young person must make. We're very proud of that emphasis and of that change to better equip the next generation with the skills they're going to need to succeed—because it remains a challenge in this province and country, where young people have twice the rate of youth unemployment.

I would argue that in part, the challenge this province faces when it comes to our young people is that our math curriculum is not aligned with the needs of the job market. We are not providing a curriculum that is related to the skills young people need in their lives and in their future jobs.

That's why we have modernized and totally overhauled the grade 1 to 8 curriculum, and it's why we are unveiling a new grade 9 math curriculum that will emphasize the critical skills of financial literacy, computational skills, coding, data management—some of the foundational knowledge that we believe will help young people succeed in their education system, and most especially as we aspire for them to get good-paying jobs related to their interests.

I will note that there's also a component focused on education training for our teachers, really supporting

them—over 20,000 educators who are provided with professional development specifically on the curriculum. We really want to strengthen their knowledge, which is why we're providing subsidized courses for them to upgrade their skills. It's also why we continuously provide professional development training throughout the school year, to aid them in learning the new curriculum and in rallying behind the competencies that this curriculum helps to educate on.

I believe, so far, we've received a great deal of support right across the sector for our new curriculum. I think it underscores a broader commitment of the government to not just fix the problem that we inherited when it came to mathematical skills not being at the standard we want, but to make math more relevant to the lives of young people.

It's also why we have required the next generation of educators in Ontario to meet a grade 9 math standard, to take a math proficiency test.

We believe that at every level, we have to challenge the status quo on how we educate young people.

With a multi-pillared approach of strengthening professional development of teachers, a more modern, skills-aligned curriculum, more resources for tutoring in English and French for students, as well as continuous renewal of those skills within the broader curriculum, I think it's going to make a big difference as we look forward and we lift up those math scores, year over year.

Mr. Toby Barrett: Chair, if I could jump in again: Further to the importance of math for young people—and I was young once. It's very important for people my age. I had the benefit of what I thought was a fairly good one-room school education, although the teacher that we had for addition—I guess we didn't see eye to eye. I'm not very good at adding, but I had to go on and take grade 13 geometry and algebra, and trigonometry, whatever that is. I got two degrees in economics, and I'm not very good at adding. That goes back to a failure in the system, maybe back when I was in grade 4. I farm part-time, working out acreage and fertilizer applications. I was purchasing firewood this weekend. If you can't do all this stuff in your head, it's kind of embarrassing in doing business.

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So when you talk about what we're doing with young people—and I'm quite heartened to see this is moving into grade 9. Just a little bit more on how this is going to help us as Ontario roars back to life and we all get back to doing business and working with numbers in a very practical way—maybe not trigonometry.

Hon. Stephen Lecce: I do agree that there is hope on the horizon when it comes to our broader recovery—human health and economic. I believe in part by enabling young people to have the skills they're going to need to succeed in the labour market, we're really setting them up to succeed after a year of unprecedented disruption. We're going to need them to succeed to support our recovery and to live productive lives in our society.

When it comes to the new grade 9 math curriculum, it really builds on the learning from the 2020 elementary math curriculum. It provides students with opportunities

to further develop key math skills in number, data, algebra, geometry, measurement to help prepare them for their senior program and for the pathways they choose—in the skilled trades, in post-secondary, and, of course, if they enter into a career.

We are also really providing an emphasis on strengthening student learning in data literacy, to develop critical thinking skills on how data is used to influence and make informed decisions. What we're trying to do is make these concepts relevant to the day-to-day life of a child, the day-to-day life of a student and young person in the decisions they must make.

It builds on financial literacy learning that is embedded all the way from grade 1 through grade 8, to ensure that they have a continuum of learning in this area of financial literacy, going right through grades 1 through 8 and in grade 9, as well as in grade 10 through the recently revised career studies course that we unveiled earlier. That includes mathematical modelling as mandatory learning. That's the process to solve real-life problems and make real-world decisions using mathematics. In fact, in the careers course, we mandate as a requirement of graduation that a student must complete a personal budget for the year after graduation.

These are real-life applications of learning that I think are going to make a difference. It's the differentiator between what was under the former government and what is under this government—by working with a variety of partners and math teacher leads who helped support the development of this curriculum.

How much time, Chair?

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

Hon. Stephen Lecce: Okay. I will turn it over to Yael Ginsler to build upon some of the additional details in the grade-1-to-8 curriculum.

Ms. Yael Ginsler: I am pleased to talk about the elementary grade-1-to-8 math curriculum.

Just as the minister outlined, we did implement, starting this September, the new elementary math curriculum to better prepare our students for work in a rapidly changing world, to strengthen their math competencies, and to improve their grades in math. This is all part of our four-year math strategy—the \$200-million math strategy that really is designed to improve student performance in math and prepare them for their future.

The new curriculum, very much as the minister said, is starting in grade 1. As part of algebra, there is now mandatory learning on coding, which is new for our curriculum and definitely will prepare them for all that future employment work and bring them some greater technological fluency. We have added new learning on financial literacy that also begins in grade 1 and is now a new strand. We've also added a new strand on social-emotional learning skills. Taught in the context of the other strands, this is learning that helps students think positively so that they can go out and say, "I am good at math"—so think positively, learn from their mistakes, persevere, and build their identity as a capable math

learner. We are also more explicit around that fundamental learning in math, in those concepts and skills and numbers. And we've also, of course, updated it to make it more relevant, including current examples, so that students can really connect math with their everyday life.

We've also streamlined the curriculum. There are fewer expectations, and I think in the context, too, of learning recovery and renewal this means students and teachers will have more time to go into more depth on important mathematical concepts as they go into the next school year.

We also, of course, launched our new curriculum on a new digital curriculum platform for the—

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

Ms. Yael Ginsler: This curriculum platform will allow parents, the public and students, as well as teachers, of course, to be able to access the curriculum in a more user-friendly way.

There are lots of supports for educators in implementing the new curriculum.

This year, when we did launch the curriculum, we did support it, including with webinars. We partnered with the Ontario association of math educators and principals' associations. As the minister said, there were actually over 22,000 participants in these webinars, and we also supported it with over 145 elementary math curriculum resources. These are classroom-ready resources that teachers can use in their classroom to support lesson plans on financial literacy, on coding, and on fundamental math concepts and skills. In addition to that, we provided long-range plans to help them—thinking through how you would teach the curriculum.

Very important too—we provided educators with a resource on high-impact instructional practices. This is a resource on how you teach math; what are the different ways that you can bring those math concepts to life in your classroom—including the power of direct instruction, when teachers teach mathematical concepts directly to students, and when that's appropriate.

So there were lots of opportunities to support educators this year.

We will continue to support educators. As we launch the new grade 9 math curriculum, again, we are prepared to support educators with resources and webinars immediately to help them with the implementation of that.

We're really excited about the new elementary math curriculum, and we have had a lot of positive feedback from administrators and parents around the power of the new math curriculum—

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Thank you. I'm sorry to say we're out of time.

Before we go back to the official opposition, I am declaring a 10-minute recess. We will be back in 10 minutes.

The committee recessed from 1027 to 1038.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): We're back in session.

I understand, MPP Karpoche, that you have joined us virtually. Could you confirm your identity and location in Ontario?

Ms. Bhutila Karpoche: Bhutila Karpoche, here in Ontario.

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

With that, we go to the official opposition. MPP Stiles, the floor is yours.

Ms. Marit Stiles: I'm going to go back to some of the questions I was asking earlier—but I was listening to the minister's comments on the government members' questions.

I want to just take one moment to talk about this new math curriculum for grade 9 that the government has been talking about. This is absolutely a critical piece of the destreaming of grade 9, which I have some experience with, because certainly one of the schools in my riding—when I was a trustee, actually—was one of the first to destream grade 9. I had a lot of experience and a lot of conversations with teachers, principals and others on the front line through that experience, and they talked a lot about the really critical piece of all this which is making this work—which is curriculum, but also other supports.

The executive director of the Council of Ontario Directors of Education, Tony Pontes, said on Tuesday in the *Globe and Mail* “that he was told by Ministry of Education officials that they had completed work on the new curriculum”—which we sort of heard here, but the problem is, it's sitting on the education minister's, Stephen Lecce's, desk.

We've also heard concerns from others, including the coordinator of secondary math at the Toronto District School Board—fears that if this government is going to do what it did last time to the elementary school curriculum changes, which was released only in late June, that means that teachers will not have time to prepare for the current academic year. We've heard these same concerns again, reiterated by many, including the director of education of the Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board and others. They're all waiting, Minister.

I wonder if you could tell them when you are actually going to get around to approving this new curriculum so that they can get to work on implementing it?

Hon. Stephen Lecce: I appreciate the question.

I can confirm that in very short order, we will be unveiling this curriculum. For the benefit of students, it will provide a continuum from the elementary math curriculum.

There's \$300,000 set aside in the implementation to support math subject associations to provide teachers with training and classroom-ready resources, and additional funding for the principals' association to create resources and provide training to principals.

I should also mention that, like the elementary curriculum, the new grade 9 destreamed curriculum, which will replace the applied and academic grade 9 math options, will also include supports for parents, a parent guide, to help them and instruct them in the context of how they navigate these changes, and really to support historically disadvantaged groups by providing more equity

investments for racialized, Indigenous, First Nation, Métis, Inuit students in Ontario.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Excuse me, Minister. I have to [*inaudible*] from the MPP.

MPP Stiles.

Ms. Marit Stiles: Thank you. I will say to the minister, I didn't hear a date. Soon is not soon enough. It's June 8 today, and the clock is ticking. As you may be aware—I don't know—this is a really busy time for education workers and teachers. I think people are really down to the wire. What this says to me is that you're setting up, once again, educators and students for failure in the fall, and that's very unfortunate.

I'm going to continue on. I want to recap what we learned in the last 20-minute session. We learned that the government did nothing to address the loss of those 40,000 students talked about last year. Boards were certainly scrambling, working really hard, but the government did not seem to have any plan in place to do anything to address that loss.

We learned that the government has a plan to give teachers a guide to help address reading loss. That's it; that's the plan. The minister claims not to know that his own ministry clawed back \$85 million from boards, from the GSNs, in the middle of a pandemic, and the minister didn't seem to want to comment on the coincidence that this is the same amount that the government is then devoting to recovery.

One of the drivers of those 40,000 lost students I think very clearly was a lack of faith in the plan for safe schools. The repeated closures over the last year and a half were really hard on kids, on their families. Every time the ministry changed tack, classes needed to be reorganized. We heard students were continuing to drop like flies from their schools and from online.

Looking ahead to September, many education workers and families are saying they are feeling a sense of *déjà vu*. They're waiting to see if school is going to return as normal. And the result of all this is that boards are considering hybrid models of learning, a return to quadesters, which, I'm going to say, I think for most families, most students, certainly has not been a great experience and there are a lot of issues around that. And as we confirmed last week with you, Minister, boards not even knowing if their funding will be cut further in the new year, which is really unheard of—to have that level of uncertainty.

Once again, the government is cutting, not investing. Indeed, as I have raised here previously, the Financial Accountability Office confirms the government is spending \$800 million less this year alone on education.

I want to spend some time today looking at what plans are in place and what funds are available in the hopes that there actually is a plan for safe school return in the fall, and that the government isn't in fact taking a sit-back-and-hope-for-the-best approach. I hope that is a thing of the past.

I want to go back and look at reviewing more details of some of this time-limited COVID-19 funding that we've talked about.

On May 4, 2021, the province announced that the government is making more than \$1.6 billion available in COVID-19-related funds for the 2021-22 school year. Minister, how much of that \$1.6 billion is coming from the Ministry of Education's own funding, provincial funds?

Hon. Stephen Lecce: One hundred per cent of the contribution is coming from the government of Ontario. We have always leveraged the dollars that we provide. We work through the Treasury Board with our partner ministries. The Ministry of Health, for example, is responsible for public health nurses. We brought forward that recommendation and they supported it, and they are providing part of the broader \$1.6 billion in contribution. But every dollar is from the provincial taxpayer.

In the past, we were able to leverage federal funds. This is entirely delivered by the province of Ontario and all of our partner ministries, from health, mental health and other ministries that of course have a responsibility for the care and protection of families and children and individuals in the province of Ontario.

Ms. Marit Stiles: To be clear, the FAO is in fact estimating that only \$623 million will be spent by the Ministry of Education, with \$576 million in 2021-22 and \$46 million in 2022-23. That's from the Financial Accountability Office. It includes up to \$536 million for PPE procurement and school-focused nurses, which we know are actually public health nurses. They're not in the schools. This phantom idea of school nurses is not real. That's actually funded by other ministries.

So let's just be clear here: The remaining \$478 million in announced funding, that remaining chunk, is not going to be committed in the second half of the 2021-22 school year. It's only going to be committed if necessary, right? So it's contingent, I suppose, on the status of the COVID-19 pandemic. That's what boards have been told.

Minister, if COVID-19 is still a significant enough threat to keep schools closed this June, as you've made clear, is it reasonable to assume the risk and impacts will be gone by December and that boards are only going to need half a year of funding support—even considering that there are other additional learning supports that we've outlined for you here, that our students have been struggling? You're willing, at this point, to hold back that funding. Why?

Hon. Stephen Lecce: First off, we're very proud—part of our plan to get schools open in September safely, creating more stability for children, will benefit this year, unlike last year, from the advent of vaccines approved for individuals, particularly for youth 12 and up. That is a game-changer. Every single child in this province who is 12-plus and who wants a vaccine and, likewise, every education worker will receive two doses before September, which will have a material impact on improving the safety of our schools and the broader communities as this government works toward a two-dose summer.

The second is that, notwithstanding that, the first principle, which is vaccines for a critical mass of the population—in fact, everyone who will want one will get two by late summer. In addition, we're still renewing the \$1.6-billion investment with a critical investment, still supporting mental health, public health nurses, air ventilation, transportation, PPE renewal—

Ms. Marit Stiles: Sorry—

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): MPP, if you want to intervene, please raise your hand.

Ms. Marit Stiles: If I may.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Okay.

Hon. Stephen Lecce: And I would just note—

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Sorry. MPP Stiles has asked to intervene.

MPP Stiles.

Ms. Marit Stiles: Minister, my question was, why are you holding on to that remaining \$478 million? Why are you putting boards through this? Why is it that you won't allow our boards to plan forward?

Again, I just want to point out, as I said, this past year one of the things that was—I'm going to just say it—I think a real issue and a real mistake on the part of the ministry was the constantly changing directives going into September and October. We know there was a lot of change happening, but it was very clear to boards, to folks on the inside—I know because I heard from a lot of them—that the ministry, that the minister was not doing the work that needed to be done in advance to make sure that everybody was ready.

1050

Boards need the time to prepare and to plan, and what's happening right now is, the boards are being told, basically, "We're only going to guarantee that you have half of that." So they're having to plan forward, assuming they will have that money, that \$478 million. As a result of that, they're making decisions for September that are less than ideal for students and they know it. They're making decisions based on an assumption that they may not have \$500 million in funding to work with. That is, I think, a real problem.

I'm going to ask the minister, clearly: Why are you holding that back? Why can't you just say this year is still going to be a year like no other, that we are into pandemic recovery even if we do manage to get all the education workers vaccinated by September?

I want to tell you, Minister, I am getting emails this morning from education workers, even those who are still in the schools working with special-needs kids, who are saying they tried to schedule their second dose and the earliest they can get in is in September. I hope that changes.

Why are you continuing to put our students through this kind of chaos?

Hon. Stephen Lecce: We have renewed the \$1.6-billion investment and made it very clear to school boards that, based on public health indicators, if there is a need for those investments, they are there. They're set aside.

They've been announced. We're going to maintain that commitment going into the coming school year.

Obviously, and I would hope the member would agree, if the public health situation improves, and public health including the Chief Medical Officer of Health at the time says, for example, that for a high school we may not need masks because we've reached a high quantum of vaccination rates, that allows us to have the flexibility to either step up supports if required, based on public health, or walk them back based on the improved health of schools, and—

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Excuse me, Minister. I'm sorry; I have a request.

MPP Stiles?

Ms. Marit Stiles: Minister, I would say, we've been in touch with school boards, and I can tell you they are not responding well to that decision, because they need to plan for a full year. When you talk about that maybe things will change and they won't need masks—come on. We know that if a school board is using more funding to hire more staff to reduce class sizes, for example, and then in the second half, if that funding doesn't get delivered, there is going to be significant reorganization required. Why not support them all the way through?

This sounds like a plan that is setting up students and families and workers for more disruption in this year ahead, not less, and for failure.

I want to know if the minister could share with me: What are the measurements or indicators the ministry is using to determine if that funding is going to be needed? Has that been communicated to boards—because if it has, they are certainly not aware of it. But if you have communicated it to boards, please let us know.

Hon. Stephen Lecce: I would just use the opportunity to remind members that there were over 7,000 staff hired, in part because of provincial funds: 4,100 more teachers, 313 more mental health—

Ms. Marit Stiles: That's not my question, Minister. My question is, what are the measures or indicators the ministry will use to determine if the funding is needed?

Hon. Stephen Lecce: I just want to note that there have been net new hires benefiting students and improving the safety of schools. With that, obviously we continue to follow the advice of the Chief Medical Officer of Health. He will provide the guidance to us in July with respect to what September will look like based on the broader modelling.

I will turn to the deputy minister to provide additional context.

Ms. Nancy Naylor: I would just echo the minister. The key metrics will definitely be public health metrics. We do anticipate, as we shared with the boards, that we would be seeking advice and announcing it late July or early August, about the exact reopening metrics for September. We do expect to monitor that through the first semester, where we expect to see the results of the vaccination program. We have committed to vaccinating all children from 12 to 17 by August 15, and the government recently committed to adding education workers to that. So further to your earlier

comment, it is the government's goal to make sure that everyone who is working in a school or attending a school who is eligible for a vaccine would be able to benefit from that.

We're particularly following the evidence around whether or not vaccines might become available before or during the upcoming school year for younger children and, if so, we would certainly prioritize them as well. We are projecting the conditions that will be necessary to provide health and safety measures throughout the next school year, and that's a difficult time period. That's really the basis for the planning approach for the next school year.

Ms. Marit Stiles: Are you saying, Deputy Minister, that the measure for a return to school is that you meet those markers that you just set out? Is that the indicator or the measurement that you're basing the continuation of funding on?

Ms. Nancy Naylor: I think the key metrics will be public health measures, the percentage of Ontarians who are vaccinated, the community case counts. But as the minister has said many times, in the Ministry of Education, we will definitely defer to the Chief Medical Officer of Health in those measures. How schools need to operate and the financial investments needed to support that mode of operation will follow the medical—

Ms. Marit Stiles: What I need to ask you on behalf of all the people who are contacting me is, then, if the metrics change—and I'm going to say it: I think people in Ontario would love to know what any of those public health metrics actually are, because the government has never been very clear about what the measures they're using are to make the decisions they've made, like this wild decision about how every single class can now have graduation ceremonies outdoors based on some mystery metric that nobody knows about.

Anyway, with all of these mystery metrics that you're basing this on, the question I have is, does that mean that in July, if we reach one of these metrics, these measures, that we're suddenly going to shift back to, what, semesters instead of quadesters or away from hybrid learning? At what point do you as a ministry decide that—

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

Ms. Marit Stiles: —the priority here is actually the quality of the educational experience our children are getting?

Ms. Nancy Naylor: On timetabling, we have provided guidance to the system, as we did last year. It's slightly more relaxed timetabling, because we are planning for full-time attendance by both elementary and secondary students. But we have asked secondary schools to plan for a version of a quadmester schedule that would allow those secondary schools to pivot back to an adapted schedule should public health conditions require that.

We're very hopeful, obviously, with vaccinations, that secondary schools will be able to support everyday in-person learning. We're working with school boards on their timetabling approach. Many of them are adopting a quadmester model, although one that allows for four

courses throughout the semester to allow students to have more time with their subject matter and with their courses.

Ms. Marit Stiles: It's a model that I think may have been necessary, Deputy Minister, but at this stage, again, what we're hearing from education experts, front-line educators, families, students is that this model is not ideal, to say the least. There are some significant concerns about whether or not that quadmester model suits any style of learning, particularly for students heading into university or maybe in grade 12, for example. The learning gap or loss that can occur between a quadmester and the beginning of university or college or other things that they embark on is significant. We're hearing, certainly, that this is deeply unpopular, and the government has an opportunity—

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): I'm sorry. With that, you're out of time.

We go back to the government. MPP McDonell, the floor is yours.

Mr. Jim McDonell: It's interesting; I'm optimistic, anyway, and I'm hoping that they will return in September, but I know that is really the determination of the government, with the medical experts. Nobody is a fortune teller today, but we're certainly looking to get our kids back to school. I'm looking forward to that, but I think, as the minister said, you have to be ready for all issues.

Minister, I believe you mentioned earlier about hoping to expand on the government funding to school boards to upgrade to better ventilation.

Can you expand on the tangible upgrades that we're seeing in our schools and if any practices have been changed to create safer schools?

1100

Hon. Stephen Lecce: Thank you very much for the question.

I just want to provide a quick summary, if I may, to colleagues on the improvements we've made in air ventilation in the province of Ontario.

In the summer of 2020, we provided an investment of \$50 million to improve air quality, providing direction to school boards to more frequently change their air filters and improve the quality of them. In the fall of 2020, we announced an additional \$450-million investment through the ICIP program. In February 2021, another \$50 million was announced. And in the GSN, as you will know, in May, we announced another \$20 million for the coming school year.

Just so we are clear: We've increased the rate of changes within our filters and a higher quality. We've recommissioned HVAC systems in 72% of schools in the province of Ontario, and school boards have led this, supported by our funding and guidance. We've increased the frequency of higher-quality filters, and about 93% of schools have done that.

Much of this work, particularly when it comes to the improvements within our schools—we've often cited that 95% figure. That goes back to a survey we conducted by Thanksgiving, in early 2020—in the school year, at least. Many of those improvements were realized, and then, building upon that, additional supports and improvements

were made to our air ventilation systems. In fact, we've got the highest filter, MERV 13 filters, being installed within our ventilation systems in over 93% of schools with full or partial mechanical ventilation. That just underscores our commitment to air quality improvement.

I noted 72% of schools with full or partial mechanical ventilation—the recommissioning of those HVAC systems.

Based on information we have in the 16 school boards across the GTA and Ottawa, for example, we know that there have been even further improvements.

All schools were assessed, and improvements were made to their ventilation systems. All schools with mechanical ventilation are running their systems for longer periods before and after school to flush their systems. And 97% of schools are changing their filters more frequently and have installed a higher-quality MERV filter, including MERV 13s. Almost 90% of the mechanical systems have been recommissioned or recalibrated to maximize airflow.

For less than 10% of schools without mechanical ventilation, HEPA filters and HEPA filter units are in place in classrooms, in addition to increasing fresh air through open windows. School boards procured over 55,000 portable HEPA filtration units; over 35,000 HEPA air filtration units have been received as of May. They've purchased over 20,000 other ventilation devices, which could include air circulation controls and air quality monitoring. Approximately 25,000 stand-alone HEPA filters are in place, including in every occupied classroom in the Toronto District School Board and the Toronto Catholic District School Board.

And \$450 million, as noted in the ICIP funding for ventilation projects—that, we believe, is going to really help improve the quality and the safety of schools, to over 2,000 projects in over 1,600 schools and co-located child care facilities in over 70 schools right across the province. That is going to make a big difference.

And we've announced \$29.4 million being provided to increase supports for any operating costs and for the maintenance of high-filtration systems in the coming school year.

Those are the investments we made in air ventilation as a stand-alone.

I will also note that we provided over \$1 billion over the pandemic to build new schools in this province, to build modern facilities with air ventilation systems to the highest standards.

We have also maintained \$1.3 billion in maintenance funding, which allows school boards to do much of that backlog.

So we're very committed to continuously improving the state of our schools and investing in air ventilation. We lead, in this respect, in the nation. And I believe, obviously, through the summer we'll continue to make the improvements that families expect.

Mr. Jim McDonell: I listened intently to MPP Barrett's comments on math. It just highlights the story of a local employer in Cornwall that is busing employees

from Valleyfield in Quebec, almost an hour away, because he can't get suitable employees out of our region. The issue is really, basically, for any level—he says, “Our basic workers, we require them to have good eyesight because they deal with different pigments and have to pick them out, and general basic computer skills. We ask them to pass an aptitude test, and we can't get the employees in Ontario to pass the aptitude test. Finally, we took out the division part of it, and we're having more success.” It's a comment on our education system—this goes back to a tour of the plant I had about two years ago, so certainly before our changes could take any effect—that this is an employer who tries to hire locally and can't get basic employees or general workers to pass these tests. So I think it was very telling.

It has been almost a year since you placed the Peel District School Board under supervision, as a result of direction by you that found the board was not able to address serious concerns about anti-Black racism, systemic inequalities, leadership and governance dysfunction, and unfair human resource practices.

Minister, can you tell us the progress that has been made to restore good governance in the interests of the Peel District School Board students?

Hon. Stephen Lecce: Thank you for the question.

Yes, indeed, we did put the board under supervision. I know the member from Mississauga–Lakeshore alluded to this—obviously, a priority in trying to restore leadership and provide forward momentum for that school board, the second-largest in the province. It represents a large community of children and diverse families. It really was important that we put them on track and we provided an opportunity for that change. In the absence of them taking leadership, we drove that change by bringing in a supervisor.

We've been in regular communication with the board. I've received briefings. We work closely and collaboratively with them to address some of the most serious concerns that were raised in this respect; specifically, anti-Black racism and systemic inequalities, leadership and governance dysfunction within the board itself, and unfair human rights practices. Through the ongoing ministry review of board submissions regarding their corrections, we are confident in the board's ability to move towards restoring good governance and leadership, as well as ensuring the full implementation of the binding directions we have put in place.

We really do see positive change happening: reconciliation with the affected groups and communities and a sense of cohesion in supporting at-risk children within Peel District School Board, and helping all kids succeed through an emphasis on STEM, mental health, special education, and, of course, tackling and combatting the discrimination and racism that certainly can manifest within our schools, our playgrounds and of course within our broader communities.

Mr. Jim McDonnell: I think MPP Skelly is up next.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): MPP Skelly.

Ms. Donna Skelly: Minister, I was very pleased when MPP Barrett raised some concerns earlier about our government's efforts to address what had become a huge problem under the previous government, and that was plummeting math scores. Of course, I'm delighted that our government has addressed that with the new curriculum. When I was a parent council chair, when my kids were young, this was an issue that was often raised by parents. But that was then.

We have just seen a pandemic. A year has gone by and we have had to transition, as we were seeing this morning, to a new world. Right around the world, people have had to embrace technology, and our government has certainly done so, not only with the way we conduct business in our Legislature, in government and also in committee, but also in our school system.

I also recall, Minister, prior to the pandemic, you brought forward plans to give our students an opportunity to learn how to learn online. You were going to be bringing forward some courses online, and I recall members of the official opposition who are on this call today, who are on this committee, fighting our government, saying that this was outrageous—and why would we ever want to help our students adapt to the changing world, where they would at one point perhaps have to learn how to be educated and even work in an online environment? And here we are today.

It brings me to my question, which is about what we as a government have done to help our students switch between in-class learning and online learning.

1110

I represent a unique riding. It has a mix, a blend, of people who are suburban and rural. Of course, the rural component has presented challenges with accessing broadband and being able to allow their family members and children to study online. But you put in place a plan that really did address a lot of that.

What is your plan to support learning recovery and renewal in response to the ongoing pandemic?

Hon. Stephen Lecce: Thank you so much for the question and obviously appreciating full well the necessity and critical importance of children being in class, learning in schools. We've always been champions of that, knowing how important it is for their mental health, their development—the social interaction that young people need.

However, before the pandemic, and certainly during the pandemic, it underscores the importance of having a choice for parents who have benefited from virtual learning and, in high school, benefited from access to course diversity, diversification through our online learning program. We really are uniquely positioned in Ontario and this country to have that capacity, that infrastructure and that broader system.

We made a significant improvement when it comes to the online learning system, professional development and investment of over \$200 million within our remote learning system, utilizing TFO and TVO to build new courses

for high school, some of which were implemented in September of this past year, and again new courses in January, in English and French.

We continue to provide school boards with the resources to expand the infrastructure required, including, for example, tablets and laptops. Over 190,000 more have been procured, with Internet connections provided to at-risk families.

We really do believe that those types of improvements are going to build and leave a lasting legacy and impact for families in Ontario, so that they preserve that choice—because we believe parents will make the best choice for their children. That includes this September, which is why we've required school boards to maintain the in-class delivery, a safe in-class experience, and a more dynamic virtual experience, should children and their families opt in for that. We expect, like this year, the majority to continue to return to in-class schooling.

I will also note that our emphasis is on making sure that all students could get access to courses. As you will know, not all students—about 40% of small schools in the province do not offer courses like grade 12 physics, which is a requirement, a prerequisite, for many STEM-related post-secondary careers. So it's this type of emphasis on diversification and enabling individuals—especially in smaller schools, where in class they don't have the option, the plethora of choice—that they will actually get it and benefit from having those pathways, especially to STEM, skilled trades and post-secondary careers.

I will turn it over to Yael Ginsler, the ADM, to build upon some of the changes we've made within the online and virtual systems.

Ms. Yael Ginsler: Thank you, Minister.

I'm pleased to talk about the work that we've been doing to support educators, students and families with respect to remote and online learning. This is really about making sure that students and families are supported in making a decision that works best for them.

This year, in-person learning was optional for the school year, but if not attending in person, students were expected to attend remotely. This option will be available again to families for the 2021-22 school year. We've put several supports in place to make sure that we can move forward successfully in this regard.

The MPP touched a little bit on broadband, and certainly we've made tremendous progress in broadband and the broadband strategy to ensure that all of our Ontario students and educators in our publicly funded schools will have access to fast, reliable and secure Internet services. We've also, in collaboration with the Ministry of Infrastructure, worked on considerations for supporting connectivity for students at home and in underserved communities that may have had limited broadband prior.

There are other measures that we're putting in place as well—training, to start with. To date, we have trained over 33,000 educators who have accessed our live webinars, and others who have downloaded archived videos and supports that specifically target practices around teaching

and learning in a remote context. We have also implemented mandatory professional activity days for all educators across the province. That was part of this school year, and will continue next school year as a mandatory requirement.

We also have hosted, as I mentioned, several webinars and teleconferences, but we've also provided self-directed learning modules to build the capacity of our educators in teaching remotely. These are all available on our curriculum and resources website, where educators can access the training through our secure virtual learning environment.

We've also provided a sufficient amount of funding for the 2021 school year to support remote learning. This included funding for technological devices for students. It included funding to hire additional principals and—

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

Ms. Yael Ginsler: —for remote learning. We also targeted some high-priority areas with additional funding; lots of investments in devices, specifically, to support students learning at home.

We also provided educational resources directly into the hands of educators. Starting last March, we launched our Learn at Home website, with a lot of classroom-ready lesson plans and activities that educators could use in their remote classrooms. And we partnered with TVO and le Centre franco, en français, to provide, again, additional resources, including our online tutoring services, Mathify and Eurêka!, which have over 85,000 registered users annually. We also partnered with TVO and with TFO to provide educators with digital educational resources that they could use in their classrooms with students directly.

This was supported with policy. We introduced a new policy and program memorandum, PPM 164, that outlined the requirements for remote learning so that we could try to create as much consistency across the province as possible when it came to students learning remotely at home. This included minimum daily requirements for synchronous learning, protocols for communicating with parents, and access to technology and the Internet. It also talked about cyber security and privacy protection, which, of course, is critical when students are learning remotely and have access to digital tools. We're going to hear from school boards through their report back on how that went this year.

Going forward, we will continue to provide these supports, including training. We will continue to provide educational resources directly into the hands of educators. Again, we're working closely with TVO and TFO; those are the government agencies that have—

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

We go back to the official opposition. MPP Stiles, the floor is yours.

Ms. Marit Stiles: I want to continue in a similar vein, just to recap a bit. What we were learning in the last round of questions—or opposition round of questions. So let's recap a little.

We know that the minister is threatening to withhold a portion of funding for our school boards, forcing boards

again to shift their plans. All of this is going to mean more disruption for students. We don't know how that helps our kids, and we wonder how the government could even be considering such a terrible plan at a time when Ontario's children, our youth, our families and our education workers are struggling so much.

1120

I want to remind the committee that last year the government made a rather controversial decision to force school boards to draw down upon their reserve funds in order to address the impacts of COVID-19. That reserve funding was actually included in total COVID-19 spending announced by the province as if it were new money, when in fact it was actually a greater share of the overall funding than your own government put in.

School boards, as I noted in my questions last week, are required to balance their budgets each year by law. The reserve funds are not just sitting there; they're actually used to support a range of needs in schools, oftentimes when money from the ministry doesn't meet the local needs and local priorities. We know, of course, that the funding formula that has been in place for a number of years here under both Liberal and Conservative governments is deeply flawed, and this is one of the reasons why boards are in that situation.

Not only were school boards not consulted about that measure, but they also raised concerns with you, Minister, about the long-term and destabilizing impact of this on board finances. At the time, I'm going to remind you, the Ontario Catholic School Trustees' Association said, "Beyond the obvious responsibility of the provincial government to adequately fund all costs associated with school reopening, the decision promotes significant inequities among school boards and the students they serve."

Minister, how much did school boards spend of their reserve funds during the last year? It's a very simple question.

Hon. Stephen Lecce: Thank you for the question.

I will note that we allowed temporary access of up to 2% of their operating budget for reserves; \$496 million province-wide was accessed, was eligible for use.

As Andrew Davis, ADM, who I'll turn to to provide clarity, noted—

Ms. Marit Stiles: I'm just looking for how much of the school boards' reserve funds did they spend in the last year—

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): I'm sorry; I'm going to ask you to raise your hand when you need to jump in. I understand why you want to, but I just need to make sure that only one person is speaking at a time.

You have asked to speak. MPP, please go ahead.

Ms. Marit Stiles: Thank you. Minister, to be clear, all I need from you—and I'm assuming you know this—is, how much did school boards spend of their reserves in the last school year?

Hon. Stephen Lecce: What I was saying is that we provided those funds, which the ADM last week noted were overwhelmingly provincial ministry dollars, for school boards to use for this exceptional, once-a-century

pandemic, to put to use for the local priorities of their school boards, in consultation with their public health.

I will turn it over to Andrew Davis, ADM—

Ms. Marit Stiles: Sorry, if I may.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Yes, MPP Stiles.

Ms. Marit Stiles: Minister, first of all, let's just be clear: These are reserve funds. It wasn't money that you gave to boards out of the goodness of your heart and said, "Here, go ahead. Spend all these dollars." You took it from them. You said, "We're going to take that from your other priorities. We're going to force you to use that, and we're going to spend a smaller actual dollar amount out of additional provincial funding to contribute to COVID-19 spending."

Let me help you, Minister. All told, school boards used \$405 million of their own reserve funds in this last year. And for the next school year, 2021-22, the government is again relying on school board reserve funds to supplement your plan.

So I want to ask you: How much are boards being asked to use this school year?

Hon. Stephen Lecce: We receive financial statements from the boards by the end of August, and it will give us a better sense of the utilization of reserves.

I will turn it over to ADM Andrew Davis to answer—

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): I have a request from the MPP.

MPP Stiles?

Ms. Marit Stiles: The minister is basically saying they don't know yet. My understanding is that it's going to be up to 2% of their budget, to \$254 million, with a potential increase to \$508 million in the second half of the year, if required, and that the province is going to reimburse costs over 2%. For boards that do not have sufficient reserve funds, they will be then topped up.

If you know that boards that don't have sufficient funds are going to be topped up by the province, you must have a sense of how many boards are in that situation. Can you please explain that?

Hon. Stephen Lecce: Chair, I'd like to turn it over to ADM Andrew Davis.

Mr. Andrew Davis: Thank you, Minister.

A few important facts in regard to reserves and your questions: First of all, next year, we're expecting that school boards across the province will have \$1.5 billion in reserves. Prior to last year, each and every year, school boards, in aggregate, had increased the total reserve balances that were there, which has now brought that sum, even after this year, to \$1.5 billion. The number I believe that you're looking for—

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Excuse me, ADM. I have a request from MPP Stiles.

Ms. Marit Stiles: No, he can continue. I want to hear the number that he's going to give me.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): MPP Stiles, you have the floor.

Ms. Marit Stiles: want that number that he's about to mention, actually, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Andrew Davis: The number that you are interested in is that, of the total that was made available to school boards, our estimate is that they took advantage of about \$387 million of reserves. I'm not sure where your other figure has come from.

Ms. Marit Stiles: That's coming from other additional studies, including the FAO.

I do want to mention that my understanding is—and this is just to throw this out there—first of all, the \$1.5 billion in reserves, the ADM is saying it just continues to grow. These are not dollars that go unspent. They are there; they are allocated. It isn't like it's just this pot of money that the government gets to dive into. This is money that boards have put aside for priorities, and particularly local priorities, that this funding formula doesn't account for. These are very important areas that are spent on.

I want to add to the minister that some in the sector have raised concerns with us that this whole scheme actually incentivizes boards to be a bit less prudent stewards of their resources. If a board has no reserves and spending up to an additional 2% of operating has no effect on a board other than resources becoming available that are wholly funded by the ministry, boards that overspend by up to additional 2% of operating are held as harmless for that over-expenditure. I just want to flag that as an issue I think the ministry needs to consider.

I'm going to shift over now a little bit to some questions around the capital side, start this, and then, hopefully, we'll get back to it after the lunch break.

Minister, as the science has evolved on COVID-19, the role of ventilation has become a really key component of limiting spread. I think we know a great deal more now than we did in March 2020 about how this disease is spread. We know that addressing ventilation is key to keeping schools open, but Ontario entered into this pandemic with our schools in a very vulnerable place. That is thanks to a massive school repair backlog that was left behind by the Liberal government first—a backlog of about, I think, when this government came into power, \$15.8 billion, and that has only grown under your government, to \$16.3 billion at last count.

I want to ask the minister, where does that repair backlog stand now?

Hon. Stephen Lecce: First off, I will note that we're very pleased that there is an additional infusion of funding, over \$450 million, to the ICIP program, which is going to help improve the state of our schools.

I will also note that we approved \$1 billion in capital over the pandemic to build new schools in the province, recognizing, as the member noted, that the deferred backlog inherited by the government is significant, under the former Liberals.

Seventy-two per cent of our HVAC systems in Ontario schools—have recommissioned partially or fully their HVAC systems. And I will note that we are—

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Excuse me, Minister. I apologize for interrupting you.

MPP Stiles?

1130

Ms. Marit Stiles: Sorry. It was a really simple, straightforward question. I want to know what the repair backlog stands at now, please.

Hon. Stephen Lecce: We're going to continue to make—just let me finish that sentence, then I'll turn it over—the \$1.3-billion investment in the maintenance of schools which has carried on in the coming fiscal year, as you will note, in addition to the provision for over half a billion dollars to build net new schools in the province of Ontario, as well as expand upon construction.

I will turn it over to ADM Didem Proulx, please.

Ms. Didem Proulx: Thank you. I want to take this opportunity to mention that, as the minister mentioned, the annual funding for school renewal is \$1.4 billion, and that has flattened the school facilities condition curve despite the aging portfolio.

The assessed average facility condition index—commonly referred to as FCI—the industry standard measure of a building condition at any given point in time, has remained stable over the past two years at 28.5%, with the number of schools with FCIs over 40% significantly decreasing over the past few years.

I think your question was also around the current assessed “state of good repair” needs over the next five years, and that number is at \$16.8 billion, estimating these renewal needs support school board prioritization of these investments. The reason why the five-year needs assessment is up from last year is because, as you can appreciate, school boards prioritized HVAC and other renewal measures that have had a direct impact on health and safety measures this year. So that has resulted in an interim temporal change of which projects got undertaken at what point, so that meant refocusing and reprioritizing the renewal investments.

The other important thing to note is that school boards do most of their renewal activity over the summer months, when schools are closed. This is to ensure that there's minimal disruption to students and staff. Last year, however, due to COVID-19, school boards could not initiate as many renewal projects, and whatever projects they could do, as I mentioned, were in relation to both health and safety measures and HVAC measures.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): ADM, I apologize for interrupting you. I've had an indication from MPP Stiles that she would like to speak.

MPP Stiles?

Ms. Marit Stiles: I just want to confirm for the record here, Mr. Chair, that the COVID-19 repair backlog for Ontario schools has now increased by another \$500 million, which means that under this government it has increased, I believe, by—because it was \$16.3 billion; now it's \$16.8 billion, which means it's up, I believe, by \$1 billion since this government came into power, since the Liberals were in power. That is what I heard, and I heard a lot of explaining about why that might be.

I will also add, I heard some comments about, with the realities of COVID-19, you can't get into schools and everything, but the truth is, we know that actually this has

been a prime opportunity to get some work done—a rather unique opportunity, one that has been frustrating for school boards as they wait for the government to approve projects. I've heard from many, many school boards that they're waiting for projects, new school builds as well, that are sitting on the minister's desk for years, not approved. This is a real problem.

That's interesting; so we now have an increase in capital repair backlog by \$1 billion under this government's watch.

Notwithstanding the funding for those—even taking into account funding for COVID-19-related infrastructure projects, how is Ontario ever going to clear the repair backlog if your annual amount of contribution to this remains at that bare minimum that isn't even keeping up with the increase? The \$1.4 billion is clearly not keeping up with the need.

Part of the increase in funding related, as you said, Minister, to vote 1002 that we're going to be voting on later today is the new funding from the Investing in Canada Infrastructure Program or, as we call it, ICIP, a joint federal-provincial investment. Some of that funding will be used, yes, to fund ventilation improvement projects, according to your press release.

How much of that \$657 million in ICIP funding is coming from the province?

Hon. Stephen Lecce: The ICIP, I believe, is an 80/20 program, in the context of contribution. It's \$656 million, which wouldn't be included or factored into the number cited, the backlog cited by the ADM. That's an additional one-time investment that helped reduce the backlog, which is not factored in because those projects are still ongoing until they're completed.

I also will note that in the first wave, construction was closed in the province. Notwithstanding that, we still made significant improvements in air ventilation systems by Thanksgiving—

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Excuse me, Minister. I apologize for interrupting you.

MPP Stiles, you asked for the floor?

Ms. Marit Stiles: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I had a very specific question, so I'll go back to it.

I just want to note that I remember very well the promises that the Premier made about how every school would have their ventilation issues addressed by Thanksgiving last year. We know that didn't happen. All you have to do is ask any family in this province, any school how much of their school ventilation issues were dealt with, and I think we know the answer.

The answer to my question, which was how much of the \$657 million in ICIP funding is coming from the province, is about \$131 million, which is, by my calculation, about 20%. So I just wanted to provide that information to the minister. When people are talking about, "Oh, \$1 billion of this, and \$657 million of that," it is important to understand what's actually coming from the government here in Ontario. What we've seen throughout this pandemic is a government that really doesn't want to spend an additional penny; they want to spend the least

possible amount they could. What we're seeing now is, again, I just want to point out, a government that, despite all their supposed new COVID-19 funding, has seen a capital repair backlog in this province continue to explode, now to a historic high of \$16.8 billion.

Minister, I want you to share with us, before the ICIP announcement, how much funding did boards receive specifically for ventilation improvements?

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

Hon. Stephen Lecce: I'd like to turn it to ADM Didem Proulx, please, to provide context on that. But I can assure the member there was funding announced in the summer of 2020. Perhaps the ADM can outline that.

Ms. Didem Proulx: Thank you. For dedicated ventilation projects, there has been an investment of \$550 million. The \$50 million that was announced in August 2020 and then \$450 million of the \$656.5 million of ICIP investments are going into HVAC improvements in the system, and an additional \$50 million—

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Excuse me, ADM. I apologize for interrupting you.

MPP Stiles?

Ms. Marit Stiles: Just to be clear, my question was outside of the ICIP funding.

Ms. Didem Proulx: Outside of the ICIP funding, there has been \$100 million of dedicated investments announced last year—\$50 million before the start of the school year in August 2020, and one that was announced in early 2021 for immediate measures. In addition to that, as we mentioned, the \$1.4 billion in school renewal funding is available to school boards this year—

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Excuse me, ADM. I apologize for interrupting you.

MPP Stiles, you had a further question?

Ms. Marit Stiles: Thank you, ADM. Maybe this is something that you can respond to after we have the break. Of that \$50 million, could you explain to me how much of that went to fixing mechanical ventilation and HVAC systems and how much went to purchasing filters?

Ms. Didem Proulx: We will take that question back, yes.

Ms. Marit Stiles: Do you think I can get a response to that today?

Hon. Stephen Lecce: We'll take it back, Chair.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): You will take it back and respond.

With that, the 20 minutes is up. We now go to the government. MPP Skelly, the floor is yours.

1140

Ms. Donna Skelly: During this round, if the staff are going to be responding to any of the questions, I will give them the time to actually complete their answer before cutting them off, because it's just, I think, polite when we ask a person a question, to at least let them continue and give their response.

To the minister: As many people know, Hamilton is one of the fastest-growing communities, and we're seeing a number of people who are leaving the GTA and moving to

Hamilton, for many reasons. My community of Flamborough–Glanbrook is one of the fastest-growing in Ontario. I was absolutely pleased when I was able to host you, not just once, but on several occasions, to announce new schools in my riding. Specifically, we announced schools in Binbrook and in Stoney Creek.

Minister, I'd like you to share with the committee this morning why you believe it is so important to make these investments of funding for new schools in my community and others right across Ontario.

Hon. Stephen Lecce: I appreciate the question.

I have fond memories of venturing out to your community and meeting so many families, educators and, of course, students themselves, and how excited they were to finally have a government that was following through on our commitment to build and expand new schools, modern facilities with Internet and air conditioning, that are fully accessible. This is the standard by which we seek to build schools in the province, following a period of time when we had 600 net closures in the province of Ontario under the former government.

I want to, first off, acknowledge your leadership in advocating for families in your community, which is the reason why Binbrook and Stoney Creek, respectively, have new schools on the way that will really materially improve the quality of life for the next generation of families within your riding. It is exciting.

But to be fair, it's not only in the Hamilton region; we are building schools, as I see my two colleagues—one from York; one from Peel—in both regions and right across the province. We are expanding and building net new schools. In fact, we have dedicated roughly \$14 billion in capital supports over the next decade to build new schools. Last year, in fact, during the pandemic, in one calendar year, we announced roughly \$900 million-plus in capital supports to build 50 net new schools in this province and to renew 20-odd additional major renovations for 20 additional ones, and child care expansions within some of those schools. That is because the Premier and the government feel very strongly that the facilities that house our children need to be modern and, most importantly, need to be safe. So we've undertaken not just improvements of our existing school infrastructure, but we've committed ourselves to build schools in fast-growing communities across the province where population demands it, and where I think parents rightfully expect a quality space where their child can learn.

We also, as noted, committed a billion dollars over the next five years to build 30,000 child care spaces within our schools. Again, that adds real value for families—creating that community hub concept, where schools really are at the heart of our communities, especially in rural and remote parts of Ontario. But in all regions of the province, I think we could accept that premise—that they play a critical role. Just today, while children continue to learn in remote learning, many of our schools are being used as vaccination centres, constantly stepping up to be used for the purpose of health and safety, for professional development, for anti-racism initiatives.

It really heartens many of us—the amazing work that could be done within our schools—which is why we are fully committed to continuing to build new schools. In fact, this summer the ministry has a plan to release the next round of capital to build new schools in other regions of the province of Ontario.

Obviously, as we know, with the \$13 million announced for St. James Catholic elementary school, the \$13.5 million announced for the public elementary school in Binbrook—we're talking about adding literally over 1,100 spaces for students in your community, that you helped deliver in partnership with parents. I remember meeting some of those parents, and there was an element of shock that a government, any government, followed through, after many years of them expressing to us that they felt ignored. That, perhaps, is true in a lot of rural and suburban parts of our province.

So our commitment is strong. It's in the fiscal framework. We're going to continue to build new schools, renew our schools, expand child care, and really make public education, the spaces that our children learn in, as modern and safe as possible, which is why we've dedicated the funds, with many schools being built in regions of the province that deserve it.

Ms. Donna Skelly: I know the parents and families in my riding, but also right across Hamilton—as you mentioned, it's not the only investment—do appreciate that you are making that investment, and you recognize that our community is growing and does need more places for our students, our kids, to learn and to grow.

I'm going to hand it over to my colleague MPP Oosterhoff.

Mr. Sam Oosterhoff: Thank you very much, Minister, for appearing before the committee today, as well as to all your team. I know there is a lot of work always ongoing in the Ministry of Education. I appreciate the time spent in answering these questions.

Aussi, je pense que c'est très important de reconnaître l'importance de la communauté francophone ici en Ontario : les enseignants, les élèves qui travaillent très fort dans nos écoles. Pouvez-vous donner des informations sur l'investissement destiné à aider l'AFÉSEO en tant qu'organisme porte-parole à promouvoir l'intérêt de la communauté francophone ici en Ontario?

You don't need to respond in French, but I do want to hear a bit about the importance of the investments that have been made, working with groups like AFÉSEO and the various francophone communities across Ontario to ensure that there are strong supports in advocating and acting for the benefit of the francophone community. I'd like to hear more, as well, from your officials about some of the work that has been ongoing in supporting this.

Hon. Stephen Lecce: Thank you very much for the question.

I want to just acknowledge the parliamentary assistant for his leadership in this area, ensuring that we continue to promote French-language education, culture, identity, history and language within the province within our publicly funded education system. We very much are

committed to that, which is why we continue to support high-quality child care and early learning programs in direct response to the needs of working families, who want there to be French-language programming.

We have provided \$150,000 to create new positions at the provincial early years advocacy group, l'Association francophone à l'éducation des services à l'enfance de l'Ontario. These positions will promote the recruitment, retention and professional development of French-language early childhood educator staff while supporting the provision of high-quality French-language services.

The French-language sector liaison is the person responsible for creating and maintaining collaborative relationships. That has been a priority.

We continue to build child care within our French-language school boards, supporting their efforts and recognizing that families, English and French, urban and rural, need continued support, which is why we created the child care tax credit, with a 20% increase to support working families, providing roughly \$1,500 per child this year, which will help.

I will turn it over to ADM Denys Giguere to provide additional context, in his language of choice.

Mr. Denys Giguere: Bonjour. For the record, my name is Denys Giguere, and I'm ADM for French-language education.

Minister Lecce touched on all the very important points about AFÉSEO and the crucial role that it plays in French-language school boards and, specifically, in helping French-language school boards liaising with municipalities across the province, but also recognizing that French-language school boards cover a very large territory. An organization like AFÉSEO plays a crucial role in bringing people together to share best practices, to promote the teaching of the language and the culture, and to provide this forum for people to get together. These two positions that were funded with \$150,000 are crucial for the sector to be able to share best practices, to work together, to liaise with municipalities. They're really the glue that brings the child care sector together in the French-language system.

1150

M. Sam Oosterhoff: Merci beaucoup, Denys. Peut-être que tu peux aussi expliquer plus l'importance du ministère de l'Éducation et son support pour la communauté francophone et pour les investissements différents dans le secteur, parce que je sais que c'est très important pour la communauté aussi de connaître les différents investissements dans la communauté. Nous comprenons qu'il a décrit l'importance de ce secteur et l'importance de la communauté : leur culture, leur histoire, leur caractère unique. Peut-être que tu peux expliquer un peu plus l'histoire de la relation entre le ministère de l'Éducation et la communauté francophone, mais aussi les investissements cette année dans cette communauté importante et dans les écoles de cette communauté.

M. Denys Giguere: Merci beaucoup. I thank you for the question. I will follow in French, if you will allow me.

Le ministère de l'Éducation, effectivement, soutient l'éducation en langue française de façon considérable. Une des façons de le faire cette année a été de mettre dans les Subventions pour les besoins des élèves—donc, ce qu'on appelle en anglais « GSN »—le financement pour une coopérative du nord de l'Ontario qui offre des services aux élèves qui ont des besoins particuliers dans les six conseils scolaires du nord de l'Ontario : donc les quatre conseils catholiques et les deux conseils publics. Ça leur permet, par exemple, de partager les services d'orthophonistes, les services de psychologues, les services de santé mentale. Donc ça joue encore une fois un rôle crucial de rassembler pour une minorité des services qui sont essentiels aux élèves.

On a aussi, bien sûr, des investissements encore une fois considérables en apprentissage en ligne. Et cette année, donc en réponse à la situation particulière de la COVID, on a travaillé étroitement avec TFO. Ce qu'on a fait, en fait, c'est qu'on a regardé les ressources qui étaient disponibles à TFO, on les a comparées aux programmes-cadres et on a élaboré des assemblages, si vous voulez, de ressources qui viennent en aide au personnel enseignant et qui leur disent, pour le curriculum de quatrième année en études sociales, par exemple, TFO a de disponible, gratuitement, pour tous les enseignants et enseignantes, les ressources A, B et C suivantes. Donc ça, c'est venu apporter une aide particulière aux écoles cette année.

Bien sûr, quand on parle de l'année—et on a reconnu un peu plus tôt qu'il va y avoir un besoin d'appuyer les élèves de façon particulière dans les écoles de langue française. Tous les investissements du ministère pour aider les élèves à renouer avec l'école—souhaitons-le de façon plus normale en septembre—vont avoir des appuis particuliers pour les défis que les élèves des écoles de langue française vont avoir.

Il faut savoir qu'une large proportion de nos élèves dans les écoles de langue française utilise le français à l'école mais, très souvent, utilise l'anglais ou une autre langue à la maison. Donc, cette année, à cause des circonstances particulières, ils n'ont pas eu l'occasion de parler français autant qu'avant. Alors dans les fonds qu'on va mettre à la disposition des conseils scolaires, effectivement, on va porter une attention particulière à la communication orale pour essayer de combler l'écart qui s'est creusé.

J'ai parlé un peu plus tôt d'apprentissage en ligne. Un autre service qu'on a à la disposition des parents et des élèves c'est un service que le ministère finance par l'entremise du Centre franco, et c'est un service qui s'appelle Eurêka! Il y a un service d'aide individuel aux élèves, soit par courriel, soit par téléphone, soit en ligne. Ça couvre toutes les matières. Ça couvre toutes les années scolaires. Et même l'été dernier, et encore à nouveau cet été, il va y avoir un camp pédagogique—mais bien sûr ludique, puisque c'est l'été, mais c'est quand même un camp pédagogique—qui va appuyer les élèves puis qui va essayer justement de combler un peu les écarts qu'on a vus se creuser cette année à cause des circonstances particulières qu'on a eues.

Donc, comme vous pouvez voir, on a toute une gamme de services, de programmes. On est vraiment à l'écoute des écoles de langue française, et vraiment, le but c'est d'avoir des services qui sont taillés à leur mesure.

Je vous remercie.

M. Sam Oosterhoff: Merci beaucoup. Et peut-être aussi tu peux m'expliquer le changement dans la gouvernance du Centre Jules-Léger, parce que je comprends que, récemment, ça a été transféré du ministère de l'Éducation à un consortium de conseils scolaires de langue française. Pouvez-vous expliquer en quoi ce transfert a été important pour la communauté francophone de l'Ontario et les détails de ce transfert, aussi?

Mr. Denys Giguere: Thank you for the question. I will continue in my first language, if you'll allow me.

La gouvernance du Centre Jules-Léger, en date du 17 août 2020, a été transférée à un consortium qui est gouverné par et pour les francophones. C'est un point très important pour les francophones. En 1997, au moment où les conseils scolaires de langue française ont été créés, le Centre Jules-Léger est demeuré sous la gouvernance du ministère. Il y a eu, au fil des ans, nombre de demandes qui ont été présentées pour assurer que le Centre Jules-Léger soit gouverné par et pour les francophones. Il y a même eu à l'époque, en 2014-2015, une enquête du commissaire aux services en français qui recommandait aussi que la gouvernance du Centre Jules-Léger soit transférée à des francophones.

Le gouvernement a écouté les recommandations du commissaire. Le gouvernement a aussi consulté la communauté. On a travaillé étroitement avec les conseils scolaires pour créer le Consortium Centre Jules-Léger, qui est composé, en fait, de trois conseillers/conseillères scolaires catholiques et de trois conseillers/conseillères scolaires publics, dans la région de l'Est, dans le Nord et dans le Centre-Sud-Ouest. Donc on a une représentation géographique et on a une représentation des conseils publics et catholiques. Ce sont eux maintenant qui—

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

M. Denys Giguere: —gouvernement les affaires du Centre Jules-Léger. Donc tout ça, c'est entré en place au mois d'août.

Et cette année, pour une première année qui était plutôt—c'était une année très particulière, parce que c'était la première année que le système gouvernait l'école. Avec les défis qu'on a eus, ils ont eu une excellente année. Les écoles ont ouvert. Les jeunes qui fréquentent le Centre Jules-Léger sont des élèves qui ont des besoins particuliers, donc les services ont pu continuer d'être offerts en personne. On a travaillé étroitement avec eux pour s'assurer qu'il y avait un nettoyage accru, qu'il y avait toutes sortes d'attentions particulières accrues pour que les jeunes puissent continuer d'aller en personne au Centre Jules-Léger.

Donc tout ça s'est fait en partenariat avec le ministère, en reconnaissant que le Centre Jules-Léger maintenant est gouverné par des conseillers et conseillères scolaires élus et qu'il y a un lien très, très étroit avec les 12 conseils scolaires de langue française.

Donc il y a une intégration qu'on voit qui se fait de plus en plus, où maintenant toutes les écoles élémentaires et secondaires en Ontario sont gouvernées par et pour la communauté francophone, ce qui, comme vous le savez très bien, est un point essentiel, crucial pour une communauté de langue minoritaire.

Merci.

M. Sam Oosterhoff: Oui, et comme tu as dit, c'est crucial, c'est essentiel pour la communauté d'être par les francophones et pour les francophones. C'est une phrase très connue par toute la communauté, « par et pour ».

Une dernière question : quels sont les soutiens que le gouvernement a fournis pour faire progresser l'éducation en langue française en Ontario? Par exemple, pour ce qui est—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): I'm sorry to say, MPP Oosterhoff, that ends your 20 minutes.

We will recess now until 1 p.m.

The committee recessed from 1200 to 1300.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Good afternoon, everyone. We're going to resume consideration of vote 1001 of estimates of the Ministry of Education. There is now a total of one hour and 52 minutes remaining for review of these estimates.

Standing order 69(a.1) allots 15 minutes to the independent member of the committee. They will have the opportunity to use this time today if they wish.

When the committee recessed this morning, the government had just finished its round of questions. We will now go to the official opposition for questions.

Before I do that, I just want to note another member has joined us and I need to confirm identity and location. MPP McKenna?

Ms. Jane McKenna: It's Jane McKenna, and I am in Burlington, Ontario.

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

With that, I will go to the official opposition. MPP Stiles.

Ms. Marit Stiles: When we left off before the lunch break, I had asked the minister if he could confirm for me, of the \$50 million that was spent on ventilation, how much of that went to fixing mechanical ventilation, HVAC systems, and how much went to purchasing filters. I believe the ADM was going to get back to me on that. I'm wondering if there is a response to that question now.

Hon. Stephen Lecce: I'll turn it to ADM Didem Proulx for additional response on that.

Ms. Didem Proulx: Thank you so much, Minister.

I believe the question was, from the first \$50 million that was allocated to school boards in August, what is the share of portable HEPA filters versus the other mechanical improvements? The final breakdown of actual spend is due back to the ministry in September, because school boards have until the end of the school year to use all the funds. But based on interim reports that we have received from school boards, it's about 50% of funding that has gone towards portable HEPA filter units—and the remaining 50% on mechanical system upgrades.

I would also like to take this opportunity to mention that based on interim reports we have from the school boards, we know that in addition to the funding that we have provided to school boards as incremental investments, plus ICIP funds, they have spent approximately \$85 million of the \$1.4 billion of their FCI and school renewal funding on HVAC system improvements already in the school year as well.

Ms. Marit Stiles: Just continuing on this line, I would also like to get a rundown—if you don't have it right now, if I could get the staff to confirm that they will table it with the Clerk of the Committee following the committee. I also would like to get some information on whether the filters were HEPA filters or whether they're MERV 13 air filters. That kind of detail would be very useful.

Hon. Stephen Lecce: We would be pleased to provide additional context of the 25,000 HEPA filters that were procured. Some 35,000 portable HEPA air filters are currently in classrooms. There are 55,000 that have been procured, of which 35,000 were in classrooms as of—

Ms. Marit Stiles: So are you saying, Minister, that they're all HEPA filters?

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Sorry, MPP; please raise your hand.

Hon. Stephen Lecce: There are 20 school boards, procured over 55,000 portable HEPA air filtration units. Some 35,000 portable HEPA air filtration units were received as of May and 20,000 other ventilation devices—

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Excuse me a moment, Minister.

MPP Stiles?

Ms. Marit Stiles: Since you don't have the information about MERV 13 ones, could you please make sure that that gets tabled? And if we could also get staff or the minister to table, when they have the final numbers back from the boards—if that could be tabled with the committee, please. Can I get your undertaking that that will happen?

Hon. Stephen Lecce: We will provide additional information on the province's robust improvements to air ventilation.

I just will note that 97% of schools are changing their filters more frequently and have installed higher-rated MERV filters, including MERV 13s. We'll provide more information as we have it.

Ms. Marit Stiles: ICIP funding has some really tight deadlines, as I think the minister is aware. What I'm hearing from boards are concerns about what happens if they don't spend the funding in time, because of that tight deadline.

I'd like to hear from the minister if there is a plan in place should they not be able to spend all of that funding by the deadline.

Hon. Stephen Lecce: I appreciate the question, and I've heard similar concerns, especially given the competition for construction materials, labour etc. I will turn it over to the ADM, Didem Proulx, but I will note that we have advocated for flexibility. While obviously we all have a shared imperative to get the projects done yesterday, as soon as humanly possible, we recognize there are

challenges, and that's why we have advocated with the federal government for some additional time. I will turn it over to the ADM to provide more context on that.

Ms. Didem Proulx: Thank you so much, Minister. You're absolutely right; we have heard from school boards with respect to the tight timelines, and we have reached out to our federal colleagues and have requested an extension. I think similar requests have been made by other provinces as well.

The extension requires an amendment to the federal-provincial agreements, and that is what we are currently waiting on, and we continue to keep all school board counterparts apprised of all the developments. While we are seeking an extension to the timelines, of course the goal of this program is to make sure that measures that improve health and safety are implemented as soon as possible. So in addition to working with federal colleagues to seek an extension, we are also working closely with school boards to make sure that these projects can get under way as soon as possible, so that their benefits are realized for students and staff across schools in Ontario as soon as possible, as well. School boards share that goal as well.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): MPP Stiles.

Ms. Marit Stiles: I've been speaking with a lot of experts in ventilation over the last year, and there has been some significant guidance provided by the American Society of Heating, Refrigerating and Air-Conditioning Engineers.

There is a set of guidelines that has been released on air quality—probably the most influential when it comes to schools—called Schools for Health: Risk Reduction Strategies for Reopening Schools, from the Harvard school of public health. The minister is familiar with that report? Just yes or no.

Hon. Stephen Lecce: I have heard broadly of the literature that we've been briefed on with respect to the importance of high-quality filtration systems and MERV 13 filters. We have been continuously briefed in the ministry about the emerging evidence on this.

As the record noted, from August to the fall to the winter, we have continually increased investments to support school boards. It's the reason—

Ms. Marit Stiles: So—

Hon. Stephen Lecce: —90% of mechanical systems have been reconditioned in Ontario—

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Excuse me, Minister. I apologize for interrupting.

MPP Stiles?

Ms. Marit Stiles: Thank you, Minister. I just wanted to know if you were familiar with it.

The report recommends prioritizing control strategies—ventilation, filtration, supplemental air cleaning—and targeting a combined four to six air changes per hour. This is very significant, in terms of when we're speaking about classrooms—to have any combination of those approaches. The University of Toronto—and I've raised this with you in the Legislature before—announced it's going to follow this approach for in-person learning spaces

this school year. The Harvard report says outdoor classes are the safest, but “as the next best solution, mechanical ventilation systems in buildings can forcibly bring outdoor air inside and then distribute that fresh air to different areas of the building.”

I need to know whether the ministry is bringing any of that information and that science into school boards. Have you provided school boards with any specific guidance for air quality and ventilation that meet the Harvard standards?

Hon. Stephen Lecce: Thank you for the question.

Specific to the study, I would have been briefed on that last summer.

In August 2020, we provided detailed guidance to school boards on air ventilation standards and best practices. That was the basis for the memo in the summer, ahead of September. Of course, part of that advice speaks specifically about improvements to the filters themselves, including using the high standard of MERV 13; the complementary benefits of HEPA units, which we have procured; and the need for improving. And, when required, we have recommissioned roughly 90% of all mechanical systems in the province to improve air flow. Of the 10%—

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Excuse me, Minister. My apologies.

MPP Stiles?

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Ms. Marit Stiles: Sorry; I just don’t want to get too far off-track there, Minister.

So what you’re telling me is that August was when you provided the guidance to boards. What I’m hearing, I think, is that no other guidance has been issued since August, which I would say is very concerning given the extent to which the science has evolved since then. I just want to confirm that that was the last guidance specifically given to boards.

Hon. Stephen Lecce: Chair, I’d like to turn it over to the deputy minister.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Deputy Minister?

Ms. Nancy Naylor: As the minister said, we did put out the technical guidance on August 25 around ventilation and air quality in classrooms, and we included a detailed checklist for boards to follow throughout as they prepared for the school year and throughout the year. That checklist was based and informed in part by the Harvard school and by ASHRAE standards, which you referred to.

We have continued to work with our colleagues who are responsible for other public sector infrastructure, such as the Ministry of Labour and the Ministry of the Attorney General, which is responsible for the courts, and we are all following the guidance of Public Health Ontario. They continue to advise us and publish updates. In particular, they published an update in December 2020, which we reviewed carefully. Our guidance to school boards continues to align with that advice, but we continue to follow the evidence.

As ADM Proulx had mentioned, we’re supporting investments in the ventilation systems, and where ventilation systems can’t bring air quality to the standard that

school boards want, we’re supporting an enormous procurement of portable HEPA filters, which are sufficient in some cases.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): I have a question from MPP Stiles.

MPP Stiles?

Ms. Marit Stiles: Just two things: First of all, how are school boards reporting on their progress in this regard? Then, secondly—and I think this is critical: In all the conversations I’ve had with the experts, like David Elfstrom, who is, as you probably know, a professional engineer specializing in these issues, and talking to folks about the Harvard report—are independent engineers or contractors undertaking any air quality tests right now in Ontario classrooms?

Ms. Nancy Naylor: We have stayed in close touch with school boards and we have asked them for monthly reports on all of their COVID-19 investments, including their ventilation and air quality investments. The minister speaks to those Pulse surveys on a regular basis in the House and in other places. We do, as I mentioned, take advice from Public Health Ontario, and they monitor the literature on our behalf, including other air quality experts.

We are aware that some school boards have contracted with engineers to ensure that the commissioning of their ventilation systems is such that they are running at an optimal level, and that they have been monitoring both the air quality in their classrooms and the validity of the building monitoring systems that are often part of the overall mechanical ventilation systems.

Ms. Marit Stiles: Deputy Minister, what I would like to know is, does the government have a plan to ensure that all of the classrooms in Ontario—what I’ve been encouraging the minister to do and what the experts are encouraging the government to do is to undertake independent air quality testing in all of our classrooms, and is that being planned in advance of, at the very latest, a September return? I was hoping that this government would tell us what the metrics are that they’re going to be looking at. This surely should be one of the things that we’re considering in a return to school.

Ms. Nancy Naylor: The answer to your question is yes. Effectively, most schools, 70% of our schools, have full mechanical ventilation. Those systems are set up with building monitoring systems to make sure that they are achieving the air quality results that they are intended to achieve.

As we’ve mentioned, we are encouraging and funding school boards to run those systems at their optimum capacity, at their maximum capacity even if that exceeds energy efficiency goals; for example, asking them to run the system for two hours before classes and two hours afterwards. We are offering school boards \$29.4 million in the next year to cover their increased energy costs and the more frequent changes of filters and other mechanical ventilation components that are required to support that.

Another 21% of our schools have partial mechanical ventilation, and the remaining schools have older systems such as boiler systems. In those in particular, we asked

school boards to use their funding to procure portable HEPA filters, to make sure that they could place one or two of those units in every classroom where air quality might need remediation. Again, we are supporting them in changing the filters in those machines regularly.

Those are the steps that our school boards are taking to address air quality in the very varied forms of infrastructure that they are maintaining and supporting.

Ms. Marit Stiles: I would say, just to put it on the record again, that it was disheartening, to say the least, to learn today that the capital repair backlog in our schools has increased now by another billion dollars under the Conservative government since they came to power, three years ago almost exactly.

When I look at the promises that have been made by the Premier at the end of last summer, and then I see the gap between what we have seen has actually been accomplished—I will reflect the comments I'm hearing from so many parents, school boards and others out there, which is, "What has the government really been doing to address this issue? Where is the commitment to ensuring that our schools are ready for reopening in September? At what point will we have that assurance?" It's very disheartening, I have to say, and I think a lot of Ontarians share my perspective on that.

Mr. Chair, I think we only have a few minutes left. Can you tell me—

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): You have three minutes and 20 seconds.

Ms. Marit Stiles: Okay, so I'm going to start on some other questions. I'm going to start on some of this government's plans to make online learning—the kind of remote emergency online learning that we've had—permanent in this province. This is a plan that the government calls Education that Works for You. It's an overhaul of the public education system. The same overhaul was notorious in its attempt to eliminate 10,000 education worker jobs and bring about massive cuts.

One of the routes to eliminating those jobs and making those cuts was by imposing four mandatory online courses for secondary students, against all best evidence. When you became minister, you walked back part of that plan to two mandatory courses, after students, families and education workers protested quite loudly, which was still a significant departure from what any other jurisdiction was doing, and without much evidence that it would be good for students—and, by the way, with a system that already offered people the potential. There have always been optional classes. If, for example, as I know the minister mentioned earlier, students can't access a certain course, they've always been able to access that course online if they needed to.

This year's GSNs show a reduction for secondary education teachers related to the phasing-in of those two mandatory online learning courses for secondary students.

And it is no secret that online learning was already, as I said, part of our public education system and that COVID-19 required this shift to remote learning. It's also no secret that those emergency measures have really been

the source of a lot of harm for students, for their mental health, for their academic health and well-being.

So it was a big surprise to many educators, parents and school boards when, at a meeting of stakeholders in March of this year, a plan was dropped on them out of nowhere that would make remote learning a permanent fixture in our education system.

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The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): A minute left.

Ms. Marit Stiles: Minister, while schools are seeing an exponential increase in COVID-19 cases and boards were stretching their reserve funds to make up the funding that they needed, why were you focused on making this risky remote learning plan permanent and not in getting our kids back to in-school learning?

Hon. Stephen Lecce: We do believe that parents are best positioned to make a decision for their children, not government, union members or anyone else, to be quite frank. It's why we provided that choice—a choice that we believe, roughly, one in four parents exercised in the pandemic. We, obviously, have committed only to providing that choice in the coming September, given the pandemic will continue on, notwithstanding our collective sense of optimism about the future.

Obviously, our commitment is to get students in class, and we are strong advocates of safe in-class learning. But we also believe the pandemic has demonstrated the need and the utility for that option, at least during this crisis, to provide parents with that choice. And high-quality learning was the basis for our over \$200-million investment—

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

We go now to the government. MPP Coe, the floor is yours, sir.

Mr. Lorne Coe: Good afternoon, Minister, and good afternoon to your staff who have worked so hard over the last year to bring us to our discussion on the estimates before us.

Minister, my question is on skilled trades. You will know from our work together that this is an area that I have significant interest in, primarily because Ontario's education system, in my view—and I know you agree with this—can play a key role in Ontario's economic recovery by doing something that I know my constituents want: promoting the skilled trades to young people, to help meet their future workforce needs.

Added to that, Ontario's future economic growth relies on a skilled workforce. I also hear that out of discussions that I have with, for example, the Whitby Chamber of Commerce and Durham College, which has a skilled trades centre. They both realize that the skilled trades are essential to meeting the needs and demands of the economy in the region of Durham and, in fact, its recovery. That's not dissimilar to any other part of the province of Ontario. I know that you and your excellent staff understand that.

Minister, could you explain to the committee members what the government is doing to ensure that students and parents recognize the skilled trades as a viable career

option—and in doing that, Minister and staff, if you could particularly highlight some of the excellent work you're doing in the four-year plan within the ministry.

Hon. Stephen Lecce: I appreciate the question and obviously the shared commitment on expanding access to the skills trades for young people in the province.

I remember my first visit as minister—one of them, at least—was in your riding, visiting a beautiful school that had a strong, proud alumnus involved in the SHSM program. It was great to meet the educator. I remember fondly speaking with him and with some students who were proud to show me their shop.

This government believes that there are dignified, meaningful opportunities in the skilled trades for young people. We aim to reduce the stigma and to empower young people—particularly young women, as well as other communities that are under-represented in the skilled trades; for them to see themselves reflected in the skill trades—to enter those careers and to seek this type of meaningful, high-paid employment.

There are a few things we've done. First off, I will note, in the grade 10 careers course, we actually, for the first time, really put an emphasis on helping young people, earlier into their high school career, see the benefits and the opportunities associated with the skilled trades. It's part of our broader aim to strengthen STEM learning in the province. Those pathways are now integrated—for technology, for skilled trades, for apprenticeship, right into that course, to inspire young people and, I think, to a greater extent, encourage them to enter into those fields.

We also know—it's certainly the case in Durham; it's the case in York and really right across the province—there is still a very high shortage, an acute shortage of workers in the province today. That is going to be further exacerbated as the baby boomers and other workers exit the workforce. We need roughly 100,000 skilled workers in the immediate term, and that number will only rise over time. So we have a plan in this province, as noted, with the grade 10 careers course, to help promote career exploration, which is a critical part of learning, in our estimation, and really mandating that course to focus on careers and pathways that lead them into STEM and skilled trade work.

I will also note that in the budget, we announced that the Specialist High Skills Major program, SHSM—there has been an additional investment of \$39 million for that program over the next three years. That's going to help support 75 new programs to open up opportunities for students across the province, really to create and develop job-ready skills amongst our senior students. We think that is going to be very significant in building upon a successful program within our schools today and to really help them achieve success in the classroom and beyond.

We also announced in the budget a \$3-million investment to create 1,000 bursaries, essentially internships, within the skilled trades. We really think that this is going to be a positive way of collaborating with the private sector to create meaningful job opportunities with the

government, to get these young people into those pathways and, ultimately, to help create opportunities down the road for employment, post-graduation. We're very excited to bring these very fulfilling opportunities to young people within our schools, within our communities, and working with our small business partners across the province of Ontario.

We have, obviously, expanded throughout the curriculum and the math curriculum some of the competencies required to complement and to support the skilled trades. That has been a major emphasis on financial literacy; coding, for example; measurement; data analysis; management—all of that has been very beneficial in the grade 1 to 8 curriculum we've revised and in the new grade 9 curriculum we're about to release.

What I'd simply note is that we are firmly committed to investing, in partnership with the Minister of Labour and obviously the parliamentary assistant and others who have been involved in this work for some time, to make sure that we can continue to focus with a real target on getting more young people into the skilled trades, and especially helping to empower more young women to enter those careers. We see meaningful opportunities. We have a plan that's multi-pronged, multi-ministry. I know the Premier feels strongly about this as part of our path to economic recovery, as we support entrepreneurship, apprenticeship and skilled training for the next generation of young people.

Mr. Lorne Coe: Thank you, Minister, for that very expansive answer to my question.

I want to move into another area, Minister. From participating in committee meetings over the past week and this week as well, it's really apparent to anyone who's watching that Ontario has a world-class education system, and importantly, it's one that strives for equity of opportunity for all students. I know that's an important aspect for you and has been for a long time. This applies to Indigenous, Black and racialized students as well as students from the LGBTQ community and the special-needs community.

Minister, within the last few months, you've made announcements about a new language curriculum for a community that has long been underserved. I'd like you, for the benefit of the committee and those who might be watching or listening, to please share what the features are of that announcement that will benefit ASL and LSQ language learners, and what you anticipate the impacts to be in the short term, midterm and long term, and then the extent of the consultation that was undertaken to lead up to that announcement.

Hon. Stephen Lecce: I appreciate that question.

It was an exciting announcement. Back in March, Ontario became the first jurisdiction in Canada to offer LSQ as a second-language course and one of the first to offer ASL as a second-language course, and we're proud of that.

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We know, obviously, within the sign-language community, there is a rich culture and identity. Expanding access to more students to learn, I think, will really foster

the creation of that community and the promotion of that diversity that exists within it. I know, when I spoke to leaders within the deaf and hard-of-hearing community, just how meaningful this was as an expression of solidarity with the community—and to really encourage other students, who perhaps don't face those challenges, to pursue learning within the sign-language community, be it ASL or LSQ, for English and French. We are quite proud of that work.

The new curriculum that is available for September 2021 was announced with a great sense of excitement for many partners. We're hoping many school boards will participate and promote this type of new learning that I think many students will benefit from. I think it underscores our broader commitment for those students with disability. It's why we continue to improve funding, both for accessible spaces for special education students and mental health, more largely, in the province of Ontario.

Mr. Lorne Coe: Minister, could you speak a little bit about the curriculum and resources website? It's my understanding that it offers the curriculum in a digital format as well. Can you talk about what alignments you see with the government's commitment to modernizing the publicly funded education system, and then more broadly, the government's initiative in digitizing other aspects of government, please?

Hon. Stephen Lecce: Yes, of course. First off, I'd just note that the new curriculum is available for educators and parents, as you noted, on the new curriculum and resources website, which is dcp.edu.gov.on.ca. The curriculum and resources website offers the curriculum in a digital format. It's part of our broader aim to modernize the way by which we reach young people and their parents. Many of the new curricula we've unveiled include a parent guide, to distill this curriculum down so that parents can follow along and be most empowered with the information that their children are learning. We think that is a very important strength.

With respect to the broader access to the digital curriculum, I would like to turn it over to Yael Ginsler, who has been supporting and leading our efforts to digitize and bring this curriculum system into the 21st century.

Ms. Yael Ginsler: Thank you. I am pleased to talk with you about our curriculum and resources website and how we are digitizing curriculum documents. This is very much a part of the provincial plan on a digital data strategy across government and all the work that's happening to modernize government and services for Ontarians, and certainly the work that we are doing in the Ministry of Education is part of that.

We did launch a fully accessible ontario.ca/curriculum or dcp.edu website, fully available in English and French. It launched in June 2020 with the release of the elementary math curriculum. Since the launch of the site, we've had hundreds of thousands of unique visitors from over 150 countries who have come to look at Ontario's curriculum. On launch day itself, we had over 55,000 unique visitors from 65 countries very interested in what Ontario is doing with its curriculum as a leading jurisdiction. So the site has a wide reach across our province and across countries

around the world. It is an iterative process. We continue to add to it so that we are increasing the searchable features, so that parents and students can really understand what it is that we learn in Ontario's schools. There are some great overviews for parents, for example, where they can see, "What is my child learning in mathematics in grade 4? What will they learn in grade 5? What will they learn in grade 6?" That kind of trajectory of learning is available to help parents truly understand what it is their child is learning in school.

So far, we have, of course, launched the mathematics grade 1 to 8 curriculum in a digital format, the health and physical education curriculum, and the career studies curriculum that the minister just spoke to; also, the First Nation, Métis and Inuit studies curriculum; and, of course, our new curriculum for ASL/LSQ that we've just spoken about. We are currently revising the grade 9 curriculum, and that, too, will be available in this digital format.

As parents go to the website, they can still access all of the curriculum, not just those that have been put into this new digital format. They can access all curriculum through that site, so it's a one-stop shop. More curriculum will be added—as well, as we've said, additional features to make it a really accessible and useful site for parents, for families, for students and, of course, for our educators. When we launch a curriculum, we do put a number of resources there for educators specifically, including access to the training that's available to support implementation of curriculum. And, as the minister said, there are resources for parents, as well, on the digital curriculum platform.

We will continue to grow and digitize and modernize our curriculum and at the same time focus on digital fluency for our students themselves, including with the new mandatory learning around coding that begins in grade 1 for all students across the province.

Mr. Lorne Coe: Thank you for that response.

We're the first jurisdiction in Canada to offer LSQ as a second-language course and one of the first to offer ASL as a second-language course, so I'm not surprised that we have other countries coming to Ontario to learn about how well the process is working.

I'm also encouraged to see that there's ongoing collaboration with students and parents to look at adding different features to it.

With those other countries that are coming to Ontario to learn more about it—can you give me a sense of where they're coming from and what, particularly, they want to take back to their countries? Obviously, what we've done, with your leadership and your co-workers and the minister—this is a best practice. So I'm not surprised, again, we have other countries coming to learn more from you—through you, Chair, to the ADM.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Thank you, MPP Coe.

Ms. Yael Ginsler: We work with many jurisdictions around the world. Depending on the curriculum that we're updating, we'll look to various jurisdictions, and they will, of course, do the same and respond back to us. Just this past year, we were invited, for example, to sit at the table through UNESCO to work with other jurisdictions around

the pandemic and learn from one another. Many jurisdictions look to Ontario, and we were asked to present at those forums what Ontario was doing to support continuity of learning for students. So that continues. Many other jurisdictions do look to Ontario.

I do know that when we launched the elementary math curriculum, just as an example, we were right away featured on CNN that same day, particularly with the work that we were doing around coding and financial literacy.

So, certainly, we do get attention from many other jurisdictions. They often request presentations from the Ministry of Education. We're now doing those virtually, but we used to entertain many jurisdictions, in Ontario, that came to hear more about what we were doing. So Ontario continues to be a leader, for sure.

Mr. Lorne Coe: How many minutes are left, Chair?

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

Mr. Lorne Coe: I'll turn the questioning over to MPP Skelly, please.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): MPP Skelly?

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Ms. Donna Skelly: I'm going to ask the minister a question on something that we touched on earlier, and that is the additional funding we've spent on schools, just that we've spent even since the pandemic began. I know that there have been some challenges, perhaps, in terms of the members of the official opposition actually agreeing with some of the numbers that you brought forward.

We have spent a tremendous amount of money—and I am proud of the fact—to upgrade schools; for example, to address some of the systemic deficiencies we've seen because of neglect in the previous government.

Can you please go over once again the amount of money that we have been able to allocate to our schools and to school boards across Ontario to improve the buildings themselves, whether it's addressing air conditioning or air purification in the systems—or simply addressing some of the problems that we've seen with infrastructure across Ontario.

Hon. Stephen Lecce: I very much appreciate the opportunity to do so.

Let's just be clear on air ventilation, if we may start there. Some 95% of schools in this province have improved ventilation; that's reported by the school boards themselves. Some 90% of all mechanical systems in the province have been recommissioned or recalibrated—in part because of our guidance and our clear commitment going back to summer—to improve the state of schools and the air quality for students and staff. For the 10% of—

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

We now go to the official opposition. MPP Stiles.

Ms. Marit Stiles: When we broke, I was starting to ask the minister some questions about his plan to make their really terrible online learning experiment permanent, and what response we were getting from families and students about that. I know the minister likes to couch it in terms of choice, but what I think we need to make clear in this

committee is that when you are moving resources out of classrooms and onto online, you are actually reducing the choice for so many students. Really, it's no choice at all when your community school ceases to exist. So we're going to go through some of that.

I want to reiterate for folks who may have just been tuning in that the plan which the government outlined in a secret meeting—and had people actually signing non-disclosures around, which is really extraordinary—back in March of this year is a plan that was dropped on educators and education stakeholders that would make remote learning a permanent fixture in our education system. The plan, which stakeholders were obligated, again, to keep secret, said that new legislation was forthcoming, as reported in the *Globe and Mail*. If introduced and passed, beginning in September 2021, parents would continue to have the ability to enrol their child in full-time synchronous remote learning if they choose to, going forward.

The document also stated that school boards would be required to provide students with remote learning on snow days and in the event of an emergency that results in a school closure.

The documents that were outlined in that plan are going to see students enrol in “teacher-supported” online courses offered through TVOntario or TFO, with school boards footing the bill. TVO and TFO would put forward a global development strategy so they could market online courses and generate revenue, and TVO and TFO would be able to enrol out-of-province students in online courses, but school boards wouldn't be able to do so.

Minister, again, we heard you say that this was all about choice.

So while we're seeing in schools these exponential increases in COVID-19 and boards are doing everything they can to stretch their reserve funds to make up the funding they needed, this government was focused on this remote learning scheme being permanent.

I want to ask the minister, why were school boards and education workers not consulted on this plan before this ministry initiatives meeting in March?

Hon. Stephen Lecce: The government has committed ourselves to providing virtual learning options for parents this September. That is the only commitment we have made to date. The rationale for that, in part, is because we think parents deserve the choice, leading into this September, with the pandemic still around us.

We also believe, as a matter of principle, parents are best positioned to make that decision, not any member of this committee or, respectfully, any public servant. Parents will make the best decision based on the circumstances of their household—an immunocompromised family, living with intergenerational parents and grandparents etc.

I will also note that there are 200 schools and high schools in this province with fewer than 200 students. We know—

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Excuse me, Minister. I apologize.

MPP Stiles?

Ms. Marit Stiles: Minister, I just asked you a really simple question and you did not answer it.

Why weren't school boards and education workers consulted on that plan, which was presented to them in March, before this ministry initiatives meeting that took place in March? Why were they not consulted?

Hon. Stephen Lecce: That meeting was a consultation meeting. I'd just note that through October and November 2020, 55 stakeholder groups were consulted in 31 separate engagement sessions. Additionally, in March and April, 19 labour and school board partners were consulted. The overall aim is to seek the perspective of those we serve, but at the end of the day—

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): I'm sorry, Minister—

Ms. Marit Stiles: Oh no, no. Go ahead.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): My apologies, sir.

Hon. Stephen Lecce: I was just going to say, at the end of the day, our intention is to ensure that parents and their students have a choice of a publicly funded, publicly delivered education system, in class and online, for this September. That is the only commitment we have made to date. That is what we are standing by. I know we will disagree on the merits of having that virtual system, and that is fair. I think for the one in four parents who exercised the choice this current year, and perhaps likely less, perhaps hopefully less in the coming year, because we want children in class—I will note that they will benefit from the choice as well.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Sorry, Minister. My apologies.

MPP Stiles?

Ms. Marit Stiles: Minister, what you're trying to couch this in is as if this is just for next year, but the plan actually puts in place something that will be very difficult to unroll. This is a plan that completely changes the way that online learning has been conducted in the past. I know you were about to say something earlier about small schools and kids needing choices of doing other courses. Those choices already exist. Those choices already exist for students across this province, and they have existed for many years. The minister knows that.

The minister is using the excuse, I would argue, of the pandemic to slip in what is actually a major and radical change to the way that education is delivered in the province—because it is not about just this year; it is about going forward, and it is a move.

When you start to move in this direction, Minister, you are taking resources—precious resources. We know our schools are already cash-strapped, and you're taking those resources out and moving them to a whole other institution to deliver this kind of education online.

I've got to tell you, I have met no one, no education experts out there who say that it's a good thing to move kids into full-time online learning versus in school. There are rare cases where a child may have some issues where they are required to not actually be in person in school—but those are very rare, and we really should be addressing the root issues there, don't you think?

Anyway, Minister, the point is you did not—the answer to the question, the correct answer was, you did not consult on this plan. The consultation in March—you landed on all of those stakeholders and they were shocked, they were outraged that you came to them with a fait accompli, basically: “Here is the package, including a proposal for legislation.”

Minister, you mentioned in that slide deck that was leaked to the Globe and Mail and others that there was legislation coming. We didn't see it this spring.

I would like you to report to us on what the status is of the legislation that you mentioned in that slide deck.

Hon. Stephen Lecce: I think it's quite clear, Chair, that we have not introduced legislation.

Our commitment is to consult on that particular program, but the immediate term—I think it is actually really important for the deputy minister to provide context on why choice today is not, in fact, provided to all schools and all regions of the province.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Excuse me, Minister. My apologies.

MPP Stiles?

Ms. Marit Stiles: I think the minister has answered my question. I think the minister said that there is no legislation coming forward. That's the answer to my question.

The deputy minister might want to respond to this next question. This is actually a question coming from People for Education. I know the minister will be familiar with that organization. They have noted that TVOntario's Independent Learning Centre currently provides credits online to approximately 19,400 students, most of whom are adults. Under the provincial plan, by 2023, two years from now, 250,000 students per year will be taking courses online, all of them coordinated through TVO and TFO.

1350

How will the Ministry of Education and TVO or TFO's volunteer board ensure that those institutions, that organization, has the capacity to effectively manage such a substantial change in such an extraordinarily short period of time?

Ms. Nancy Naylor: Thank you for the question.

I think it's fair to say that we are consulting with key education partners on how to carry forward the government's mandate on online learning. Those consultations are still under way. We got valuable feedback from the conversations that started about a month ago, and we expect to continue those conversations about how to operationalize this goal of providing a full suite of online learning to all students, no matter where they are in the province.

As you mentioned, the government has announced that the expectation will be that two online courses will be a graduation requirement, so that will become part of the 30 credits that students will need to graduate. It is true that we have a good base to build on in terms of online courses, but it's also true that we have the rare asset of having two educational broadcast agencies in the province of Ontario who have proven to be excellent partners throughout the

pandemic. They have proven to have the capabilities to provide educational programming, content and educational credit content for us as we've needed. They are currently developing, for example, a range of elementary digital content for us.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Excuse me, Deputy Minister.

MPP Stiles?

Ms. Marit Stiles: I'd like the deputy minister to continue, but I do want to know—that is going from 19,400 students to 250,000 students. I just want the deputy minister to explain how we move to that capacity.

Ms. Nancy Naylor: The 19,000 credits that you referred to are the credits provided by the Independent Learning Centre. We do expect those to continue, but that isn't really what we are counting towards our goal of online learning credit. We consider that to be day school high school students, the kind of students you picture when you think of a normal high school. Currently, 61,000 high school students, or almost 10%, are taking an average of 72,000 credits every year. That's our base to build on, and it's substantial.

What we hope to build on is, with the help of TVO and TFO, creating online credits, modernizing them, bringing their broadcast capability to make engaging and interesting and curriculum-relevant content—that we would make that content and those courses available to our school boards so that their own teachers could develop and provide the online learning content.

We do have a goal of ensuring that it's easy for students to access the range of credits they may be interested in, even if they are in a smaller high school that wouldn't provide all of those credits every year.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): MPP Stiles.

Ms. Marit Stiles: I want to go back to the minister.

Changes were made to legislation last year, Minister, you will recall, that gave you, as the minister, the power to choose which third-party providers create and deliver the centralized courses that are offered through TVO and TFO.

Has the ministry entered into any contracts with private online learning providers at this time?

Hon. Stephen Lecce: No, because the intention is to deliver online and virtual learning through publicly funded systems and through the Ministry of Education's partners to date, including school boards, TVO and TFO.

Ms. Marit Stiles: Minister, francophone school boards already have their own very well-respected consortium that provides online learning courses, CAVLFO.

How will the constitutional right of francophone Ontarians to control their own education be maintained if those courses are taken away and centralized with a separate government agency, being TFO?

Hon. Stephen Lecce: We absolutely appreciate that question.

We do have an obligation to the French-language and Catholic systems and the communities in the province of Ontario. We commit ourselves to uphold it.

I'll turn to the deputy minister to provide that perspective and assurance.

Ms. Nancy Naylor: We do recognize that as we look towards our achieving our goals with respect to online learning, we have to proceed with full respect for the constitutional framework for the Ontario education system. That does include respecting the governance rights of French-language school boards, both public and Catholic.

It is our intention to build on the infrastructure that is operating very well. It's known in the French board system as CAVLFO. It does provide many, many online courses to the students in our 12 French-language boards. They will play a key role in developing and implementing the strategy for French-language school boards for online learning.

Ms. Marit Stiles: Deputy Minister, as I'm sure you're aware—Minister, I know you are—many are quite concerned that, in fact, this move is unconstitutional. I suspect you will be spending a lot of money in court fighting those things.

When it comes to CAVLFO and the rights of francophones in our province, you would think it would be important to consult with francophone and Franco-Ontarian organizations, particularly the school boards, as well as the francophone teachers' federations going into this plan.

Minister, I think we both know the answer to this question, but did you consult with them about this plan before you gave them the plan in March?

Hon. Stephen Lecce: We have held regular conversations and consultations with public, Catholic, English and French school boards, associations, trustees on the virtual learning offering—

Interjection.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Excuse me, Minister. My apologies.

MPP Stiles?

Ms. Marit Stiles: Minister, I don't want to interrupt you, but I asked you specifically—it's one thing to say, "We've been talking to them all along," but it's another thing to say, "We specifically brought them into the development of this plan." But you did not. We all know the answer to this question. I just need you to confirm that.

Hon. Stephen Lecce: We've been in regular conversations with them leading up to and thereafter, and we've committed to them, as I will to you and through to this committee—our commitment to uphold the constitutional obligations to French-language minority communities in the province. That's something we've shared directly to our French-language partners.

Ms. Marit Stiles: Again, it is not enough to be out there saying these things. These are just words unless there is actually a commitment. A commitment would mean a collaboration—an actual collaboration, a real consultation, not, "We understand that you have constitutional rights," and then, boom, here's a plan that completely throws all of those previous conversations out the window. That is not consultation or collaboration. I think it again shows the lack of respect that this government has for

francophone Ontarians, Franco-Ontarian rights and language rights in this province.

I have just one more question on online schools. You've talked many times about how your government made a commitment to stop the closure of community schools that happened under the previous Liberal government. But I want to put it to you, Minister, that the conversations I've been having with school boards, with education experts, indicate very clearly to me that what this plan you are embarking on, which, I understand, you see as your legacy—moving kids out of in-person schooling, more kids online. You call it choice; I would say that it's no choice at all. This plan will have the impact of moving dollars—because the dollars follow the students. So you are going to be moving dollars literally out of community schools and into TVOntario and TFO.

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

Ms. Marit Stiles: I would put it to you, Minister, that moving funds out of our small community schools, our rural, our northern schools and our francophone schools—many of them are francophone—is going to result in their closure. That is the alarm; that is what I am hearing from boards across this province—whether you're talking about cities and maintaining that small neighbourhood school or you're talking about more isolated communities and northern and rural schools, that this will be the impact, Minister.

I want you to explain to me how it is that you think you can move dollars out of those schools and that not result in school closures.

1400

Hon. Stephen Lecce: First off, I'm very proud that under our government there have not been any school closures—a sharp contrast to the former Liberal government.

The second is, on virtual learning, the member will know that there is no funding differential between virtual schools and the in-class experience. That is just a matter of fact. So any assertions—

Ms. Marit Stiles: No, but it's—

Hon. Stephen Lecce: Sorry; I just want to answer the question, if I may, and I will turn it back to the member.

Ms. Marit Stiles: I only have a few seconds. I just want to say, Minister, you know that what I'm talking about is that the funding dollars—and you've made it very clear in your plan—will follow the students online, if they're choosing permanent online options. It's going to come out of the school boards.

Hon. Stephen Lecce: Virtual learning, the K-to-12 virtual learning, full, synchronous experience, is funded at the same rate as in-class learning, member. That's just a fact.

Ms. Marit Stiles: At the same rate, but the money is following the students.

Hon. Stephen Lecce: We did increase the funding by an additional \$200-plus million to expand the infrastructure for tablets, for Internet connections. Over \$3 billion was announced in the most recent budget to end the digital

divide—over 10,000 Internet connections, professional development for educators. Every step of the way, we have strengthened a system that has been vigorously opposed by many interests, including yourself.

Ms. Marit Stiles: And what you, Minister, are going to do is—

Hon. Stephen Lecce: But we do think parents make the best decisions—

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): And with that, I have to say to both of you, the 20 minutes is up.

We go to the government. MPP McKenna.

Hon. Stephen Lecce: Before I turn it over to MPP McKenna, I just wanted to permit an opportunity—

Ms. Jane McKenna: Sorry. If you can hear me, I cannot hear anything at all.

Hon. Stephen Lecce: Oh. Can you hear us now?

Ms. Jane McKenna: Yes. Can everybody else hear now? Sorry. Go ahead.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Yes, we can hear you, MPP McKenna.

Hon. Stephen Lecce: I was saying to the MPP—just permit us one minute. I wanted to get an opportunity to comment before I turn it back to you—just a few quick thoughts.

Just to finish our thought on air ventilation—we have undertaken a commitment to improve the air quality of schools in this province. Some 95% of our schools in Ontario have improved their ventilation systems, as reported by the boards themselves, and 90% of mechanical systems have been recommissioned or recalibrated, and the residual 10% that don't have mechanical ventilation have HEPA filter units in place. We have increased the frequency and improved the filter quality within our schools. There are 55,000 HEPA air filtration units procured and 20,000 additional ventilation devices supporting our schools.

In Toronto, for example, 25,000 HEPA filters were in place in every occupied classroom in the province when they were open. We announced an additional \$450 million—federal-provincial dollars—to improve over 1,600 schools in this province, with a focus on air ventilation and HVAC systems, and an additional \$29 million going forward to maintain those systems.

Our bottom line, our commitment, is to improve air ventilation in Ontario. We have led the way in the nation to do so, recognizing we're going to continue to improve those spaces, continue to improve the safety of our schools, given the assurance by the Chief Medical Officer of Health repeatedly, from September to the present, that our schools have been safe. Our commitment as a government is to continue to make them even more safe, which is why we're ensuring every student, every staff who wants a vaccine will receive two before September, as part of our broader reopening strategy to keep them safe.

With that, I did want to turn to the deputy to expand, because there was an opportunity where the deputy minister was not permitted, Chair, to answer a question related to smaller schools and the impact on choice for

virtual learning—and then, of course, back to the parliamentary assistant.

Ms. Nancy Naylor: Thank you. In Ontario, given our unique and extensive geography, we're proud to support over 800 high schools. Those represent schools throughout the province of varying sizes.

We have, as the minister mentioned, over 200 high schools with fewer than 200 students. Typically, this would mean approximately 50 students per grade, and that, even with a fairly rich teaching allocation and staffing allocation for smaller schools, does not permit the range of course selections that are possible in larger high schools.

So we do see our online learning plan as a key strategy to broaden the access to the full range of Ontario credit courses for high school students in more remote and in our smaller schools.

We would also note that this is an opportunity for Ontario teachers who teach in those smaller schools to teach courses that they have a passion for, that they would like to bring to their students, and perhaps some of their students will be in front of them and some of their students will be in other schools. That is something that we do see as an advantage of our online learning program.

I could also add to the record about the nature of the consultation that we have done on the online learning program. We did, last fall, legislate the new mandate for TVO and TFO to have a role in the online learning plan, and we did ask them to develop a business case on how they would go about that. Throughout October and November 2020, 55 stakeholder groups were consulted in 31 separate engagement sessions—19 conducted in English and 12 in French. Stakeholder engagements informed TVO and TFO's development of a joint business plan to reflect their expanded mandates, which was submitted for ministry consideration in December 2020. Additionally, in March and April 2021, 19 labour and school board partners were consulted. Our consultation and planning work will continue on this important priority.

Mr. Chair, I'll turn it over to other questions from members of the government caucus.

Ms. Jane McKenna: First of all, I want to speak to the minister.

I want to thank you for your fight for children, teachers, administrators and custodians, who are all involved in the recovery of schools getting reopened again. Your heart and commitment has shone through that. I say that on a few things.

I've been sitting here listening intently today and I need to say a couple of things. You talked about the 21st century, with the choice of having online learning. My son went to school and was bullied every day of his life. I ended up moving him from the school. I did it, but I told him I couldn't move him again because I didn't want him acting like a victim. He's 25 now, and he said to me, "Mom, you know a government is doing the right thing when the Minister of Education, the Minister of Labour, Training and Skills Development, the Premier, and all the caucus involved are listening to the people out there instead of them telling us what we need them to hear." I

can say this because he wanted a choice and he didn't have one. In the 21st century, my God, if you don't give people the ability to make a decision on what they want to do—because it's not a cookie cutter, and we all have different circumstances in our lives. I can say for him that he thanks you, Minister Lecce, for the opportunity for people to have a choice of what they want to do in this 21st century.

I also wanted to say, before I get into my questions, that with your heart and your commitment, because Natalie Pierre—her son Michael, as you know, sadly, took his life. And obviously, Laurie, you have been with them numerous times. This is you reaching out to them on your time because they needed to hear from you, and you have gone above and beyond, just as a human being, more so than anything else, because you listened to what her story was with the loss of her son Michael. My heart goes out to her every day, and every other parent who has had to live through that.

I want to thank you, because I am saying that we have a responsibility, as MPPs, for our constituents—to give them the skills to succeed, and if you don't, you have failed as an MPP.

It's very easy to sit and be an armchair quarterback and tell people all the things that we should be doing, but it's better to be a government, and a Minister of Education like yourself, and all the other people who are working together—the ministers, because you've all gotten out of your silos. You all work together. I am the parliamentary assistant for labour with Minister McNaughton. The numerous conversations we've had just wouldn't have happened in the last 15 years with the previous government.

In saying that, I want to talk about the bullying aspect, just to see what else you'd like to say, because I know your commitment to my constituents here and how you've treated them was overwhelming to me. It actually could almost bring me to tears.

1410

With kids not being at school, what have you been doing with cyberbullying, and what has been happening in a year when most kids are learning virtually? I just want to know what you've been doing to address that, Minister.

Hon. Stephen Lecce: I really appreciate that question and the focus on the mental health of children.

I recall vividly the discussion with Natalie about the suicide of her son, on World Mental Health Day. I think we were together at CAMH making a mental health announcement. It all came together the night prior, when the member from Burlington literally, at about 7 o'clock, gave me a shout and told me a bit about this exceptional citizen in her community, and the tragedy of her son. She ended up speaking at CAMH that day. For many of us, it made it very real and reminded us that this happens to everyday folks in both good families and in broken families.

It was a very sad experience, but also motivating—recognizing that we could help save lives in his name. That's why that day we announced the doubling of mental health funding, the permanent hiring of 180 mental health workers—psychologists, psychotherapists and social

workers—and we announced, in the context of the pandemic, this year and going into next year, an \$80-million investment in mental health. That is unprecedented in-school mental health services by any measurement.

At the peak of the former government's spending—and as you know, I think we can say with some certainty, perhaps even with the opposition member, that the former Liberal government did not have any aversion to spending. They did like to spend, and yet even still, the mental health contribution was around \$18 million at a high. It is now \$80 million. That is going to make a real, lasting impact on improving access, reducing wait times and providing a continuum of care.

In fact, this summer, like last summer, we allowed mental health services in schools to continue through the summer, so they didn't have to drop off in June, the parents then having to go to community supports—if they can get them—then return to the school in September. It was very inconsistent in the child's routine and probably not in their interest, in the sense that it was better to have continuity. So we funded that through the 12 months, allowed boards to do that.

Of course, there's \$86.3 million allocated for this year.

I will just say, with the recovery plan and heavy emphasis on mental health promotion embedded in the health and physical education curriculum which we unveiled two years ago that had a nation-leading emphasis on cyberbullying, on embedding that knowledge right into the heart of our curriculum at a very young age, making it age-appropriate, to understand the signs for the child and strengthening knowledge for parents, I'm working with our ministry and a variety of partners on launching the first school-based human trafficking strategy, in part to counter the victimization happening online—not because of COVID-19. That was a phenomenon happening before, but the data may suggest that with children online more and at home more, perhaps those numbers have risen, most tragically. So our point is to counter that form of evil that's taking place off the 400-series highways, disproportionately in Ontario and across the country.

We've also allocated professional development for our staff, in the context of knowing those signs.

We know there's a lot that must be done to strengthen the safety of our schools. Cyber protection when it comes to our online infrastructure is being strengthened across our school boards to maintain the confidentiality and the privacy rights of students and staff.

Really, enterprise-wide, we've made this a priority from the beginning, and we're going to continue to. It's for Natalie; it's for other individuals who have faced darkness in their lives, so that they know they can, at the least—while they cannot bring back the lives of those they have lost, we have lost, we can move forward remembering their spirit and making the system better, and making sure no child is left behind as a consequence.

If you'd like more, member, I'm happy to turn it over to one of our ADMs, to Denise Dwyer. Or if you have an additional question, I'm happy to turn it back to you.

Ms. Jane McKenna: I'd like you to pass it over to her, but I'd just like to quickly say, I've worked with you numerous times—and that was a 9 o'clock call, when you called me. I just want to put on the record that it was you who reached out to me about that, because of your compassion and your thoughtfulness. We got off that call that night at, I think, 10 to 11. You made it happen. She came in there, and it was a very difficult conversation for her, as you recall—because there weren't any signs for her. I can't even imagine what she had gone through. I just want to say I thank you from the bottom of my heart. She was so overwhelmed by the conversations that you've continued to have—not just once—with her and Laura. Again, there's something to say about reaching out to people and going above and beyond. You've done that so many times. Thank you very, very much for that.

Hon. Stephen Lecce: I'll turn it over to ADM Denise Dwyer to build on some of those supports—mental health supports, specifically—in schools in Ontario.

Ms. Denise Dwyer: My name is Denise Dwyer. I am the assistant deputy minister of Indigenous education and well-being.

I am pleased to talk about bullying and some of the funding we have put behind that as well, and as you indicated, Minister, to talk a bit about mental health and in particular those supports that are very culturally appropriate and targeted to certain populations of students.

As we've heard today, bullying is definitely a priority for this government in terms of prevention and awareness, and taking the position that school environments must be safe regardless of sex, sexual orientation, gender, gender identity, gender expression, race, ancestry, place of origin, colour—no barrier by the identity of the student—and that all Ontario schools should be safe and have an environment that's free from violence and free from bullying.

That's why we have, first of all, a very strong policy foundation to prevent bullying and cyberbullying in schools. That includes a provincial code of conduct that requires that school community members must not engage in bullying behaviour, including cyberbullying, and standards of behaviour that apply to students, whether they're on school property or in a virtual learning environment, on school buses or in other school-related activities, as we have when schools are in person. They also apply to all individuals involved in publicly funded school systems: principals, teachers and other school staff; parents; volunteers; and community groups.

We know that there are some very compelling statistics around bullying that can produce the outcomes that we've heard, and that includes 23% of students reporting being bullied at school, and statistics that we have from Egale, which is an organization that's there to improve the lives of 2SLGBTQI students. Their statistics for 2011 show that 64% of those students, when they surveyed 3,700 of them, felt unsafe in schools.

The ministry has taken a number of steps with respect to bullying and cyberbullying. We continue an ongoing collaboration with schools and partners to promote safe, accepting and inclusive learning environments, as well as

addressing cyberbullying and bullying. For example, in 2020, to support school boards in their planning for Bullying Awareness and Prevention Week, the ministry shared an inventory of evidence-based anti-bullying and positive behaviour programs and resources with school boards. The inventory includes resources related to conflict mediation, and restorative practices or restorative approaches. There was also a parenting resource shared with the sector at that point, entitled Information for Parents/Guardians About Cyberbullying.

We continue to have investments that relate to bullying, which, as we know, can affect a child's mental health. In 2021, EDU spent \$1.95 million funding third-party organizations to develop programming and resources related to bullying and cyberbullying prevention. Those resources included the Ontario principals' association, which has funding of \$245,000 for cyberbullying skills development for principals and vice-principals, and Egale, as I've mentioned before, which has also been funded with provincial and federal monies.

In addition, in 2021, the government put towards \$2.35 million—that was used to be able to provide third-party organizations to further augment their funding and resources related to bullying and cyberbullying prevention. These were, of course, part of a one-time investment that went to Kids Help Phone—doubled the money to Kids Help Phone—to offer their 24/7 counselling services in English and French—

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

1420

Ms. Denise Dwyer: —and as well, augmented the monies going to Egale, White Ribbon and the Canadian Centre for Gender and Sexual Diversity.

I can continue, Minister, if you'd like, on some mental health—or you may have some things I'm sure you'd like to say.

Hon. Stephen Lecce: We'll turn it back to the member, but thank you so much for that thorough update. I appreciate that.

Ms. Denise Dwyer: Thank you.

Ms. Jane McKenna: Minister, I've got a gazillion questions in front of me here that I wish I had the opportunity to ask you.

If you can elaborate a bit more on the expansion of the Internet for broadband—because obviously, we've come leaps and bounds in that, for all the people to have the opportunities to be able to have the Internet.

Hon. Stephen Lecce: This is a firm commitment we have made to ensure every school in this province has access to Internet. We are well under way to having all schools completed by September of this coming year, which is a massive transformation and modernization for the schools of this province. It is going to help our students and our staff connect, especially as we embrace more technology within the classroom.

I will note that, under our government and the Premier, we announced a \$2.8-billion investment to end the digital divide, to ensure 100% coverage by 2025. And we have

increased investments in technology this year alone with respect to the infrastructure, the connectivity, the reliability within our school system and tablet access—over, literally, 200,000 more tablets supporting kids in Ontario and roughly 10,000-plus Internet connections supported. All of this underscores our commitment to ensure families as well as schools have access to the Internet.

I really do believe that our investment, particularly the province-wide 100% commitment, is going to make a dramatic difference in creating, from an equity perspective—so that all families get access to reliable and more affordable Internet in the province of Ontario, something we feel very proud of.

I will conclude, noting that our broadband modernization program is really aimed to deliver a modernized network of improved access and speed to support digitally enabled learning in the classroom. And I think, as we've noted, part of our broader aim for virtual learning, yes, we could—

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

We are going into shorter rotations. To ensure our remaining time is apportioned equally, it will be split as such: eight minutes and 42 seconds to the official opposition and eight minutes and 42 seconds to the government.

Official opposition: MPP Stiles.

Ms. Marit Stiles: I want to get back to the issue of permanent online learning in the last few minutes that we have. I would say that one of the clearest signs that this government is on the wrong track is that virtually every single stakeholder has publicly condemned the plan.

I want to quote Cathy Abraham, the president of the Ontario Public School Boards' Association. She said, "We are extremely concerned with the contents of this proposal and potential legislation, especially since it comes at a time when our province continues to struggle with the pandemic, and plans for the return to school this September are unclear."

This plan would see school board budgets gutted as students are forced into centralized online learning.

"We are also concerned that the current proposal may be promoting the online learning option to the detriment of student well-being and the overall integrity of our education system."

Similar concerns have been raised by the Catholic education community, the francophone education community, all the education worker unions, federations, People for Education, experts in online learning, parents and students, who have been going through hell with remote learning this year.

The proposal that was leaked to the media said that this plan was to be implemented in September. I would like to know from the minister if that is still the plan, or is this intense backlash the reason why you have not yet tabled that legislation?

Hon. Stephen Lecce: The only commitment we have made is to provide choice to parents this September using the high standards, the high synchronous requirement we've set out of 70%-a-day live instruction. I know we

disagreed on that matter, but we believe educators should be in front of their class within the remote system of a sort of Zoom-style leading experience, leading instruction and accessible to their children.

I will note that in March 2020, when the pandemic began, there was a patchwork. We didn't really have an online learning system, or a virtual learning system—I should be more clear—in the province. It wasn't the expectation, to be fair, of the system or of educators. The pandemic underscored the necessity not just to pivot but to have that capacity built into the system so that, yes, if there's a snow day; yes, if there's a natural disaster; yes, God forbid, another pandemic, we can continue to keep kids learning in Ontario—

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Sorry, Minister. I apologize for interrupting.

MPP Stiles?

Ms. Marit Stiles: We have very limited time, so I just want to be very clear with the minister.

I'm not talking about the hybrid learning, although I think it has also been widely panned by educators, by students and by parents. I'm hoping the government will reverse their decision in that regard and actually focus on what they're going to do to get children back in school, in person, as close to normal as possible in September.

What I'm talking to you about right now is the plan that you had, which seems to have disappeared again. And we're a little nervous about that, those of us—which is pretty much the entire education community—about what your plan is; because you were talking about getting this under way in September. That's not what you're referring to now. What I'm talking to you about, Minister, is the legislation that you were looking to pass and table this year, which you've said you're not planning to now. Does that mean that you are putting aside your plan to move to this permanent online system, which you had proposed in March?

Hon. Stephen Lecce: In fact, I did not suggest what the member said. I simply said our only intention to date is to introduce an option for parents this September. That remains our priority. We think that parents deserve that choice and will benefit from it.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): MPP Stiles.

Ms. Marit Stiles: Does that mean that the minister has taken—because this was the plan in the slides that you presented and had everybody sign agreements on that they would keep it secret in March. It was to bring forward a comprehensive plan to create this whole new system of permanent online learning for students. That is not the same as emergency remote distance learning. So I just want to confirm that that plan is not moving forward. Is that correct, Minister?

Hon. Stephen Lecce: What I answered twice prior was that our commitment is to provide choice to parents this September. We think that is important, and that will be continued to be provided. We have instructed all boards to do so, especially supported by the additional \$200 million announced in the past budget to strengthen the online learning system. We're going to continue to provide support,

professional development and access to tablets and, of course, Internet connectivity for those children who enrol themselves in it—

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Sorry, Minister. My apologies.

MPP Stiles?

Ms. Marit Stiles: Sorry, Minister. I have so little time.

I just want it to be on the record that the minister is refusing to answer that question, refusing to say that he has scrapped that program.

We'll have to assume that your plan is still to move everybody into permanent online learning.

I want to put it on the record again: I think that over the last few days, we've noticed a few things. One is a dramatic increase, a \$1-billion increase in the capital repair backlog of our schools in Ontario, which is concerning, to say the least. We've seen that the government's plan for the coming school year does not seem to involve intensive work over the next few months to get students into in-person learning. In fact, as the minister just said, the plan seems to be to just continue on with the current system—which I have to tell you, Minister, is really bad news for a lot of students.

Last week, in the middle of these committee hearings, it was announced that your government would not be moving to reopen schools in Ontario, even on a regional basis. That was bad enough, but after a few weeks of this government leading on our students to believe that there was some chance that they might be reopening, to then break a lot of hearts last week, then to now not clearly seem to have any plan in place to actually be doing the kind of intensive work that we in the opposition and experts in public health and education have been saying needs to be done—Minister, we saw a research report come out last week from international experts and here in Ontario, who you have yet to consult with, actually, saying that what we are looking at is a generational impact in terms of learning loss, but also learning opportunities being lost, making a very clear case for the kinds of interventions that need to happen—

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

Ms. Marit Stiles: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Whether it's looking at the curriculum, whether it's investing in a really big and significant way now in testing air quality in our schools—I did not hear, again, that that was going to happen; it's an unfortunate missed opportunity—whether it's continuing to look at how we keep class sizes down, not just because we want to maintain the distance, but because we recognize as a system that children and youth and education workers too, by the way, are going to need those additional supports in the next few years. I see no indication of that in the minister's plans. In fact, the Financial Accountability Office says that this government is cutting education funding next year, the year when we need it the most, by \$800 million.

1430

Minister, it seems quite clear over the last few days that this government has no intention of actually doing what's

necessary over the next few months. It seems like you're sitting back and waiting to see what's going to happen, and I've got to tell you, that has not worked out so well for the students of this province.

I really hope that the minister will take a lesson from our conversations over the last few days, which is, "Please, you must collaborate in a meaningful way with the real experts."

I also want to mention that we are already starting to see reports from the front line of the loss of early childhood educator and educational assistant jobs. Minister, you have to reverse these cuts. We need to be investing, not cutting, education at this time. I want to bring the voices as much as I can in these committee hearings to you, of the folks on the front line. It is time to collaborate in meaningful ways. It's time to roll up your—

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Your time is up.

The next rotation goes to the government. Just to note, both government and opposition, there will also be a shorter rotation after this if no independents appear to claim their 15 minutes.

With that, I go to the government. MPP Oosterhoff, the floor is yours, sir.

Mr. Sam Oosterhoff: I really appreciate all the time that has gone into this committee over the days and hours that we've had the opportunity to hear from the Ministry of Education. It has been fascinating to get insight and details of the various areas that the Ministry of Education touches upon.

We all recognize the value of schools in our communities. We recognize the value of educators in our communities. We see how important a world-class education system is for our students, for our youth, for our future. I think as legislators there are many areas that our actions touch upon. There are many different areas that we pass budgets to support, that we vote upon in order to ensure that there is funding for areas in the province that Ontarians rely upon.

Education is one of the most crucial pillars of the services that a good government provides. A good government ensures that those investments are made in tangible, meaningful ways; that they're investing in our communities by building up new schools, as this government has done; that they're ensuring that the pathways to future careers are streamlined, that they are equitable, that they're accessible, that they are able to be there for each and every child in this province, and for those who also need that extra help, who need that extra hand up, when it comes to being able to access their education. I know this is something that the minister has spoken about many, many times—his belief in the importance of the value and equity of education and ensuring that those investments are made in a meaningful way, in a tangible way. I think, over the last hours, we've had the opportunity to really hear that from the minister, from his team, from the experts he works with at the Ministry of Education, in order to ensure that all of our constituents are well served.

Some 2.1 million kids in our province go to publicly funded schools, a substantial percentage of our population.

Of course, when we think about all the lives that are touched through our education system each and every day—from education workers to parents, to students themselves, to the many, many people who are engaged in the education system in one way or another—it's crucial that we have the information in front of us as legislators. As a very small percentage of the population, 124 of us have the opportunity to serve in this House—quite a small number—and an even smaller number have the opportunity to pose questions of the executive branch at the estimates committee. These are privileges that we can't take for granted, but they are ones that matter.

Throughout the last hours, we've heard about the investments that have been made, and we've heard many, many different questions, but we've also, unfortunately, heard spin from the opposition. We've heard them fail to recognize a number of the investments that have been made. We've heard them fail to address the substantial and remarkable investments that have been made to deal with COVID-19. We've heard them fail to address the importance, of course, of recognizing how much has been put into our education system and the continued investments in that regard.

I'm wondering if you could speak about some of the unfortunate spin that came out of the opposition over the past hours and lay some of that record very straight, around the investments that have been made and your commitment to ensuring that our students are supported across this province.

Hon. Stephen Lecce: I really appreciate that question and the opportunity to correct the record, if you will, with respect to some of the investments and supports we put in place—really unprecedented and nation-leading.

First off, we're the only province to have hired and doubled the public health allocation, the public health nurses supporting our schools.

We're the only province in the nation that has an asymptomatic testing program with province-wide capacity and deployment in every public health unit in the province, meeting standards of at least 5% of schools on a weekly basis.

We had the most comprehensive masking program in Canada. That remains true. We led with the mandatory mask in grade 4 and up. Many provinces adopted that protocol or intervention much later and in a much more limited way.

We're the only province to offer province-wide virtual learning. Imagine: Some members opposite talk about the imperfection of a system that isn't offered in nine provinces in the federation. We have built up a system, against vigorous opposition, notably from opposition members, unions and others. But at the end of the day, in the interests of students, we provided that choice, built it up ahead of the pandemic, and strengthened it during the pandemic. We think that's important.

The consequence of that \$1.6-billion investment, of following the best expert advice of partners and the Chief Medical Officer of Health's office, local medical officers of health, SickKids, CHEO, other pediatric institutes, is

that Ontario has one of the lowest case rates in the nation for youth under 20. That is because we followed that advice, because we invested, and because we put in place every investment to date.

I will just note what Dr. Jüni, the scientific director of Ontario's science table, said, "Ontario, unlike other places in the world, did a relatively good job. If you compare to the UK, our way of cohorting, our way of masking kids is much, much better."

The Chief Medical Officer of Health has said repeatedly, from the fall to the winter to the spring to the present, that our schools have been safe. In fact, what he has repeatedly said to members of the public and the population is that schools have been safe and that we want to keep them safe. That has been the position. That's because we followed that advice.

I appreciate all those who have collaborated with us in an unprecedented year to deliver public education, to ensure we improve the standards.

We also faced opposition, respectfully, when we said that when it comes to synchronous learning, live learning—

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

Hon. Stephen Lecce:—we expect educators to be on those Zooms, if you will, for at least 70% of the day, to set minimum standards, to create accountability and access for this child to their teacher. That is the basis for why we did that—because we felt students needed a voice and, more importantly, there needed to be an online learning system that worked for them, that actually was able to keep children engaged in learning and really focused on getting through the curriculum materials and expectations.

I appreciate that opportunity to address that, and I'll just reaffirm our continued focus on providing choice and investment, particularly as we look to September.

We have \$2 billion set aside, a half-a-billion-dollar increase for school boards through the Grants for Student Needs; \$85 million dedicated to learning recovery, with a mental health component built in; and additional supports, specifically in the context of how we keep schools safe—the \$1.6 billion in COVID-19 resources.

So we're doing it all—plus the vaccinations. We're proud in the Ministry of Education to have advocated for and delivered two vaccines, a double dose. Students and staff who want one will get one. We're one of the first in the country to allow teachers to get access to the vaccine, many of whom were already eligible based on age. That type of early action is helping lead us to a place today where we're on track to reopen our schools safely and as normal as possible for the benefit of children, with extracurricular sports, clubs, the full gambit of learning that we really think is critical after a tough year of disruption—not just in Ontario, colleagues; right around the world, we've seen that challenge.

Mr. Sam Oosterhoff: Yes, and I think it's key to recognize that there have been challenges for education systems across not just Canada but, frankly, the globe.

I think it's fair to say that Canada, and Ontario specifically, have stepped forward, as you have, Minister, and

your team, to demonstrate extraordinary leadership in providing supports for the students, the educators and, of course, the families impacted throughout COVID-19 as—

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

1440

It doesn't look as though an independent member will be appearing before us. The remaining time, then, will be divided equally, with seven minutes and 30 seconds for the government and seven minutes and 30 seconds for the official opposition.

It is the turn of the official opposition. MPP Stiles.

Ms. Marit Stiles: Thank you, Mr. Chair. Where are those independent members? I don't know. It would be nice to see that interest from all parties here at the Legislature about the future of education in this province.

Mr. Chair, I want to just go back. I have a couple of specific points I want to mention. We've heard a lot of rhetoric throughout this committee from the government. What these committee proceedings have shown is that this is a government that still does not believe in public education, and that even a global pandemic could not shake them from their agenda of cuts.

The FAO says that \$800 million—that's the Financial Accountability Office—is being cut this year, and that the gap between what Ontario has budgeted and what is actually needed to spend on public education means that we are on track for a decade of cuts.

If you think about it, this is a government that, from really early on, stated very clearly in some of the research that was being done for them that they were looking for cuts. They were looking for cuts, and they were looking at ways to, ultimately, undermine public education.

If you adjust for inflation, the Grants for Student Needs are providing less per student funding than 10 years ago. In fact, instead of investing in face-to-face learning and in stronger local schools, this government is pushing ahead with a scheme to move kids out of classrooms and onto screens permanently, and the minister really wouldn't really answer my questions about that, about what their plans are.

They floated a plan in March. They made everybody sign all kinds of documents to try to keep it under wraps. It slipped out because—frankly, I think it's outrageous that they would ask education stakeholders to keep information like that away from the public. Clearly, the government knew that if the public got a chance to look at it, they would lose it, because this is basically telling Ontarians that their plan for "choice" in Ontario's education is that we either keep money in our local schools or we move it out of schools and put a bunch of kids online—and that is no choice at all. People in this province deserve better. I can tell you, we in the NDP are prepared to deliver better in one year's time.

Minister, in this previous round of questions, you said that you—i.e., Ontario—led in so many different ways throughout the Ontario pandemic, but Ontario students have been out of school for longer than any other jurisdiction in North America. I have asked the Auditor General

to actually review this, to review your government's performance. We'll see what she finds.

I want to ask you again, what exactly is your plan to get students back to some kind of normal in September? I can tell you right now, hybrid learning, online learning, online remote emergency distance learning, quadesters—this is not working. The idea that this government is going to wait, just like they did last year, until August, to throw all kinds of changes at boards again and cause more chaos in September—I want to hear the minister tell us that that's not going to happen again, because all of that is really a disaster, and we have an opportunity now to turn this ship around, Minister. Will you turn the ship around? Will you commit to some of the things that we in the official opposition have been asking for for years?

Hon. Stephen Lecce: I can confirm and commit that we're going to continue to invest more in public education next year than we did the year prior. Every year, under our Progressive Conservative government, public education funding has increased to the highest levels in special education, transportation, mental health, and French-language education. We believe vigorously in public education.

In the context of how we keep schools safe in September, a critical question on the minds of many, first, vaccines: ensuring every education staff member—all of them, from our school bus drivers to our admin to, of course, our educators and EAs; everyone—gets access to two doses by September. Likewise, for children 12 and up who want one, they will also get double vaccinated by September. That's an important first principle.

The second is the continuation of funding, with \$1.6 billion in resources provided for boards into the coming school year, to allow for the asymptomatic testing program to be continued, to allow for the public health nurses to be maintained, to allow for virtual learning options to be preserved, and to ensure our system remains safe and our schools remain safe in this province.

We are seeking the perspective of the Chief Medical Officer of Health and will do so in July for the final advice for September, to get that guidance.

I assure the member, we want to create the most normal September as possible—

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

Hon. Stephen Lecce: —with the restoration of clubs and physical education. That's something that we're focused on delivering.

Interjection.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Okay. MPP Stiles?

Ms. Marit Stiles: Minister, I want to point out, if you continue with the plan in the current directives, like quadesters, it means the kids won't have clubs. It means there won't be extracurriculars. There will be none of those things. So the minister needs to figure out a better approach than simply just waiting until July and, "Maybe, yes, no; we don't know." There needs to be a plan in the works right now.

Minister, you've talked about your commitment to public education, but again, I want to point out that the

funding that you are committing—and you keep saying "historic levels"—is actually less, and when you look at it and adjust it by inflation, it's even less than that. We've seen capital repairs skyrocket under your government. We've seen the struggles that our children have—certainly, the pandemic has played a big role. But it's going to take more funding. I know your government has avoided that. You have avoided actually making the kind of investments that were necessary.

I would urge you and encourage you to please do better than this. I don't see how anybody can support your plan as it stands currently. It's simply not adequate. It's really a plan to do the very least possible at a time when our children, our youth and our young adults need us to be doing the most we possibly can.

So I ask you again, Minister: Please, this is the time to prioritize Ontario's children and youth. This is the time to invest in our schools in truly historic ways. And this is also the time to truly respect Ontario's education workers.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): And with that, their time is up.

We now go to the final rotation, with the government. MPP Skelly, the floor is yours.

Ms. Donna Skelly: My question is to the minister.

I want to continue on with MPP Stiles's questions on the historic funding that our government has committed to education and give you an opportunity to truly and factually address the funding through the GSN, the Grants for Student Needs, for 2021-22.

Can you tell us how much funding is also being provided through the Priorities and Partnerships Fund?

Take as much time as you need to get the facts on record.

Hon. Stephen Lecce: What I will say is that we know that the school system in the province has been safe according to the Chief Medical Officer of Health, medical officers of health, and all of our respective regions have said so.

We also know that the funding we put in place has been critical to ensuring that Ontario has unique interventions that protect students and staff.

I want to speak about the logical inconsistency of the opposition. For the last weeks, they have said, "Kids should have been in school. It didn't have to be this way. We should have kids in school on a regional basis." And yet in the same breath they have taken the position that schools have been unsafe—thus, their position is returning kids to unsafe schools. They simply can't have it both ways. They'd only take the position—the populist position, if you will—to suggest that schools should be open if they believed that they were safe in the first place. No member, I would argue—none of us—would put a child in peril. We know the systems have been safe because the medical authorities have said so.

We also recognize that we have to continue to scale up our response systematically, as we did this past year, starting with an asymptomatic testing program in the hot spots and scaling it up province-wide.

Launching virtual learning, opposed by the members opposite—but really providing a choice. Roughly 400,000-

plus children in Ontario benefited from having—they may have left the system altogether without that choice at all.

1450

The benefit of having a learning recovery plan, recognizing the global disruption of this pandemic, the necessity to reach those children most disrupted and most affected; a focus on equity, where funding is being dedicated for graduation coaches for Black and First Nation, Indigenous and Inuit children, recognizing the necessity to support them with even more resources—all of this underscores a commitment, a compassionate lens to helping those most in need, but also keeping everyone in Ontario safe.

As a consequence of our plan, we're able to protect the summer, keep our numbers down and our public health indicators moving in the right direction, allowing us to reopen elements that I think are critical to families: wading pools, day camps, fitness, things that are important for children and their own mental health, and with an aim of keeping us safe through the summer so that in September, kids return in the optimal scenario.

Low cases within the community, high rates of vaccination—that's what we're on track to do, because we have a plan in place to ensure every child 12 and up and every staff member in Ontario who works within our schools gets access to two vaccines before September.

We know there's more to do. We're going to continue to be agile to respond to the emerging evidence on this matter, as we've done on air ventilation systems.

As I noted, and it can't be understated, 95% of air ventilation systems in schools were improved by October of last year. I know of no other province that could report that. I know of no other province where 90% of mechanical systems have been recommissioned or recalibrated. And of the 10% that don't have HVAC systems, we have HEPA filter units in place within those classrooms. I noted in Toronto, which is a hot spot, in every occupied classroom, there is a HEPA filter in place—25,000 no less, in the public and Catholic boards—as an example to underscore the thoughtful planning, proactive, following the advice, literally acting upon it immediately upon receiving it and bringing in place procurements and investments to support boards to do that.

I think that really underscores the commitment we've made from the beginning to the present, and it will carry forward into September, to do whatever it takes to protect students and staff, to keep these places of learning safe and to support their mental health, their resilience and their recovery going forward. It will, yes, take a multi-year commitment to ensure that children are okay when it comes to their mental health, when it comes to their own sense of wellness, but also in the context of really meeting those gaps, bridging those gaps and helping to support mathematics and reading engagement following a challenge we're seeing globally that's taking hold for students in Ontario as well.

Ms. Donna Skelly: I would also like you, in the limited time we have left, to speak to the need to give students and parents choice, whether it's a choice in terms of what they want for child care or a choice on virtual versus in-person

learning. Why is that important and why are you encouraging it?

Hon. Stephen Lecce: Well, I think as Progressive Conservatives, our default is to trust parents to make the best decisions for their children—respectfully, not a union member, not a government member, but the parents, the moms and dads of this province. It's no different than on child care, as you alluded to, where we believe so strongly in flexibility, in allowing every parent to choose the best child care that works for them and their unique needs within their families. We believe in that choice. We believe in maximizing the choice.

What's driving much of our action is, yes, flexibility, but affordability, really, is our priority. It's to make sure that when parents opt in to a system, in to a child care operator or a before- and after-school program, no matter what they do, they benefit from the most affordable child care possible, which is why we created the child care tax credit.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): One minute left.

Hon. Stephen Lecce: It's why we're expanding it by 20% this year, saving families a significant amount of money, about 1,500 bucks per child for this year.

With respect to online learning: We want kids in class. We have consistently promoted a safe, developmentally stimulating in-class learning experience. But at the same time, I will never substitute my judgment for that of a mother and father in this province. They know best. An immunocompromised sibling, a grandmother who is vulnerable—they'll make the best decision for their child and the welfare of their family. We're going to arm them with that choice this September. We are uniquely positioned: the only party in this Legislature who is providing that choice, who stands by that choice, and I think parents will benefit from it.

We're going to continue to build up our virtual and online learning system for the coming year to make sure it's as accessible as possible and equitable, so that every child who needs a tablet gets one with Internet connectivity—and a stronger, professionally developed staff.

I just want to conclude by expressing gratitude to all workers, all school boards, educators, students and the parents of Ontario for an incredible amount of work over an incredibly difficult year. We're proud of your work. We're grateful for your leadership. And if I may be so bold to speak for all of us—just to express a real sense of thanks to everyone on our front lines working within our schools today.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Minister, the period of questions is concluded.

This concludes the committee's consideration of estimates of the Ministry of Education. Standing order 69(b) requires that the Chair put without further amendment or debate every question necessary to dispose of the estimates. Are members ready to vote? Okay.

Shall vote 1001, ministry administration program, carry? All those in favour, please raise your hand. All those opposed, please raise your hand. It is carried.

Shall vote 1002, elementary and secondary education program, carry? All those in favour, please raise your hand. All those opposed, please raise your hand. It is carried.

Shall vote 1003, community services information and information technology cluster, carry? All those in favour, please raise your hand. All those opposed, please raise your hand. It is carried.

Shall vote 1004, child care and early years programs, carry? All those in favour, please raise your hand. All those opposed, please raise your hand. It is carried.

Shall the 2021-22 estimates of the Ministry of Education carry? All those in favour, please raise your hand. All those opposed, please raise your hand. It is carried.

Shall the Chair report the 2021-22 estimates of the Ministry of Education to the House? All those in favour, please raise your hand. All those opposed, please raise your hand. It is carried.

We will now recess until 3:10 p.m. Thank you to all who took part in these hearings. They were extensive, but everyone's still standing.

The committee recessed from 1458 to 1510.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Good afternoon. The committee is about to begin consideration of the estimates of the Ministry of Infrastructure for a total of seven hours and 30 minutes. Are there any questions from members before we start? MPP French, please go ahead.

Ms. Jennifer K. French: Just a quick question and reminder: Of the seven and a half hours, what's the time allotted to each party? And then, just so that I'm clear, because I have, of course, a lot of questions, what is the timing of each rotation?

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): If you remember, the minister gets to present for half an hour, the opposition gets to present for half an hour, and the minister gets to present for half an hour in response. So that leaves about six hours of questions, and unless an independent shows up, that's divided equally between the opposition and the government.

Ms. Jennifer K. French: And is it 20-minute rotations?

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Yes, it is; although at the very end, we get into shorter rotations, just in case the independent doesn't show up and we need to divide their time.

Ms. Jennifer K. French: Thank you, Chair.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Okay. I just want to confirm identities and locations in Ontario.

MPP French, if you'd confirm your identity and location in Ontario.

Ms. Jennifer K. French: I'm Jennifer French, and I am in Oshawa, Ontario.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): I have MPP West.

Interjection.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Ah, he will come back later.

MPP Crawford, confirm your identity and location, please, sir.

Mr. Stephen Crawford: It's MPP Stephen Crawford, and I'm in Oakville, Ontario.

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

MINISTRY OF INFRASTRUCTURE

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): I'm now required to call vote 4001, which sets the review process in motion. We will begin with a statement of not more than 30 minutes from the Minister of Infrastructure, followed by a statement of up to 30 minutes by the official opposition, and then the minister will have a further 30 minutes for a reply. The remaining time will be apportioned equally among the two parties, with 15 minutes allotted to the independent member of the committee.

Minister, the floor is yours.

Hon. Laurie Scott: Thank you, Chair. Before I begin my formal presentation, I just want to take a moment to acknowledge the shocking and horrible events that took place in London. I know we can all agree that there's no place for racism and hatred in Ontario, and that we all do have a role to play in addressing these kinds of senseless actions. Certainly, on a personal level, I'd like to extend my support for the community and all those who have been touched by this terrible tragedy.

Thank you, Chair, for allowing me to say those few words.

I'm pleased to be in front of estimates for the Ministry of Infrastructure.

I would like to start by introducing my deputy minister, Chris Giannekos. I would like to also acknowledge that Michael Lindsay, the CEO of Infrastructure Ontario; George Zegarac, CEO of Waterfront Toronto; Stephen Diamond, chair of Waterfront Toronto; Adam Redish, assistant deputy minister for infrastructure, program, design and delivery division; Grant Osborn, assistant deputy minister for infrastructure, research and planning division; and James Northey, director of corporate coordination, are part of our estimates team and are ready to jump in to provide additional information in response to your questions when needed.

During our time before this committee, I will be providing you all with an in-depth overview of all of our accomplishments since the last time we met—it has been not quite two years—and I'll take you through a timeline of the progress that has been made in delivering on the government's key priorities over the past year.

I will take this opportunity to remind everyone of the importance of making timely investments in infrastructure for every community across the province.

Since the first day of the pandemic, Ontario has been committed to helping families, workers and businesses get through unprecedented challenges. All the while, we've continued laying the foundation for building infrastructure, to create jobs, stimulate economic growth and close the infrastructure deficit left by the previous Liberal government for over 15 years. This ministry has been, and will continue to be, steadfast in doing its part to make long-awaited, much-needed investments in communities to build better roads and bridges, highways, health care facilities, and other vital infrastructure like broadband for high-speed Internet connectivity.

All of us here can agree that right now, more than ever, investing in the infrastructure in Ontario must be a top

priority. That's why we've made it a key part of our mandate. We're investing in infrastructure that will deliver critical services, while providing many types of jobs for local businesses.

We have taken and continue to take into consideration the profound effect that the COVID-19 pandemic is having on people's lives and Ontario's economy, and we will continue to do our part to remove barriers to recovery so that Ontario can bounce back stronger than ever.

Ontario's planned capital investments over the next 10 years total over \$145 billion, which includes \$16.9 billion alone in 2021-22.

With our investments, shovels are already moving on hundreds of projects across the province, to get projects built. These investments were made through programs like the Investing in Canada Infrastructure Program, known as ICIP; the Ontario Community Infrastructure Fund, known as OCIF; and the Infrastructure Ontario Loan Program, to name a few.

We have also committed to helping ensure that all Ontarians have access to high-speed Internet by the end of 2025.

Let me take a deeper dive into some of these important initiatives.

ICIP, the Investing in Canada Infrastructure Program, represents up to \$30 billion in combined federal, provincial and partner funding over 10 years for infrastructure projects right across the province. Projects are cost-shared between the federal and provincial government, and in most cases the recipient.

ICIP has also been divided into five streams, which I will speak about in depth later. They include rural and northern; public transit; community, culture and recreation; green; and the COVID-19 resilience stream. For each of these streams, the province has done an application intake, calling all eligible applicants, like municipalities, non-profits and community organizations, and First Nations communities and Indigenous organizations, to submit projects for our government to nominate to the federal government for final funding approval. Once received, our government does an initial evaluation based on the criteria set out by the federal government, as well as provincial criteria, before nominating projects. To date, under ICIP, our government has nominated over 770 projects to the federal government for approval, with more than half of these projects now approved.

Now, on to the five streams: The rural and northern infrastructure stream, which is also the smallest stream, worth \$500 million in joint funding, was launched in May 2019, prioritizing road, bridge, air and marine infrastructure. Over 140 projects under this stream have been approved, and many are already completed. For example, late last fall, the municipality of Tweed held an announcement to celebrate the completion of a new bridge, an important local link in the community and one of the first projects to be completed under ICIP. As of June 4, just this past Friday, of the total 144 projects our government nominated to the federal government, only one project is still pending approval.

The public transit infrastructure stream was also launched in 2019. This stream was divided into two categories: inside-GTHA projects and outside-GTHA projects. Over 250 projects have been federally approved in communities right across the province. For example, in January, we jointly announced almost \$9 million in funding for two projects to modernize and improve accessibility for Peel region's public transit system; Ontario's share of funding is \$2.3 million. These two projects are just a couple of examples of how Ontario is supporting safe and reliable local public transit. As of this past Friday, just one project nominated through the outside-GTHA public transit stream of ICIP is still awaiting approval, while 57 of the nearly 70 projects our government nominated through the inside-GTHA public transit stream have been approved.

1520

Under the community, culture and recreation stream, the second-smallest stream of ICIP, we nominated over 275 projects to the federal government for municipalities, not-for-profits, Indigenous communities and others to improve access to and quality of recreation, culture and community infrastructure. The intake for this stream was launched in September 2019 and was extremely oversubscribed. Over 1,200 applications were received, totalling more than \$10 billion worth of projects, with only \$1 billion of joint funding available. We are currently working with the federal government to support their review and approval of all remaining projects. To date, there are 20 projects still awaiting federal government review and approval.

Launched in 2019, the first intake of the green infrastructure stream focused on projects that addressed critical health and safety risks in existing water, waste water and stormwater infrastructure. We nominated over 70 projects, all of which have been approved by the federal government. Through this program, earlier this spring we announced close to \$17 million to invest in clean water, waste water and stormwater infrastructure improvements in 41 First Nation communities across Ontario. I'm thrilled to say that all 76 projects nominated through this stream have been approved.

The COVID-19 resilience infrastructure stream was announced in 2020 as a direct response to the effects of the pandemic. In order to take advantage of the new stream, the federal government required provinces and territories to redirect funding from existing streams, since no new money was committed to ICIP by the federal government. Together, the province and the federal government committed more than \$1 billion in combined funding through this stream. Funding under this stream will contribute to building or renovating health and safety-related projects in long-term-care and education facilities, as well as helping municipalities and communities address critical local infrastructure needs in the face of COVID-19. Through this stream, we're making it possible for communities to get shovel-ready projects under way sooner and kick-start their local economies. For example, just last month, I announced funding under this stream for three Ottawa

projects that are receiving more than \$2.2 million in provincial funding to help improve air quality and emergency preparedness at a local shelter, while also supporting interior facility renovations to help maintain social distancing. We are gearing up to announce funding for hundreds of projects under this stream in the coming weeks.

Broadband infrastructure is another area where our government has made great accomplishments. Over the last years, we've heard how people all across our province are being left behind in our digital world, from the small business owner right outside of Ottawa who just wants to sell her products online, to the university students whose classmates struggle with poor connectivity as they learn remotely, to the family whose frustrations over their poor Internet connection has led them to tears. When an increasingly digital world threatens to leave them behind because they lack high-speed Internet, we have a responsibility to act. That's why Ontario is going all in on broadband. My ministry has been doing everything possible to help achieve 100% access for every household and business in every community in every region across Ontario.

The pandemic has only magnified how important it is for people to have reliable access to high-speed Internet and cellular connectivity, and I'm proud to say that we've stepped up to deliver funding-based opportunities for unserved and underserved communities right across the province. Our government's recent budget committed an unprecedented new investment of \$2.8 billion in broadband infrastructure, to help ensure that every region in the province has access to high-speed Internet by the end of 2025. This proactive approach is the largest single investment in broadband in any province by any government in Canadian history and will be pivotal to Ontario's economic recovery. Combined with prior commitments, this new funding increases Ontario's overall investment in broadband to nearly \$4 billion.

Earlier this year, we introduced the Supporting Broadband and Infrastructure Expansion Act, 2021, legislation that will help connect unserved and underserved communities across Ontario to reliable, high-speed Internet sooner. It will do this by helping to remove barriers that would otherwise delay deployment of provincially funded broadband infrastructure projects across Ontario.

Our government remains committed to collaborating with our private sector partners, municipal partners, Indigenous partners and others to create a more connected Ontario. It will benefit all of us today and for generations to come.

Our efforts are now helping to connect communities to a new frontier, a digital frontier, with new opportunities and new markets. In a world where access to digital technologies determines whether individuals and companies can succeed, Ontario cannot be left behind as the entire world moves forward. High-speed Internet access is fundamental to our economic recovery and the shift to the future digital economy, and it will be vital to the success

of many families who continue to face all kinds of frustrations.

For almost 20 years, I've advocated for better Internet connectivity in Ontario, both inside and outside of Queen's Park, and that's why I was honoured that Premier Ford entrusted me to the ministry responsible for this portfolio. It remains my top priority to ensure that no one is left behind when it comes to accessing high-speed Internet, and I'm proud to join you today at committee and say that we're doing just that.

Let me remind you about Up to Speed: Ontario's Broadband and Cellular Action Plan and that it focuses on four pillars: First, we're delivering regional and shovel-ready projects in southwestern, eastern and northern Ontario; second, we're investing in our Ontario-designed Improving Connectivity for Ontario program, known as ICON, to increase access to more communities across Ontario; third, we're maximizing existing programs and assets; and finally, we are modernizing government to remove barriers. It's exactly what the recent legislation that I introduced in the Legislature, passed earlier this year, will do.

I would now like to highlight some of our specific initiatives under the broadband action plan that are making great progress.

We are investing in Southwestern Integrated Fibre Technology, known as SWIFT. It's a project to bring high-speed Internet to approximately 60,000 more homes and businesses across southwestern Ontario. In total, the project will invest more than \$191 million to expand broadband, including funding from the federal, provincial and municipal governments.

Rural communities in eastern Ontario are also closer to getting near-complete cellular coverage, thanks to the Eastern Ontario Regional Network's Cell Gap Project, and the first intake of the provincial Improving Connectivity for Ontario program, ICON, finished at the end of January 2021.

We are reviewing projects across the province and are aiming to announce successful projects in the coming weeks.

The ICON program, a four-year capital funding program launched in summer 2020, will provide investments for broadband infrastructure projects to connect more homes and businesses in areas of need.

And we continue to invest in northern Ontario. To improve access to connectivity specifically in the north, in January this year, we announced that the Ontario government is investing \$10.9 million to bring faster broadband to several towns and First Nation communities across northern Ontario. In October 2019, Ontario announced an investment of \$30 million in the Matawa broadband project that will benefit more than 670 homes and institutions in five Matawa-member First Nation communities in northern Ontario. In addition, since June 2018, the Northern Ontario Heritage Fund Corp. has invested \$2.57 million in eight projects to support the expansion of broadband infrastructure.

While we have made progress, we know there is more we need to do to connect Ontarians. That is why I continue to work with my cabinet colleagues, municipalities, the telecommunications sector and our federal counterparts to explore other potential solutions to address this urgent need to better connect all communities.

I would now like to talk about the Ontario Community Infrastructure Fund, also known as OCIF. OCIF provides eligible communities with stable and predictable funding that is used to address critical infrastructure, including road, bridge, water and waste water projects. This is an Ontario-funded program that provides investments for more than 400 municipalities every year. This stable funding addresses local critical infrastructure needs and helps our municipal partners plan their budgets.

1530

In January 2021, we announced a \$200-million investment in municipalities through OCIF. It is especially important right now as municipalities continue to experience financial strain and reallocate resources due to COVID-19. Right now, we are working with Ontario's municipalities on the development of a refocused OCIF and have retained a consultant to support consultations with AMO, the Association of Municipalities of Ontario, and other municipalities. The Ministry of Infrastructure continues to demonstrate leadership by partnering and building relationships with our municipalities and communities.

Our crown agency, Infrastructure Ontario, plays a major role in our efforts to build and rebuild the province. We want to ensure the continued success of major projects built and maintained through our spectrum of procurement models, including our P3 models. Typically, P3s are used to deliver massive infrastructure projects like bridges, highways, hospitals, correctional facilities and subways by partnering with the private sector. Infrastructure Ontario has brought over 130 P3 major projects to market since its creation.

When I first became Ontario's Minister of Infrastructure, I committed to providing more frequent market updates to the infrastructure sector, on a quarterly basis. Since then, we have successfully delivered five quarterly P3 market updates, a pipeline of upcoming P3 projects, making good on our commitments to continue to invest in Ontario's infrastructure while also ensuring the market has the latest information to make sound and timely investments. Our most recent pipeline, unveiled in April, is the largest in its history, totalling an estimated \$60 billion in contract value.

IO's procurement models are constantly evolving and improving to respond to market conditions and industry feedback, to achieve the best possible bids from the market. In fact, IO's innovative approaches to infrastructure delivery have been critical to helping to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic. As part of the effort to address urgent infrastructure needs, MOI and IO piloted a partnership-based rapid infrastructure-delivery model to increase surge capacity in the health and the long-term-care sectors resulting from COVID-19. These pilots

include the deployment of alternative health facilities, as well as the accelerated build of 1,280 long-term-care beds, which is currently under way. All of these projects improve the lives of the people of Ontario by improving services and facilities in our communities and by protecting people's health and creating economic opportunities.

Another way we are supporting our municipalities' infrastructure needs is through Infrastructure Ontario's Loan Program. Through the loan program, we continue to provide affordable long-term financing to municipalities for infrastructure development and renewal. With more than 440 clients, including municipalities and non-profits, the loan program has helped finance infrastructure projects, such as the construction of roads, bridges, arena complexes and long-term-care homes, and the acquisition of capital assets like fire trucks. Since 2003, more than \$11 billion in loans have been approved in support of more than 3,200 community infrastructure projects across the province. Last year, we began regularly communicating to the public about these loans. Since January, we have distributed eight Ontario Newsroom bulletins highlighting over 20 loans across Ontario.

While we keep working to get shovels in the ground in priority infrastructure projects in our communities, we are also working hard to track all infrastructure assets across the province. We're doing this to support municipalities in making better investments in planning decisions. Municipalities can stretch their capital dollars when they are making more well-informed, evidence-based decisions. It's about making the right infrastructure investments in the right place at the right time.

In many parts of Ontario, existing infrastructure is degrading faster than it is being repaired or replaced, putting services at risk. That is why the province implemented the asset management planning for municipal infrastructure regulation. This regulation builds on the progress municipalities have made in bringing consistency and standardization to asset management plans, sharing best practices and enabling the collection of comparable data. A greater standardization will help promote the consistent collection of data and serve as a foundation for municipalities to work collaboratively with the province to address their needs.

Many municipalities have made significant progress on their asset management plans and in meeting municipal asset management planning regulation deadlines. At the same time, I do recognize, in the context of the current pandemic, that some municipalities are also experiencing challenges in trying to meet the deadlines under the regulation. That's why we recently extended the remaining deadlines for asset management plans by one year. This includes the deadline for the phase 2 regulatory timeline, which was originally set for this July. This extension will give municipalities more time to complete their plans while continuing to allocate resources to address local priorities resulting from the impacts of COVID-19.

The province remains committed to working with our municipal partners during this difficult time. Each of the programs that I've just highlighted provides communities an opportunity to build the infrastructure they need the most.

Through these different avenues for funding and investment, our government is ensuring that communities across Ontario can recover from the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. We know how important it is for the people of Ontario and to our economy to have high-quality infrastructure. That is why investing in infrastructure remains a top priority for our government. Whether it's building new infrastructure to meet increased demand or making key investments to upgrade Ontario's schools, hospitals, roads, transit or broadband infrastructure, we need to build better infrastructure faster.

We're investing in projects in our cities and towns, and the roads and bridges in between, delivering smart infrastructure in a way that has set us apart and made Ontario a dynamic, cutting edge leader. And we'll keep pushing forward, investing in infrastructure projects that support communities, create good jobs and contribute to Ontario's economic growth and recovery.

I don't know, Chair, how much time I have left, but I want—

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): You have four and a half minutes, Minister.

Hon. Laurie Scott: Thank you very much. I want to thank, certainly, the members of the Standing Committee on Estimates for their time and dedication—I know this has been a very long process—and, Chair, you too, for your patience in having ministry after ministry appear to share the many exciting things that we are doing, in this case with the Ministry of Infrastructure, that are going to benefit the people of the province of Ontario.

I spoke earlier, in depth, and hopefully I'll get to speak longer as we go through our time in estimates, about the importance of broadband. Mr. Chair, when I say that this has been, I think, the number one issue in my riding of Haliburton-Kawartha Lakes-Brock for more than 20 years, that I've been seeing it in the headlines and that I've been involved at that level in my communities—this seems like it has been a long time coming, and it has. I just can't share enough the stories that I get—of course, during the pandemic, more stories come forward—of how much of a difference it will make to the lives of the people in those areas. In my area, we're estimating over 40,000 households cannot connect to any Internet or adequate Internet to do homework, to access health care services, to access justice services, to speak with family and friends.

I can tell you that there are parking lots that I see in some of my municipal centres that have certainly understood the need and wired their facilities. Thus, their parking lots fill up, and you see the cars parked with the parents trying to work, the children trying to download homework.

I'm fortunate to have such wonderful communities. There's a community connectedness—we kind of know

where the places are, and we try to help those families that are struggling to have that Internet capacity.

1540

The fact that business innovations can be done from anywhere in Ontario once they have connectivity, so somewhere up in the north reaches of Haliburton county—there can be the next invention that may launch something else into space.

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

Hon. Laurie Scott: It's a fabulous opportunity to be able to make those connections, literally and figuratively, with people, with ideas, with future prosperity—the economic opportunities that it brings to my smaller communities; and, of course, the job creation, just building the infrastructure that we're proposing to build. I know that I'm going to speak more to that, not only in estimates, but in the coming few weeks in the province—whether virtually or in person; we'll see how it goes—with some more exciting announcements.

Working with the Ministry of Infrastructure—we work with all levels of government quite intently. So there are a lot of exciting things happening in infrastructure that will benefit all the people of Ontario.

I'm very happy to have the opportunity to be here with you at estimates today. I will wind that up, Mr. Chair, and thank everyone again for their attention.

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

We now go to the official opposition. MPP French, the floor is yours. You have 30 minutes.

Ms. Jennifer K. French: I appreciate the chance to get a number of our questions on the record. I appreciate the face-to-face, or screen-to-screen, with the minister.

Minister, it's nice to see you. I think we're going to be spending a fair bit of time together over the next few days. I know that this won't be the first time that we have had this chance, so I will preface this with saying, yes, I'm happy to give a bit of a statement today, but I'm not going to take 30 minutes of our time because I know we'll want to use it for questions. With many of those questions, I'll do my best to be brief, and I'll ask the same of everybody so we can work through those.

When it comes to infrastructure across communities, so many folks and neighbours don't necessarily know the difference between whether it's the Minister of Transportation, the Minister of Infrastructure, the Minister of Education or the Minister of Health—they know that things need to be built and services need to be available to them when they need them.

Across communities, we have seen people reaching for that broadband that isn't there, that isn't what they need. The minister was talking about some of what she sees in her community, and certainly all of us as MPPs know community members who are struggling with students at home, with working from home, obviously, during the pandemic. I remember when I was a teacher—a long time ago, it seems now—and my students whose families couldn't afford broadband, who didn't have access to the

Internet, would all be hanging out outside the library after hours so that they could use the WiFi. Whether it's rural or northern or it's the suburbs, folks know what it is that they don't have when they need it—bridges, roads, all of that.

I have the opportunity to serve the province as the critic for infrastructure, transportation and highways, and I'm grateful for that role, but as I have recognized since the beginning, all roads lead to infrastructure. So many of our questions—my colleague on here, Jamie West, the MPP for Sudbury, he and I are kind of a tag team on this file. He looks after the northern aspects, and I know that he has some good questions for you that may be sort of the Ministry of Transportation—but it is all the same. We want to see the construction. We want to see the commitment. We want people to be able to get where they need to go safely.

Before the pandemic, we certainly had concerns across communities. When your government took office, we saw that freeze—you called it a review, but for the rest of us, it was that frozen time where things weren't being built, for better or for worse. We lost seasons of construction, and then we were in the middle of a pandemic. We all feel, I think, a bit behind in some ways.

We want to ask questions today that are going to bring some clarity in terms of schedules for communities that have applied for all of these application-based funding opportunities that you and the feds will celebrate and announce and whatnot. But a lot of the municipalities are not celebrating the application-based funding if they can't get it. They're left to say, "Well, where the heck is it?" It's not so easy for that money to flow. We hope that we can get a bit more clarity on some of those fronts.

As we're heading—hopefully, soon—into the recovery phase, we want to know that the money is flowing, that the commitments are being made.

To your point earlier, Minister: You talked about the number of nominated projects for the various funding streams that have received approval. I'm always curious about how many applied and were rejected, because a lot of those that were not successful in their applications are still left in the lurch and wondering what that recovery will look like for them.

In the wake of the terrible discovery of 215 bodies of lost children at a residential school in Kamloops, a lot of people are looking at our own province and looking across Canada or looking at First Nations, Indigenous communities, talking about meaningful reconciliation, reconciliation, and what that looks like. We've had a number of conversations in the Legislature around access to clean drinking water. We've had a number of conversations in the Legislature about access to safe and affordable housing, and certainly about the jurisdictional Ping-Pong, or whose responsibility that support is.

We'll get into some questions later, but I'd like to hear this ministry sit up straight and say, "Yes, we are all treaty people, and Ontario does have a responsibility. Here's what it will look like." I think that it's incumbent on us as leaders in the province to ensure that everyone does have

those basics. I hope that is something that, as we're breaking down the specific funds and numbers in the estimates—if there's not something there, I still hope that the intent is there.

I know that the minister has already talked about broadband. I can reassure her that we will be discussing that over our time together. I've said this to the minister in the hallways, but I'm going to say it again: I do believe that the minister has an appreciation for the need for broadband and, as she stated, an interest and a personal connection and whatnot. I was sorry for her that her Bill 257 really did get hijacked with all that super-ministerial zoning order stuff, because all of us would have liked to have had a more in-depth, focused conversation on broadband infrastructure and what it would really mean for rural and northern and just folks in neighbourhoods to ensure that they have affordable and reliable access to the Internet.

That said, I think that will be the end of my statement. I am going to shift gears, into questions. I'm going to do my best, Chair and Minister. I've got stories to tell to set the stage, of course, and make sure that the minister knows where I'm coming from, but a number of the questions, I think, will be fairly pointed. Minister, there are a number of things that we'll be asking that hopefully your ministry folks on screen and at the office can provide to the committee.

You mentioned, Minister, the market updates. Infrastructure Ontario's most recent market update revealed several unexplained delays and scope changes to P3 projects that are currently in active procurement.

1550

The GO expansion, Lakeshore East: I'm in Oshawa. Everybody has eyes on the Lakeshore corridor. Folks would like to have answers and timelines, and heck, they'd like to have a train. The GO expansion Lakeshore East, central corridor P3 project was originally supposed to reach financial close in winter of 2018, but the latest market update says it has been delayed again. Not only that, but the project's budget has been basically cut in half, which would suggest that there has been a major reduction in the scope.

I'd like to ask the minister, how has the scope of the project changed? Why is this project now delayed by more than three years? If we can't get those answers today, perhaps we could ask for that to the committee. Minister?

Hon. Laurie Scott: Thank you very much, MPP French. It's nice to see you again and to rejoin an estimates committee after, as I said at the beginning, almost two years since we last did this. I always enjoy your commentary in the Legislature and your duty as Deputy Speaker, too. I really appreciate that.

I will get some more specifics, probably, from Infrastructure Ontario, but I just want to say in a general comment that we have the largest expansion of infrastructure in the province's history: over \$145 billion over 10 years. Transit, I think, is the main question that you have here, and this one transit project. We have major transit projects that are continuing to be built out, and I'm sure

you will hear and I did allude in my earlier comments that Infrastructure Ontario has a clear track record of success in delivering P3 programs, working with different line ministries. As you know, Infrastructure Ontario is shared by the government to many line ministries. In this case, it's transportation, but also health care, education etc. We're confident that under the leadership of the CEO, Michael Lindsay, who you're going to hear from in a minute—to deliver the best results.

Has the market changed? There's always a to and fro and a realignment of funds depending on many things—construction cycles; we can throw the pandemic in here and COVID-19 into some of the comments. But Infrastructure Ontario is also very good at being flexible. We market-sound all the time. We talk to the stakeholders about the flexibility and the nimbleness that they need to work with those people who are building, our stakeholders who are building, about what the market needs, what the—

Ms. Jennifer K. French: Yes?

Hon. Laurie Scott: No, no, I'm setting it up—what the market needs, how do we engage the right people to build and protect the taxpayers at the same time.

I will hand it over to Michael Lindsay to be more specific on the question that you asked.

Ms. Jennifer K. French: [*Inaudible*] the specific scope of how this project has changed. I appreciate that.

It's nice to see you, Mr. Lindsay. We have met on Zoom. I will appreciate your feedback. Then I have a number more, so you might as well stay on screen, sir.

Mr. Michael Lindsay: Thank you, MPP French. It's very nice to see you as well.

In respect of GO expansion, from a program and scope perspective—

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): I apologize, sir, but if you would introduce yourself by name and title, just to make sure that Hansard is clear. The minister is pretty easy for us to pick up, the critic is pretty easy for us to pick up, but we want to be able to attribute everyone else accurately. So you and others who will be speaking, please, each time, your name and your title.

Mr. Michael Lindsay: Thank you, sir. Michael Lindsay, president and CEO of Infrastructure Ontario. My greetings and best wishes to the members of the committee. It is good to see you all.

MPP French, in respect of your specific question, remember that the GO expansion program is categorized in respective projects into a number of different buckets, with the end objective of establishing across the whole of the network—multiple lines—bidirectional, every-15-minutes two-way GO service. The OnCorr procurement, which is the big category of expenditure related to that particular objective, is the thing. If you looked at our pipeline document, where we're hoping to get to a contract execution at some point in 2022, there is a series of early works that go with setting the platform, works that can easily be separated out from the big tender, which is OnCorr. We knew that as long as they were delivered before the big contract, which is OnCorr, it was all just a breakdown payment on making sure that we had the right

platform. The Lakeshore East-Central corridor is one of those.

We've continued to progress the procurement. We are anticipating getting the contract extension by fall of 2021. But Mr. Verster, from Metrolinx, and I have always known that as long as those works predated the larger OnCorr package, we were still in a good place. Part of the reason why you see the project's scope varying in respect of how we report the design and construction estimate on our pipeline is because, as with every large program, there are puts and takes as between what scope goes into the big project and what scope goes into one of these projects that's meant to set the table for it. This is exactly what has happened with the Lakeshore East central corridor—

Ms. Jennifer K. French: Okay. If I'm to understand, you and Mr. Verster feel that you're still in an okay spot, but when I look at this—and tell me what I'm misunderstanding—it appears to be delayed by more than three years.

Mr. Michael Lindsay: The objective is every day, bi-directional, every-15-minutes GO service along the various lines that feed downtown Toronto, including Lakeshore East-Central as a corridor. OnCorr is the big procurement whereby we're ultimately going out to get somebody to do the construction upgrades and then to operate that bi-directional service. There were a set of works—the package that you're identifying for the Lakeshore East-Central corridor is one of them—that we knew we could begin as early works, because no matter what the final solution proposed to us through the OnCorr package was, we knew that those works could be done at any time. They serve any configuration of the bigger GO expansion program. So, though it is true to say that the procurement has lasted longer than we anticipated, as long as those works are delivered in advance of the OnCorridor procurement, it still serves the same outcome of making sure that we have the right service coefficients once the OnCorr procurement is finished.

Ms. Jennifer K. French: Just a quick answer, if you've got one: Do we know when Bowmanville is going to happen, just for the folks at home? Anyone?

Mr. Michael Lindsay: MPP French, I'm sorry, which Bowmanville project? Bowmanville Hospital redevelopment or—

Ms. Jennifer K. French: Bowmanville GO. Do we have a delivery date? Do we have a folks-can-get-on-the-train date, or still not yet?

Mr. Michael Lindsay: I would need to compare notes with the Ministry of Transportation and Metrolinx on that.

Ms. Jennifer K. French: I just wondered if you knew something that they didn't. I thought it would be fun to find out.

Continuing on: the GO expansion. The Milton corridor upgrades P3 project was supposed to reach financial close in winter of 2019, but it has also been delayed yet again. Its scope also seems to have been reduced again, after the government cancelled the planned Milton GO station expansion in early 2020. Oddly, the P3 project is now referred to as the Milton GO station project, despite the

cancellation of the expansion. Is this renaming a bit of PR by the government so that it seems like the originally planned GO station expansion is proceeding when it isn't? How has the scope of the project changed? Again, why is this project now delayed by more than two and a half years? Can I get a clearer answer on that?

Mr. Michael Lindsay: The labelling of the project in our pipeline is our attempt to be more transparent and clear for our market about what the scope of works associated with the project ultimately is.

MPP French, the answer to this question is the same as the one that I've just given you. This is another one of those early works which feeds the larger program, which is OnCorr, and it's just the puts and takes as between the scope that goes into the larger contract versus these early works contracts that is a little bit in flux and, I would argue, is not unstandard for big, big capital programs of this type, where you're separating out a component of the works as early works.

Ms. Jennifer K. French: I actually appreciate your taking the time to explain that, because I'm clear on that, because I made the connection to the first.

It is interesting when you say "labelling to be more transparent and clear," but if that original GO station expansion isn't proceeding, then to name it that—I don't know how that makes it more transparent. Like I said, it seems a little PR-ish. Am I missing something?

Mr. Michael Lindsay: I think we care mostly about broadcasting, through our pipeline, to our counterparties that are trying to organize themselves to bid on works, clear statements of what scope is actually intended in any given project, which is why we labelled it as such.

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The scope of work associated with the balance of the Milton GO station: Again, the status of that is probably a question for friends at the Ministry of Transportation and Metrolinx.

Ms. Jennifer K. French: I have a sneaking suspicion that you guys are going to tell me that a couple of times today, just because, as I said, all roads lead to infrastructure, but yes—thank you.

Still with the GO expansion, while we're here: The Lakeshore West corridor P3 project was supposed to reach financial close in early 2019. Like the other GO expansion projects, it has also been delayed yet again. Its scope has been inexplicably reduced. I'd love to know a bit more about that. How has the scope of the project changed? Why is it delayed by more than two and a half years? I'm going to anticipate that, like the other two, as you said, there are early works. But is there a reduction in scope at this point, or is it a matter of—I won't answer for you; I just—

Mr. Michael Lindsay: It is the allocation of scope as between contracts—the OnCorr contract, the early work contract on our pipeline and other work that's being done by Metrolinx Capital Projects Group—all in aid of the program that is GO expansion proper.

Perhaps just to give you a slightly different variation on this answer the third time, it's worth noting that a couple

of the same sorts of early works projects have recently reached financial close. Cooksville station and the Kipling bus terminal, for instance, both fell into the same bucket of early works for GO expansion, so progress does continue in respect of early works. On the projects that you've cited, we're excited to hopefully soon be executing contracts with counter parties in connection to those works. But it is, MPP French, very much about how scope gets allocated for a massive program like this across different contractual deals.

Ms. Jennifer K. French: Just so I'm clear, it's not to say that the scope has been reduced? Because in terms of perception, that's why I am asking these. That's what it appears as: "It's delayed. The scope has been reduced." So are you telling me that it actually has not, that what we anticipate—that it's a matter of where we are in the process as opposed to we're changing where we're going to land in the process?

Mr. Michael Lindsay: I can appreciate that. What I am telling you is, for the projects that we are twinned with Metrolinx to deliver, the scope has changed associated with those projects. That does not entail that that scope is not going to be delivered through a separate contractual vehicle by Metrolinx or through the larger OnCorridor contract discussion that we're having right now.

Ms. Jennifer K. French: I have some homework to do on that. That will be very interesting, because if we don't know, then who is going to take responsibility for the broader scope of the project? If the Ministry of Infrastructure is stepping away and leaving that to—to whom? It remains to be seen, or someone in Metrolinx knows, or what are we talking about? Who could it be?

I could answer it myself—

Mr. Michael Lindsay: Metrolinx is the owner of the GO Expansion program and carries custody, I would think, primarily, for answers to these questions.

Ms. Jennifer K. French: Okay. I'll track down Mr. Verster, but not today.

I'm moving on. When the government's private consultants are behind closed doors, negotiating with a bidder's private consultants to set the price and terms of a P3 contract and everything is unable to be seen by the public in the name of third-party commercial confidentiality, to the point where we actually can't even know a project's total budget or scope, can the minister appreciate that people are wary or that there is a risk that the public could get ripped off or might perceive that they are? The minister and the ministry love this P3; I know that. But can the minister appreciate that it doesn't look good from the outside? And will the minister commit to ensuring that the public has access to complete and updated information about an infrastructure project's budget and scope before the contract is signed?

Hon. Laurie Scott: Thank you for the interest and the questions that you have had.

I will certainly say Infrastructure Ontario has a clear record and is recognized globally as well as within the country. They have achieved—as of March 31, 2020, it was 66 projects that have achieved substantial completion.

I am again going to say the P3 program, since its inception, has delivered projects that were 95% completed on budget and nearly 70% on time.

When we first formed the government, we heard from the markets that they wanted quarterly updates, and I know that Michael Lindsay has answered a lot of questions this afternoon for you about the market updates, the changes that you see evolving as projects evolve, as market sounding is done; the flexibility that is needed in order to make completion of projects in the ever-changing—more than ever, can I say—climate that we are in. I am very confident that Infrastructure Ontario will deliver the best results possible and the much-needed infrastructure build—as I said, a historic infrastructure build of \$145 billion over 10 years—and all while doing that, protecting the taxpayers' dollars.

Thank you for doing the homework of comparing the pipelines and our market update. That's exactly why it's out there, so that people can see clearly. Especially, it helps the market, for certainty, and it helps attract bidders, not only locally from Ontario and the country, but also globally. Mr. Lindsay has mentioned financial close dates that have been made. We're showcasing this latest pipeline of 41 projects valued at approximately \$60 billion that stretch across all ministries, to some degree. We show projects that are in the planning phase. It is quite open. I don't know if Mr. Lindsay wants to add anything more, but I have great confidence in Infrastructure Ontario and in the market updates that we deliver four times a year—

Ms. Jennifer K. French: I'm actually glad to have market updates, because it's tough when I sit across from the Minister of Transportation and I have to guess about what's coming or not. So I'm not commenting on that.

What I'm saying is that with the third-party commercial confidentiality, from the outside, when you have folks go into the room and no one really knows what's happening—would you commit to having that information, the complete and updated information, about a project's budget and scope before that contract is signed? You're citing numbers there, the 95% completed on budget or 70% on time, or what have you. But for when things go sideways—and I'm looking forward to talking about some of those projects later, unfortunately—I think it's important for the public to know before the contract is signed. When you've got the government's private consultants negotiating with the bidder's private consultants behind closed doors, we just cross our fingers.

You guys started talking about P3s, and I know how excited the government is, I know IO—you guys are committed. I've heard the speeches. I understand. We see things very differently in the opposition. We've got our numbers, you guys have your numbers, but at the end of the day, I think Ontarians should be clutching their wallets when the government starts talking about P3s, because we know that we are probably going to end up on the hook financially.

So, again, I'll ask the question: Will this minister commit to ensuring the public has access to that information about a project's budget and scope before the contract is signed? Is that something that we could ask for?

Hon. Laurie Scott: Well, I think that some of your comments I am going to dispute, because there are many examples where P3 projects have actually protected the taxpayers' money from companies. You can't always predict what happens inside companies after they've started construction, so there is that protection that's built in. You are speaking a lot of probably legal language that I will let Michael Lindsay answer about disclosure and privacy and protecting business information. I won't get into the details of the language because I'm not fluent in that. But that is the general view of proprietary—

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

Hon. Laurie Scott: Okay, so I'll let Mr. Lindsay finish off those two minutes.

Mr. Michael Lindsay: Minister, I would add only the following for MPP French:

You pointed out our pipeline earlier. Part of the reason we have an estimated total capital cost on that pipeline is not only to allow our market to organize itself, given the order of magnitude of some of these projects, but also to condition people's expectations about what the cost of these projects would be.

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Harkening back to our last discussion, it's worth noting we used ranges—I'm going to come back to this in a moment—and therefore, when we put something into a different range, it's fair to say that that shouldn't be viewed as a dollar-for-dollar scope cut of something related to GO expansion. We keep the budgets themselves confidential to ensure that we get competitive bids from a set of counterparties in our process, and after a financial close, for each one of our projects, we post publicly both the project agreement as signed and a value-for-money calculation done by a third party.

Ms. Jennifer K. French: Okay, I'll take that.

Chair, I guess that would leave me less than a minute.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): You've got a minute.

Ms. Jennifer K. French: Well, a minute is not long enough to jump into the P3 debate.

Minister, I have a sneaking suspicion we'll do that back and forth a couple of more times. But when it is our next kick at the can, I'll be glad to hand over the reins to MPP West, with some northern pieces.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Back to the minister: You have half an hour to speak.

Just before you go, Minister, I want to confirm the identity and location of MPP West, who has joined us.

MPP West, please confirm identity and location.

Mr. Jamie West: It's probably ideal, because I'll be talking about broadband Internet. I had computer issues and had to restart my computer when we were all confirming. I am MPP West. I am in Sudbury, in my office.

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

Minister, the floor is yours.

Hon. Laurie Scott: Welcome, MPP West. Thank you for sharing that broadband Internet story. I'm sure we'll share some more as we continue on this discussion, and there seems to be lots of time for questions over the next couple of days.

I just want to remind everyone of a very important fact: We, the province of Ontario, have not stopped building even through the pandemic. We made a commitment to Ontarians to build infrastructure they need the most right now. We're putting our money where our mouth is, with \$145 billion worth of investments over the next 10 years. This includes strategic investments in transit, highways, schools, hospitals and broadband, among others. This year alone, we're committing nearly \$17 billion for infrastructure in Ontario, and I'll remind you why these investments are so important.

According to the FAO's report in the fall on Ontario's infrastructure, nearly 35% of the province's infrastructure is currently in a state of disrepair. This large infrastructure backlog, especially in the health sector, is a result of the previous government's lack of investments during their 15 years in office. Ontario's infrastructure was left to crumble to a state of disrepair without ever being properly addressed. In the country's most prosperous province, how can this happen? Our government had no choice but to step up to the plate for our province. That's why we're pulling on our boots and getting our shovels moving. With a clear mandate and the dollars in hand to fulfill it, we're taking steps and making announcements for funding almost every day to get Ontario back on track.

While we've made significant improvements since being in office, we know there is much more work to be done, but we can't do it alone.

I'd like to first talk about our accomplishments in getting more Ontarians connected to reliable high-speed Internet. Many of us have all heard the stories of poor, unstable Internet connectivity, which I will sprinkle throughout my days here, and I'm sure other members will and have already told us they will, and especially since the pandemic has occurred. Those stories have been coming to life more than before.

As many of you know—and I'll tell you again—I come from a rural community too, and I am in Toronto, presenting to committee and speaking with committee, just to be assured I do not have the problems that maybe MPP West has just experienced, although some people in Toronto do have connectivity problems at times that I've seen on the many Zoom and Teams calls that we all are on every day.

I'd like to share a letter from a ratepayers' association in northern Ontario. I know, MPP West, it's your home, in northern Ontario. I'll quote them: "Our region includes approximately 25,000 citizens, permanent and seasonal, living outside of municipal areas and First Nations. Current Internet services are not high speed. There are few choices. Telco infrastructure may be available, but it is not well distributed, and costs are higher than neighbouring municipalities. Our residents operate businesses that rely on Internet for their success. Entrepreneurs are entering or would like to enter our area but are challenged by the

quality, availability and price of Internet services. Many seasonal residents operate businesses too. They attempt to spend more time at the lake and manage their enterprises from their seasonal residencies. This is difficult at the present time.

"In addition, COVID-19 has revealed major weaknesses in Internet services for students who must study from their homes. Health care services are inhibited for want of better connection to health care providers. In some cases, justice services could better be done by Internet than by long journeys to big cities."

Another constituent from rural Ottawa writes, "We built a home, and we've been unable to get broadband Internet. Due to the pandemic, we've both been working at home, so this is starting to impact our work performance."

Similarly, a young family in Innisfil writes, "I'm writing to know whether you are aware of any recent discussions about broadband infrastructure development in the north Innisfil area. With more and more people working from home, we believe this is a critical issue for our adopted community and for our livelihoods going forward.

"By way of background, my family—myself, my wife and our two young children—just moved into a home in the northeast end of Innisfil, and while we knew the options for broadband were limited, we feel we were misled. Clearly, there is a need for this service. COVID has changed the landscape."

In Sudbury, one elderly couple says, "There is a small group of about six to seven families on this crescent that are unable to have fast, reliable, direct Internet, and, with the need to do so much on the Internet, we find it very frustrating at times when it just won't connect. We are in our seventies and have put up with the extra expense and terrible service for a long time. When will the province help with better Internet service in our area of greater Sudbury? I am hoping to hear of a fast, reliable Internet system coming to our area in the very near future."

Though from different areas of the province, all of these stories carry the same message. Ontarians need access to reliable, high-speed Internet right now, and our government hears you loud and clear. That's why our government passed the Supporting Broadband and Infrastructure Expansion Act, 2021, a piece of legislation that will break down barriers to help connect more communities to reliable, high-speed Internet sooner. By taking this step, our government can help speed up Ontario's broadband expansion, increasing our competitiveness and connecting our unserved and underserved communities. In fact, as many as 700,000 households and businesses—which, again, I will say is about 1.4 million Ontarians—lack access to adequate Internet speeds or have no Internet connection at all.

These proposed measures build on Up to Speed: Ontario's Broadband and Cellular Action Plan, which includes nearly \$315 million worth of investments for regional projects. Of this funding, we invested \$71 million for the Eastern Ontario Regional Network, known as

EORN—this project will virtually eliminate coverage gaps and increase capacity in the region while creating up to 3,000 jobs over 10 years—and more than \$63 million for Southwestern Integrated Fibre Technology, known as the SWIFT project, which has already connected thousands of homes and businesses in southwestern Ontario. Part of the action plan is Ontario's broadband funding program called ICON, Improving Connectivity for Ontario Program. Last fall, we invested an additional \$680 million in hopes of continuing to reduce the number of communities without service. Through the 2021 budget, an additional \$2.8-billion investment will help ensure every region in Ontario has access to reliable, high-speed Internet by the end of 2025. Taken all together, these commitments bring our government's overall broadband investments to nearly \$4 billion. We are not waiting any longer for anyone else to fill the gaps.

The Rural Ontario Municipal Association say they welcome our investment, calling broadband “a lifeline” in rural Ontario.

Barry Field, the head of SWIFT, an initiative by the Western Ontario Wardens' Caucus, called it, “an amazing and historic level of investment for broadband in Ontario. It's a massive win for rural Ontario residents.”

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The Ontario Chamber of Commerce called it “welcome news,” and the Association of Municipalities of Ontario called it “a big step forward.” That's why we are going all in on broadband.

However, building high-speed Internet infrastructure isn't the only way we're supporting municipalities. As mentioned earlier, the Investing in Canada Infrastructure Program, or ICIP, is a 10-year program that provides up to \$30 billion in total funding, including \$10.2 billion in provincial funding across public transit; rural and northern community; green infrastructure; community, culture and recreation; and other priority infrastructure. To date we have nominated over 770 projects to the federal government under the original four streams of ICIP; over 715 projects have been approved. ICIP projects don't just deliver improvements to infrastructure in our municipalities; they support communities as they grow for the future.

Take, for example, the project to rehabilitate Algoma Street in the town of Spanish, in the member for Algoma-Manitoulin's riding. Our government invested nearly \$400,000 into this project through ICIP. That means, now, the community can look forward to a safer drive to the grocery store, to work, or even to a vaccine clinic. Another is our investment in the Dundas Valley School of Art in the riding of the member for Hamilton West-Ancaster-Dundas. Their project to renovate their facility can go from a dream to a reality with our government's almost \$70,000 investment—or even our \$520,000 investment for the enhancement of the Moose Cree sewage system, to improve the waste water system for Moose Cree First Nation in the riding of Mushkegowuk-James Bay. These are three examples of success stories with the support of ICIP funding, and there are countless examples.

We're investing in Ontario's infrastructure to support families and ensure the well-being of people in the communities each one of us represents. We are investing in infrastructure that positively impacts the health and resilience of our cities, towns, rural and Indigenous communities, and the people in them. This includes investments that support a range of water, waste water and stormwater system improvements in Ontario's communities under ICIP's green infrastructure stream. The province is contributing more than \$40 million to this stream.

In February, Ontario announced an investment of more than \$1.7 million to both upgrade the water treatment plant in Red Rock and replace numerous water mains and sewers in Terrace Bay in the riding of Thunder Bay-Superior North. These investments will support better environmental protection in Red Rock, improve service reliability, and reduce maintenance costs in Terrace Bay.

Ontario is also providing almost \$940,000 to the municipality of Tweed in Hastings-Lennox and Addington to create an additional 2.8 hectares of waste water storage and upgrade a lagoon aeration system. This will help Tweed meet current standards for waste water treatment while reducing waste water overflows to help keep waterways clean and protect fish habitats.

We continue to support our community's green efforts through these types of local infrastructure investments.

In Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation, Ontario is investing more than \$900,000 into improvements and upgrades to the Native Horizons Treatment Centre. The funding is part of ICIP's community, culture and recreation infrastructure stream. These improvements will allow clients to once again have access to important treatment and healing programs after a 2018 fire destroyed part of the centre. Work involves rebuilding portions of the building, including the addition of multi-purpose and spiritual rooms, and the construction of spaces for trauma-informed programming and cultural and land-based activities. Renovations will also occur to client, lounge and laundry rooms, as well as the kitchen and dining areas. Supporting cultural and recreational infrastructure projects like this one helps to protect our communities, making them stronger, healthier and safer.

Ontarians deserve to be able to get to work and home, get out to appointments, to shop and to conduct business safely. Strategic investments in sustainable public transportation infrastructure play a key role. Ontario recently provided an investment of more than \$95,000 to the city of Kenora to purchase an accessible bus that will expand paratransit service for its residents and for the construction of a new bus garage that will ensure vehicles remain safe and reliable. Ontario has invested more than \$1.1 million to help the city of Sarnia build several active transportation projects, including bike lanes and multi-use trails, sidewalks and traffic signals, to increase access to public transit in the region and to keep pedestrians safer. These investments were made through ICIP's public transit stream.

Under the COVID-19 resilience infrastructure stream, both federal and provincial governments committed more than \$1 billion in combined funding, including a total of \$656.5 million for education-related projects to be nominated and administered by the Ministry of Education, up to \$100 million for long-term-care projects to be identified and administered by the Ministry of Long-Term Care, and an allocation-based program that will deliver \$250 million to municipalities to address critical local infrastructure needs, including a minimum of \$6.5 million that will be directed toward Indigenous and on-reserve education. Funding under this stream will contribute to building or renovating health and safety-related projects in long-term-care and education facilities and will help municipalities and communities address critical local infrastructure needs.

All of these investments bring benefits to residents by making local services run more smoothly or providing new facilities and access to programs. Investing in infrastructure helps rural communities attract, support and sustain economic growth and job creation. That's why, on January 25, 2021, our government announced a \$200-million investment in municipalities through the 2021 Ontario Community Infrastructure Fund, or OCIF, to help 424 communities build and repair roads, bridges, water and wastewater infrastructure. OCIF provides formula-based funding for communities with populations of less than 100,000 as well as rural and northern communities to invest in local infrastructure and asset management planning to address their priority needs.

Investments made through OCIF—Ontario Community Infrastructure Fund—make a positive difference by helping the 424 communities meet their local infrastructure needs. I would like to share a few examples of the kind of priority projects that have been made possible thanks to OCIF funding. The township of Centre Wellington used its 2019 and 2020 OCIF allocations to support the replacement of both the 4th Line bridge and the 3rd Line Carrol Creek bridge. OCIF investments also helped the city of North Bay upgrade wastewater infrastructure on a section of Gertrude Street. The town of Caledon was able to use OCIF funding to rehabilitate the Grange Sideroad bridge. The town also used OCIF investments to do some road-work, including widening, paving, fixing retaining walls, curbs and gutters and making drainage improvements along a section of Mississauga Road. Finally, Caledon was able to replace a large corrugated steel pipe centre-line culvert on Caledon-King Townline thanks to its OCIF allocation.

So OCIF addresses local priorities head-on, modernizing public infrastructure to help meet the changing needs of communities. This annual and formula-based municipal investment—formula-based because it's not application-based, and certainly saves municipalities that time. This formula-based municipal investment, provided through OCIF for local infrastructure in communities across Ontario, will contribute to our province's economic recovery and growth this year and for many years to come.

The Infrastructure Ontario IO Loan Program also provides affordable, long-term financing to municipalities and other eligible public sector partners across Ontario. Since its inception, the IO Loan Program has helped to support more than \$18 billion in local infrastructure development and renewal. In 2020, the IO Loan Program committed to more than \$550 million in loans, supporting 159 local infrastructure projects.

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The loan portfolio continues to grow and meet community needs. For example, IO recently committed to a loan with Prince Edward county valued at \$21 million to finance 11 water and wastewater projects. This includes repairs to Ameliasburgh water treatment facility and water storage facility, upgrades to the Consecon water tower and the Carrying Place booster station, replacement of sewer mains and upgrades to both Picton Wastewater Treatment Plant and Picton water tower.

In addition to the IO loan program, the government continues to provide capital investments for major projects. As a government, we have also made major capital investment, creating more space for health care at this critical time by providing more than \$18 billion in capital grants over 10 years to build, expand and renew health infrastructure across Ontario. These investments will improve and increase space in hospitals and include grants to support new facilities, as well as the renewal of existing hospitals and community health centres.

We haven't stopped building—again I'll say that—during the COVID-19 pandemic; in fact, our work has continued on our infrastructure projects. For example, Ontario is investing \$61.6 billion over 10 years for public transit to continue to deliver on the government's commitment towards priority projects, such as four priority transit and subway projects in the GTHA, including:

- the largest subway expansion in Canadian history, which will expand the subway system by 50%;
- the updated Hamilton LRT project, which has been added as the fifth priority transit project;
- the GO rail expansion program to provide two-way, all-day service every 15 minutes over core segments of the GO rail network and nearly double annual ridership by 2055; and
- the Kitchener GO rail expansion project to strengthen connections and increase access to Ontario's fastest-growing urban cities along the Toronto-Waterloo innovation corridor.

We have made investments in schools for the future of our children and the long-term economic prosperity of our province. This is why the government is investing about \$18 billion in capital grants over 10 years to build more schools, upgrade existing facilities across Ontario, and support education-related projects. This includes \$1.4 billion in school renewal for the 2021-22 school year to help improve learning environments.

Through our crown agency, Infrastructure Ontario, we have taken a number of strategic approaches, including public-private partnerships—P3s—and traditional procurement to deliver large and complex infrastructure

projects. This model has been successfully applied across various projects, such as hospitals, courthouses and public transit; I'm sure we'll talk more about this as we go through estimates hours.

Interjection.

Hon. Laurie Scott: MPP French is giving me the thumbs-up, so that's good.

Unlike what some may suggest, through this procurement model, taxpayers' dollars are protected by ensuring projects are delivered on budget and harness innovation from the private sector.

Infrastructure Ontario has a clear track record of success. I will repeat: As of March 31, 2020, of the 66 projects that had achieved substantial completion since the inception of IO's P3 program, 95% were completed on budget and nearly 70% on time. That is why we are confident that Infrastructure Ontario will continue to deliver the best results possible to provide much-needed infrastructure for the people of Ontario.

As mentioned earlier, our current P3 project pipeline is the largest in its history, totalling an estimated \$60 billion in contract value. Our latest update, released in April 2021, included 41 projects, with 27 in pre-procurement and 14 in active procurement. The list also includes 12 additional government-announced projects in the early stages of planning and determining the project's scope, timing and delivery model. Some of the projects in the April 2021 market update included the Quinte Detention Centre in Napanee, the Kingston Health Sciences Centre's Kingston General Hospital redevelopment, and the William Osler Health System's new Peel Memorial in-patient hospital. Our next update will be released in just a few days.

I'd like to conclude with this simple message: Ontario has not stopped building, even through the pandemic. We are absolutely focused on improving our infrastructure planning, ensuring we are investing in the right infrastructure at the right time, and investing in projects like the GO expansion, municipal LRT construction, new hospitals and other critical public infrastructure projects. By doing so, we are also investing in our long-term economic recovery as we progress from the pandemic.

Our plan includes making strategic investments in infrastructure through planned capital investments of, again, I'll say, \$145 billion over 10 years, which includes supporting municipal partners in delivering their priority projects. Many of the projects in our capital plan are outlined in our latest P3 market update valued at the estimated \$60 billion.

Ontario is supporting municipal partners by leveraging the federal investments through the Investing in Canada Infrastructure Program, with \$30 billion in cost-shared federal, provincial and partner funding. The province continues—and I do every chance I can get—to call on the federal government to reduce delays in federal approvals for current infrastructure projects and step up with an additional \$10 billion per year over 10 years to support provinces and territories for shovel-ready projects, and I'm sure all of us have our lists ready for them, should they choose to do that. Ontario will also continue to push for

expedited project approvals to get more shovels in the ground, and faster.

And finally, Ontario is making historic investments of almost \$4 billion to improve broadband and cellular services in unserved and underserved areas of the province, which will help families and businesses work and learn from home.

I see, Chair, you're looking at your watch. How many minutes do I have left?

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): You have three and a half minutes left, Minister.

Hon. Laurie Scott: Okay. Well, that's pretty good.

Our programs and initiatives will certainly continue to help people and businesses in our communities get through the COVID-19 pandemic and pivot towards our long-term economic recovery, helping us today and for generations to come.

I know that much is said about jobs and the economy, and I just want to put a plug in that before the pandemic, we definitely had a growing number of skilled trades vacancies to help us complete our infrastructure; we continue to have that. Our government saw that need, sees that need, and is making programs to try to get people not only retrained but to encourage the youth to enter into the skilled trades. We speak with stakeholders all the time, and, absolutely, that is an issue that comes up and has come up since day one of being in government, not only in the Ministry of Infrastructure—but before. I remember, when I was an opposition MPP for many years, bringing bills forward to try to close that gap of getting more people, and young people, into the skilled trades, to showcase the great future they have, the great incomes they could have, the great training that could be available, hearing that there were barriers to applying to be an apprentice, to get the proper training, the accessibility—

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

Hon. Laurie Scott: Those are all issues that we are continuing to tackle today, now more than ever. As I said, and I will continue to say, with an historic infrastructure build in the province of Ontario, we need to get companies to expand, to hire, to train individuals. This is a commitment that the young people can be part of, that they helped build infrastructure that will last generations for their children and their grandchildren to use, to travel safely on, to be cared for in hospitals.

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Mr. Chair, I'm very passionate about skilled trades and getting young people involved, and have been for, oh, my goodness, almost two decades now, and continue on, certainly, at my local riding level—the wonderful opportunities that do exist and that I know exist across the province, and companies that want to share in that excitement of enticing more workers into our skilled trades centres so that we continue to make the build-out for the province of Ontario.

Mr. Chair, I thank you for your indulgence in listening to me in my response.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Okay. That's it?

Hon. Laurie Scott: I'm good if you're good. I can go on if you want me to kill some more seconds.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): You don't have to, Minister.

Hon. Laurie Scott: I can see MPP French is putting her hand up. There's unanimous consent for that.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): We will then go to the opposition. MPP West, please.

Mr. Jamie West: Thank you, again, Minister, for your words. A couple of things just resonated with me out of what you said.

You talked about the 25,000 citizens somewhere in northern Ontario where the current Internet was not high-speed, or the high cost. It reminds me of my in-laws who, quite frankly, last summer, while we were meeting over Zoom, told me I could use their camp and they had Internet, and I used their entire month's supply of Internet in one eight-hour Zoom call. That's the reality for a lot of people. It relates also to, when you talked about how broadband is a lifeline in rural Ontario—it's a lifeline everywhere. You simply can't compete in a business. You can't compete for school. You can't connect for school. It's pretty much like how you were required to use a phone in the old days, and it has to change like that.

One of the things I was really surprised at, because my riding of Sudbury—Greater Sudbury is much larger, it has farmland, but my riding basically is rock and swamp; there's no farmland. When I met with agricultural workers, pre-COVID-19, when we were able to meet with agricultural workers, I was surprised at how dependent they were and how necessary broadband Internet was for that sort of work. I understood about in their offices, but I was surprised how much they use it when they're out in the field.

You talked about Innisfil, and it just reminded me, last summer, we were debating something and I was asking about agricultural workers being able to participate in consultations during the summertime and how it's the growing season and they might be tied up doing other stuff, and the member from Barrie–Innisfil said, “Well, they participate by the Internet.” That same week, when I was driving home back to Sudbury—it's a four-hour drive—my alarm went off on my phone that I had to be part of a team call, and I pulled over to the side of the road and I had no Internet—zero Internet at all. I was in Innisfil. That's the reality. Sometimes the member from Thunder Bay–Superior North will say that Sudbury is not northern Ontario, but I always feel like Barrie is not northern Ontario.

So we have a lot of work to do in providing high-speed Internet.

The final thing I want to say is, it's not just providing the broadband Internet; it's providing broadband Internet that really fits today's standards. If you look back to high-speed from a couple of years ago, there are areas that had the infrastructure in place, but the one-megabit isn't really high-speed anymore, where you got super excited. It reminded me of when I was a teenager or maybe in my twenties, being excited because I had a shotgun modem

that let me get—instead of just 56k, it was 256k if you had two phone lines. That just wouldn't get you anywhere today.

I do have a couple of questions on broadband Internet that I'm going to pivot over to, but before I do it, I'm hoping that—I know this fits in transportation, but I want to know if there are any infrastructure dollars towards this, because one of the biggest conversations in Sudbury has been completing the four-laning of Highway 69. There are 68 kilometres that remain to be tendered, is my understanding. I'm hoping there's an announcement that they have been tendered. This is a commitment in terms of safety. We've had many people die on that highway. It's basically Highway 400, once it gets past Barrie and becomes Highway 69, and as it gets four-laned, that gets transferred over to a 400-series highway. There are 68 kilometres, like I said, and this was initially brought in for safety, to reduce the number of injuries on that road, but it also would really be a boost to the economy of northern Ontario. Sudbury is the hub of the north. Having that artery going north and south, from Sudbury to Toronto, really would boost our economy, not just in Sudbury but across the north, and also attract business to the north—knowing that you can get goods and services on a regular basis.

Is there anything in infrastructure, in the budgeting, that would relate to awarding the contracts or tendering the contracts for these last 68 kilometres of Highway 69?

Hon. Laurie Scott: Great stories, and great questions.

Can I start on the broadband and answer a bit on that for you?

Mr. Jamie West: I have one more question related to roadwork and then I'll go to broadband, and you probably could expand and—

Hon. Laurie Scott: Look at how co-operative we all are here.

I think the Ministry of Transportation, for sure, and I don't know if Michael Lindsay—you can put up your hand, yes or no, if you have an update on Highway 69. I think that we can get you some answers if we don't have any right now. I will let Michael Lindsay speak in a few minutes.

There's no question that more people are moving into our areas and travelling more on the roads, especially since the pandemic.

If I get a chance to answer and talk about broadband later—I'll let Michael Lindsay, if he has anything on transportation. This really is a Ministry of Transportation question.

Mr. Michael Lindsay: Minister, nothing on Highway 69. I will express only my pride that we are going to get to work on Highway 17 and other [*inaudible*] Ministry of Transportation.

Hon. Laurie Scott: Absolutely. So sorry, MPP West—

Mr. Jamie West: No, it's fair enough. I was told you would have the answers. I was told the funding comes through infrastructure, so I was hoping there was some sort of funding announcement or envelope.

Hon. Laurie Scott: Well, we do have the transportation under ICIP that you've been able to get in the Greater Sudbury area, with the accelerated bus fleet, the implementation of various technology improvements—this is all Greater Sudbury—traffic signal renewal and transit priority system, major mobility hub detailed design and construction, and detailed design of bus rapid transit corridors with resulting infrastructure and implementation. So we do have some transit that we have announced up there through the ICIP, and I think it's of great value up there in Sudbury, with—oh, my gosh, I couldn't total it, but it's millions of dollars here, around \$60 million or \$70 million. So that is good enhancements.

Mr. Jamie West: Right—any improvement to transit in the north.

One of the first times I was in Toronto, I had a placement at SickKids. Every morning, there was one individual on the bus who would run from the bus to the subway, and if he missed that first subway he would throw his briefcase on the ground and scream and yell, and literally have to wait four minutes for the next subway. If you miss a bus in Sudbury, depending on where you are and what time of day it is, you could be waiting an hour.

My next question had to do with another highway, so I'm going to skip over and just go to broadband, because I think it will be a similar thing and I can just send you a letter about that, or send it to the Minister of Transportation.

This is about 911 in the north. I know MPP Gélinas, the MPP for Nickel Belt, has brought this up several times. I wasn't aware, until she brought it up in the Legislature, that 911 doesn't exist everywhere in northern Ontario. Some people have an old school phone number they have to call if they're in an emergency. As we come out of COVID-19 and we try to promote tourism—it's beautiful in the north, and I promote it all day, every day—there are people who, when they picked up the phone if they had a flat tire or they needed support or were injured, for example, and dialed 911, nothing would happen.

I'm going to read part of a letter from Mike Shantz, who is the president of Northern 911: "For a tiny fraction of that cost"—he's talking about the cost of broadband investment—"we could have 911 everywhere. I guess, in some rural areas, when broadband is done, a person could pull up his smart phone and email some organization for help, but they still would not be able to call 911."

So there is this sense in the north that we feel second place. I can't imagine anywhere in southern Ontario where they don't have access to 911, but I stand to be corrected.

Is there a commitment to complete 911 in northern Ontario, and what sort of timeline is that commitment?

1650

Hon. Laurie Scott: You bring up very good issues—your story just outside, I think, Innisfil or Barrie, when you didn't have any cell coverage and couldn't make those emergency calls. Certainly, eastern Ontario region just got monies from both levels of government to resolve their cell gap issues, and part of my riding is within that, so we can relate. I want to bring those fences down in northern

Ontario that you feel you have up there. But we share a lot of those experiences of no coverage in our rural areas.

That's why we're committing up to \$4 billion to help with high-speed Internet, cell gap services etc. Absolutely, it's a big commitment. As I said, I talk about it all the time and live and breathe it: We're to get everyone connected by 2025 to high-speed Internet. With that infrastructure that will be built with that, you will see cell gap spaces—I would like to say, totally diminish, but certainly there will be greater service for cell gaps. I will talk about broadband probably longer, later.

The north is not forgotten. The north is going to get infrastructure built. We know that it is a huge issue up there, and we know that it is more challenging and more costly. That is why services aren't up there now—because of that impediment. That's why we're bringing down that fence, as you want to call it. We want to have as much equity as we can across the province of Ontario for people to access not only the many examples you gave about broadband and business and economics, but also safety.

I know the Solicitor General, on the 911, the call—there is an investment in that ministry. I don't have those numbers right in front of me, but it is to tackle the safety calls and the accessibility of safety calls. I believe it's over a \$1-billion investment. Although I don't have that right at hand, we can get it for you. That would make that investment—and probably answer that question more specifically that's with the other ministry. But I remember speaking of this when we first got in and that the system had to be updated. It is very much in the process of being updated under the leadership of the Solicitor General.

I'll probably leave it at that, MPP West, but we'll get you more information.

Mr. Jamie West: I'm going to go into broadband. I know you're excited to talk about it.

When it comes to 911, I want to tell you, locally, we had a boating accident, very tragically, and people died, and there were people who had survived a sudden impact. They hit an island in the dark. They had difficulty with 911. So it's a burning issue. I know in your riding as well, if it were to happen there, it would be a burning issue.

I'm going to go on to broadband. During committee hearings for Bill 257, the NDP tabled amendments that would ensure that projects to expand broadband to rural and northern Ontario be given priority when public funds are allocated. The government members have a majority, and they opposed the amendments, so that didn't happen. The concern, really, is that if you are a developer working on broadband as a P3, for example, or if you're a non-public contractor and you have some money allocated to expand broadband, then it's probably easier to expand in farmland in the greater Toronto area, where they're building these large subdivisions, than it is to expand in a small town like, say, Gogama.

Could any public funds for broadband expansion go towards a new subdivision, say, in greater Toronto, the GTA area, as opposed to a rural riding or a northern Ontario riding which is struggling for people to be able to compete or for—I'm trying to be generic, but let's say Bell

or Rogers. One of those well-known telcos may not want to invest in a more remote area.

Hon. Laurie Scott: Absolutely, when we make the statement that we are going to connect everywhere in Ontario, we mean everywhere in Ontario, by 2025. There are easier areas, as you've stated, to invest in, as in flatter ground and not as tough a terrain. I represent an area that does have parts of it in the Canadian Shield and that are hard to get to, so I can relate on many, many levels to your question and your experiences.

With the expansion—and I'm going to make more announcements coming soon—it is a road map to connect everyone. We have worked with the federal government in their programs. We have programs; they have programs. We have maps; they have maps. So this has been taken very granularly, into mapping of streets and houses and where there are not connections.

I don't know if you were on when I mentioned, a couple of times, that I have 40,000 unserved and underserved people just in my communities, which you would consider central Ontario. So it is evident, and it's used—my farmers have GPS. That's how they plant, these days. This is why you need these connections.

Then, you go to northern Ontario, where we have been absolutely taking a cross-government approach, and I mentioned it in some of my comments. We have ensured communities in northern Ontario—we've already done Nickel Belt, Timmins, Sudbury, Manitoulin—can access that economy. Matawa: a \$30-million project to five remote communities in the Matawa First Nation. On June 16 of last year, we announced an investment of more than \$2.3 million in an additional seven broadband projects that support rural Indigenous communities in northern Ontario. We worked with the Ministries of Energy, Northern Development and Mines, Indigenous Affairs and the Northern Ontario Heritage Fund to bring and invest in those northern communities so that you can access broadband for many of the issues that we have gone through.

Because technology and things are evolving, we have a satellite bandwidth expansion project—so satellite technologies for those in harder-to-reach areas, again, some of which are in my riding too, as well as in northern Ontario. It would shock you—

Mr. Jamie West: I understand that. The question, more specifically, was that, the way this bill, Bill 257, is written, it looks like the door is open so that you could prioritize an urban centre over a rural centre or a northern, less densely populated centre. Am I reading that properly, or am I—

Hon. Laurie Scott: I think by its very nature the unserved and underserved are in those areas. So that's why, when we discussed with all the stakeholders what the impediments were as well as the capital investments that are needed to make the business case to go to those communities that are harder to reach, we heard back that access to utility poles would help, and working with municipalities about timely access to rights-of-way. Those types of encumbrances were actually costly to them.

We're in the game of connecting people quickly. When I say, "Connect everybody in Ontario by 2025," I am very determined to do that. So the part of the bill that's brought in was helping to reduce those barriers to help the Internet service providers see a surety in the market that they have a government that's willing to assist them and assist municipalities that may be smaller that have a hard time dealing with providers and accesses. So the piece of legislation is done in a very helpful way to build broadband faster, literally by taking those barriers, those costs, down, putting in surety for the ISPs, and just by the very nature of the 1.4 million people who are unserved—they are in my community, they're in your communities, they're in the northern communities, and it's life-changing.

I was going to bring up the satellite bandwidth expansion in First Nation communities of Lansdowne, Fort Hope and Marten Falls that we have already done, so—

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

Mr. Jamie West: Thank you. My concern, really, is, this reminds me of when we passed the bill to provide natural gas to northern, rural and Indigenous communities—I might have rearranged the areas there—but nothing in the bill has guaranteed that. So my concern is that the money doesn't end up getting where we want it to go—with the best of intentions. All MPPs are committed to that, but when you don't write the rules strictly enough, it doesn't get around there.

I have more broadband questions, but I think, with two minutes, I won't have enough time to get into them. Let's see if there's one I can do quickly. No, in two minutes, I don't think I'll have enough time to get into any quickly, but we'll have more conversation on broadband.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): One second, please. MPP French?

Ms. Jennifer K. French: I've got a question that would take two minutes.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Then be my guest.

Ms. Jennifer K. French: It's about Durham region and ICON applications.

Minister, I'd love to know what the verdict is—if Durham region is going to be getting an answer about their ICON funding, when that money will flow. There are a lot of hoops that municipalities have to jump through to fit the criteria that does not necessarily reflect the actual needs of the community. There was a pretty awesome application that Durham region put in that they then had to reframe and reshape to fit into the government criteria.

So my question is: What's the verdict? Do you have any answers for me about Durham region and our ICON application? I'm crossing my fingers here.

Hon. Laurie Scott: The verdict will come very soon, MPP French—not on this call.

Interjections.

Hon. Laurie Scott: But ICON is just one part of the whole building broadband and high-speed Internet out there. ICON is one piece, as I mentioned a little bit earlier

with MPP West. We're working with the federal government. We're looking at where the places are, the best and most efficient way to service those, and the speed at which to service them—which, as I said, is by 2025.

I'm absolutely aware of Durham region's ICON projects, and there will be news coming in the next week or two on those ICON projects for you. I appreciate you knowing that. The more people who know about high-speed Internet and the need for it all helps me. So thank you for sharing.

Ms. Jennifer K. French: That's great. I'm glad you know the application, the original one, that was really innovative and awesome about—

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

Members of the committee, there will be a five-minute recess. I will be back shortly.

The committee recessed from 1702 to 1707.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Committee is back in session.

This round is the government's round. MPP Crawford, the floor is yours, sir.

Mr. Stephen Crawford: Thank you, Chair. Thank you for running this committee. I know it's a very long session. I appreciate that.

I also want to thank Minister Scott for presenting here today and all the officials who are here in support. I know it's time-consuming but very important committee work.

With that, I just want to start off by highlighting the fact that I think infrastructure has really evolved over the last number of years, to the point where the majority of the conversation around infrastructure is actually now about broadband; it used to be just roads and bridges, which of course are important. But broadband is really taking a lot of the time and the focus of infrastructure, and I think that's a good thing.

We've all realized, having lived through the COVID-19 pandemic, the importance of broadband infrastructure. MPP West mentioned his drive back to Sudbury, going through Innisfil and not having a connection. It's certainly an issue throughout the province in rural areas, but even in some suburban and urban areas. There's a digital divide; no question about it. It has become more pronounced. It's more important than ever for families—I know a lot of grandparents stayed connected to their grandkids through the pandemic on FaceTime or other digital services—for businesses, education. It's critically important to have broadband infrastructure across the province.

With that, Minister Scott, I know the Ministry of Infrastructure has dramatically ramped up funding for broadband. I'm wondering if you could highlight some of the commitments made by the government, perhaps even as it pertains to the most recent budget.

Hon. Laurie Scott: Thank you very much, MPP Crawford. You do a great job as a parliamentary assistant to the Ministry of Infrastructure.

You are right; we are singing that broadband infrastructure—which wasn't a song sung by provinces too much before we came into government. I've heard about it—as

I've mentioned many times, my history of hearing about it. Truthfully, telecommunications is a federally regulated jurisdiction. There have been pockets of programs over the years—some federal. I've mentioned EORN. The Eastern Ontario Regional Network has been an organization representing those municipalities, for many years, that have tried to close the gap in many ways—can I say that?

Broadband is a very important and critical piece of infrastructure now. So we're quite proud, as a government, that we brought forward almost \$4 billion to the table to expand broadband, which essentially brings high-speed Internet to every household in Ontario that does not have it by 2025.

There's no question that times are changing. There are programs that we have had in place with EORN, as I mentioned, that are in process to close their cell gap problems that we have in the eastern Ontario part of the region—\$71 million is what our contribution was provincially to that project, increasing not only connectivity, which will create jobs, but creating jobs while building the connectivity—and then southwestern Ontario, with our \$63.7 million in the SWIFT project. As we speak, I think there are tens of thousands of homes that have already been connected, and they are going to exceed their goal of 50,000 to almost 60,000 homes that will be connected. In one of my municipalities, in Minden Hills, in the fall of 2019, I think, we did ICON, the provincial program—the MPP from Durham mentioned a project she had from her area that had applied for that provincial program. Those are three that were in process, and it has been a multi-ministry effort, with education and northern development and mines, and economic development and jobs is also involved.

We've heard a lot, with the pandemic, that the Ministry of Education has certainly put in dollars to help either with laptops or connectivity issues that our schools, predominantly in rural Ontario, or families who didn't have laptops—working with the school boards to make those investments.

We have a long list of projects that are unveiled already or are in progress, and as I alluded to earlier, in the coming weeks there will be more announcements with some more solid projects in them. We will be happy to plan the next stage of our connectivity in the province of Ontario. The legislation, the Supporting Broadband and Infrastructure Expansion Act, 2021, is also helping bring down barriers.

When people talk about the need for legislation or regulations—it is incredible; we all have hydro poles where we are. Why aren't we using hydro poles to string the fibre? The next highway, as some of our members have said, is broadband; it's equivalent to our next build of highways to all of the province of Ontario. We said, "Why aren't we attaching to hydro poles? What are the problems?"—so working with Hydro One, working with other utility pole connectors, to say how we can best use existing infrastructure, build it faster and bring down barriers.

Those are some of the highlights.

We remain collaborative partners with not only the federal government, which I mentioned, but also with the private partners, the Internet service providers, which really do come to the table with capital dollars and will deliver the service, and will own the service at the end of the day.

There are great stories. I think you've heard of technology changing—with Starlink and Pikangikum First Nation, and how they worked with Starlink to get the service that they need for Internet to their community, which did not have it before. Technologies like that that have become available, really, in the last year, that have been more modernized and more easily accessible—and those satellites are being launched daily; many, many of them—and how we can leverage that to access those places. For MPP West and even in some parts of my riding, satellite is the answer, and it's an answer that can be done quickly, to engage them into the 21st century. So it's exploring lots of options and working with lots of partnerships to benefit everyone for generations to come.

I probably have talked long enough. I thank you for the question.

Mr. Stephen Crawford: That's okay. It's a little different than question period, where we're limited to one-minute answers. In estimates, we can talk a lot more; we have more time.

I understand, Minister, that there are about 700,000 households in Ontario that don't have reliable broadband or high-speed Internet, so that's probably 1.4 million people thereabouts, give or take. That's 10% of the population that's really not as economically viable as they should be—and, of course, connecting for education and their families and loved ones as well, which is equally important.

In my position as the parliamentary assistant to infrastructure, I've met with a lot of delegates in the last year, too, at the ROMA and AMO conferences, and the number one issue that came up over and over again—I know you had the same issues—was reliable broadband. I'm wondering if you can just elaborate a little bit more on what it means to the people of Ontario who still face this unreliable broadband.

Hon. Laurie Scott: Well, no question; it can be life-changing.

We are seeing, since the pandemic—I can tell you, in my little towns, in real estate, a house doesn't stay on the market one day. We have people moving up from everywhere. There are new people on our streets. The stay-at-home order has put me more at home than I'd like to be, but we are doing that all for health and safety. I can see a difference in my towns—the different people who are on the streets and have moved back, and more young families, and they're working from home, so they can work from anywhere, and then the need to retain them there. I think this is a huge revitalization of rural Ontario—being able to work, to learn from home. I have family members who not only were working and teaching from home—that was an incredibly popular thing to do, learning from home before. Now we're forced to learn from home, for obvious

reasons. But it has opened up that whole world—and it's called demand. We know the bandwidth—from those of us who are on that—struggles at certain times of the day in rural Ontario, when you don't get enough coverage.

The fact that there are different options, that there is a huge willingness, a huge commitment by the government—a historic investment of nearly \$4 billion to hook everyone up by 2025 is a huge thing.

For northern Ontario, I think in January, we announced \$11 million to bring faster broadband to several northern communities, from Terrace Bay to rural Thunder Bay.

I remember picking the phone up and talking to those mayors—you kindly took so many meetings at our municipal conferences and otherwise—about the difference that means to those communities. Mayors were crying on the phone when I would phone them and say, “We're approving this broadband project.” I think it was Paipoonge, just outside of Thunder Bay, working with Tbaytel in that area—and what a difference that would make for her community.

When we were able to travel, I was up in Thunder Bay and spent quite a few days—one was announcing Matawa, but the other was meeting with Thunder Bay on their ICIP transportation projects that we had approved, and going through their transportation system, and then travelling out to the smaller communities. There was no question, broadband was the topic and it was going to be a game-changer for those communities. That helps when we can all go back to school; it helps those villages have young people. I just noticed that difference in my communities—more young families who are moving up.

So there are lots of exciting times as technology changes. As I said with the recent Starlink development, and I know there are other companies that are in Ontario—more announcements later—that are developing new technologies and helping them along to develop satellite connectivity, if that is the only choice, that is the quickest choice, and they can engage in this economy and their children and their families can engage.

Thank you for the question. Thank you for taking all those meetings and hearing those stories.

Mr. Stephen Crawford: A lot of people are looking at moving to more rural communities, being able to work and raise a family there, and I think that's great. As much as I love the GTA—and I live here—we do need people in other communities to keep those communities vibrant. So having access to broadband is critical.

I know the broadband sector has stated that they've faced challenges with the deployment of broadband infrastructure. You touched on Bill 257, and I'm wondering if you could explain a little more how this legislation will help speed up broadband expansion into rural areas to allow better access for folks in rural and remote communities.

1720

Hon. Laurie Scott: We've gone from the satellites in the sky to that connectivity, which, really, as I said—these are low earth orbit satellites, the ones we're speaking about now. The other ones from just even a year or two

ago were farther away. So this is better connectivity, for satellites.

But for many, many years—and I think my sister-in-law’s classic for it is, “But the hydro pole goes right by. Why can’t they just put the line on the hydro pole?” That’s a heck of a good question, and it has been asked for over a decade. Why couldn’t we do this? In some areas, they could do it. We needed a path. We needed some way to all sit down—“What are the problems?” We heard through the years about Hydro’s hesitancy in a lot of areas. “How heavy was the wire?” As we’ve seen things evolve, it really was getting everybody at the table and saying, “What is the pathway that we can work with you with?” That is why we saw the bill coming forward, the Building Broadband Faster Act in SBIEA, supporting broadband and other infrastructure in the province of Ontario. Those stakeholders were heard—not only the ISPs, the Internet service providers, but also Hydro One, utilities, the municipalities. We heard them. We brought in legislation and it was passed. They have working groups that are at the table right now, building those regulations. That is a clear signal to the ISP providers and to the communities—not the general public at the moment, but those people at the table—that we’re serious about building. I’ve heard stories that that’s going to reduce prices, the cost to build, by at least 30%, because it’s much cheaper to string it on a pole that’s there as opposed to digging underground and getting those permits and going through those barriers. This will accelerate building—I can’t put a number on it, but it will definitely accelerate building, and, definitely, it will decrease the cost.

That’s what the Supporting Broadband and Infrastructure Expansion Act was really about—“market sounding.” They’re my two words. You learn things as you go through ministries and life. Market sounding: You basically listen to say, “What’s the problem and how can we work together to solve it?” That was certainly a product of the legislation that was brought in so that we can deploy these services faster.

Thank you for the question, and thank you for your assistance on that bill.

Mr. Stephen Crawford: I know you participated recently in an announcement with Rogers Communications; it’s a contract to improve connectivity in eastern Ontario. I’m wondering if you could just touch a little bit on how Rogers will be supporting the provincial funding, but just in general, on private sector partnerships in connectivity. Obviously, government needs to play a role, but our private sector partners do too.

Hon. Laurie Scott: Excellent question.

I worry sometimes that I speak about my own area too much, but you can replicate it across the province. The Eastern Ontario Regional Network had a cell gap program, and they’ve been asking governments to support them. Our government proudly supported them; on May 17, actually, in 2019, we committed \$71 million to them. We were then able to entice the federal government to also commit that amount of money. There was about 10% of rural eastern Ontario that did not have reliable cellular

service, which is not safe, as MPP West has highlighted, and it’s very frustrating and very hard to do business. So they were successful in getting the government money, and then they went out to tender, and Rogers was the successful bidder. Rogers is private sector, but they have an investment. They are getting more customers. They’re putting money on the table. In fact, the Eastern Ontario Regional Network leveraged \$100 million more from Rogers to build the cell towers. I don’t have it right in front of me, but I believe it’s around 265, between new and enhanced towers, that will be built in eastern Ontario over the next few years. It’s 350, actually, new sites and an upgrade of 300 existing sites—I did find it—over the next four years. It’s incredible.

Yes, it’s cell gap service, but data comes with cell service. So while we’re building broadband, this is happening now, actually; this construction is under way. It is leveraging the private sector for the investment. At the end of the day, they will have more customers because they’re going to offer the service that people in eastern Ontario, in this situation, need. This, again, is replicated. Different ISP providers are seeing what’s going in and joining us in building the broadband.

Mr. Stephen Crawford: Chair, how much time do I have left?

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

Mr. Stephen Crawford: Okay. We have very limited time left.

We touched on northern Ontario a little bit; we’ll probably discuss that more. We just touched on eastern Ontario.

I wondered if you could give the committee a bit of an update in terms of how broadband infrastructure is being expanded in southwestern Ontario, down in London, Windsor and all that region—a great part of the province.

Hon. Laurie Scott: You’ve heard me mention SWIFT. The Southwestern Integrated Fibre Technology project is well on its way, connecting tens of thousands of homes there. As I said, they went out in March 2021 for request for proposals, and the majority of the contracts have already been awarded—as I said, tens of thousands already hooked up. They will be completed by the summer of 2023. That’s how fast we can actually do the building. They will have 60,000 premises connected, as opposed to the 50,000 that they were targeting.

We had a great response from the ISP community: 17 requests for proposals; 88 contracts were awarded; there are 19 different service providers. So it was good, overall—different types of service providers that want to join in and move those projects.

We are, with that timeline of that quick a build, very sure that we can get the builds done that we need to get done by 2025—and the rest of the projects and announceables that are going to be coming forward. Broadband is a very exciting program, and building the infrastructure and the middle mile and the backbone and all the terminology that goes along with it to future-proof it for times to come and changing times and technologies.

Thank you so much for the opportunity to speak on this. Mr. Chair, I don't know if I'm out of time. I can talk about broadband probably all day.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): You have 20 seconds.

Hon. Laurie Scott: I'll just thank MPP Crawford for the great job he has been doing and the great questions. Thank you so much.

Mr. Stephen Crawford: I'll pass the limited time that's left over to you, Chair.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): We'll go to the opposition. MPP West, the floor is yours.

Mr. Jamie West: We'll talk more about broadband. Minister, during your opening comments, I remember you mentioned at one point the \$30-million broadband commitment. That was 2019-20. When you look at that, in fact, there was \$31.8 million budgeted, but not a penny was spent. One of the frustrations—you mentioned earlier how quickly you can get broadband done. Commitments of money don't mean anything if they don't translate into broadband getting to people's workplaces.

As well, according to the interim actuals for last year shown in the estimates briefing book, it seems that in 2020-21, the government barely spent 10% of the \$45.7-million broadband infrastructure budget. This was in the midst of a pandemic, when the government kept saying that they were trying their hardest to ensure rural kids would have access to broadband for online school. We all have stories or have heard stories—I think the minister mentioned one as well, Chair—about families pulling around a public library or pulling around a school to use the Internet, which really isn't the way to work from home or to provide school from home.

Why has the government consistently failed to spend its broadband infrastructure budget? I know we celebrate the projects, but I'm talking about spending the \$31.8 million from 2019-20 and the \$45.7 million for this year. Will we be spending every single dime of that so that we're actually getting broadband?

Hon. Laurie Scott: Those are good questions.

There is no question that factors come into play with delays, sometimes, in building it faster. I will get someone to speak more specifically on that project, but you will see—none of that money is lost. It all just rolls over to the next year. So that pot of money always stays in the same amount as we said that we were going to spend in the broadband file.

In the Matawa project, which I think is what you're mainly asking about, it will still continue—is that the one you are asking about? You can just nod if you want.

1730

Mr. Jamie West: No, I was asking—

Hon. Laurie Scott: In general?

Mr. Jamie West: There was a \$31.8-million commitment in the budget for broadband infrastructure, and none of that was spent. I'm just asking why the government has consistently failed to spend its broadband infrastructure budget. People get really, really excited about these announcements, especially people who have no Internet or who are crawling along with one megabyte. They get

super excited when they hear about \$31.8 million—and a shovel doesn't go in the ground. When they hear about \$45.7 million and barely 10% was spent, it becomes frustrating, especially in a pandemic, because people are looking forward to having the Internet, having broadband access.

Hon. Laurie Scott: Yes, I hear you, and I can tell you that the spends will continue to ramp up as construction does occur. Part of the reason we brought in SBIEA, with the investments in the Building Broadband Faster Act, was to bring down those barriers so we can get things built faster—and that's exactly what we heard and what we are doing, and what the regulations are. It will time nicely with more announcements that are coming.

Some delays occur for different reasons—construction, contracts etc.—but you can be assured that our commitment is solidly 100% there. If I could have built it all yesterday, I would have built it yesterday. Unfortunately, it doesn't move that fast.

It's an almost \$4-billion commitment—to connect everyone by 2025, and whether that be wired, wireless, satellite, it will happen, and we will make up lost time as best we can. That's why we had the Internet service providers sit down with us, that's why we had the utility companies sit down with us, that's why we had the municipalities sit down with us—to say that we can't hold this build up and we all have to work together to make the build happen.

You see larger investments, as the one I just mentioned under EORN for the cell gap. The ISP provider in this case, Rogers, who won the contract from an RFP, actually invested \$100 million more into the project, which means they can build more, build it faster and have solid contracts and partners to work with. That's where I'm getting the surety from the ISP providers. I mentioned Tbaytel is one of the recipients. I think in January I let the mayor know, working with Tbaytel—so some local distribution.

The legislation is going to be incredibly helpful. But the dollars don't go away; that's what I just want to assure you. They just roll over and get re-profiled into the next year, and the whole goal is to build it faster.

Mr. Jamie West: My concern, Minister, is—rightly so, you criticized the previous Liberal government, how they failed to bring broadband to the north, how they failed to bring broadband across Ontario for 15 years—we are all aware that there's an election coming in the next year, and a commitment of 2025, when there's an election in 2022, might mean that, if we haven't put shovels in the ground, shovels won't go in the ground. We're planning to form government as the NDP next time, and we're committed to actually bringing it forward, but if something happens and you're no longer in government and the Liberals are back in government and they drag their feet for another 15 years, then a commitment of \$31.8 million that wasn't spent because we're planning to do it in 2024 or 2025 doesn't mean anything in terms of actually having people have access to the Internet.

That number that rolls over, the \$31.8 million, and then last year with the \$45.7 million—I'm trying to do the math

in my head; is there now over \$70 million, or is it just \$31.8 million and now you've added on the commitment for this year, and the total is \$45.7 million?

Hon. Laurie Scott: I'll probably get the deputy to answer specific numerical ones, if he has it handy.

The whole goal is to build broadband as quickly as possible. While last year might have seen some delays for some reason, you can rest assured that, besides the legislation and up to \$4 billion we're putting on the table, we are working with whoever needs to be worked with in whatever area of the province of Ontario to bring you broadband and connectivity faster.

I don't know, Deputy, if you—you have to state who you are and maybe even where you are before you come on.

Mr. Chris Giannikos: Absolutely. Chris Giannikos, Deputy Minister of Infrastructure, and I'm in Toronto.

Thank you for the question.

At the end of the day, \$3.8 billion has been budgeted for broadband. The annualized version of that is going to change over time based on the factors that the minister actually put forward. So the money is not lost. Whether all of it is actually spent next year remains to be seen, because that's based on forecasts, and as you understand, forecasts, the subject—various externalities and you get a lot of ups and downs.

I did want to add that in addition to what this ministry is spending for broadband, we do have \$4.75 million that the Ministry of Education is spending on the Galaxy Broadband pilot. We've also got \$4.85 million for the connecting public libraries initiative. This is all over and above what you see in our budget. In addition to that, under the Centre of Excellence in Next Generation Networks, CENGN, rural and northern broadband programs, they've allotted up to \$5 million to support cost-effective—and the province has actually put in \$63.3 million.

The only point I'm trying to make is that in addition to the money that you see here, there are other parts of money spread across other ministries that actually speak to specifics around end users for broadband.

But to your original question: It's going to be \$3.8 billion, and it's going to be done by 2025, as the minister pointed out, but these are forecasts, and depending how the construction rolls out, the money will be re-profiled. So just to end off, it is not lost at all.

Mr. Jamie West: I'm going to hand off to MPP French.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): MPP French, the floor is yours.

Ms. Jennifer K. French: I appreciate that.

The other things we're highlighting, whether it's Ministry of Education or what have you, on other Internet-connected projects for end users—that's well and good. But I want to delve further into the numbers that are left on the table. So I hear you. I've heard the minister. The money is not lost; it just hasn't been spent yet. But that doesn't do anybody any good if we're not starting those projects.

Minister, you've said it a couple of times: You haven't stopped construction during the pandemic. Depending on

where you live, you see construction all the time. Some are happy about it; some are not. The government deemed what was essential. Arguably, almost all of it was deemed essential.

If you're building things, you're doing the construction, are you pointing at construction delays, then, for why the money hasn't gone out the door, why you haven't spent 90%, give or take, of that \$45.7 million or all of that \$31.8 million on the table before?

Whoever wants to handle the numbers, can you walk me through those more specifically, please? I want the story of why we aren't spending it when we say we're prioritizing it.

Hon. Laurie Scott: Well, I'll reiterate. SWIFT is in operation. That money is flowing, and those houses are being connected, and it will be done by 2023—roughly 60,000 homes. EORN has done its request for proposal. We transferred money to them. They are the ones that are executing the RFP and the build, and that's with the Cell Gap Project.

Some other ministries, as the deputy has mentioned—I don't know exactly up to date, but education would have flowed some of that money. The Matawa, again, came out of a couple of different ministries. So it's not just ours that are building.

I am very much aware of the construction and the builds. That's why we are building broadband in those areas that I just mentioned. Some are in the north, like Tbaytel. We announced it in January with—the mayor is going to kill me—Paipoonge. You know what I mean. Hopefully, again, they would be putting those tenders out, getting construction happening. There is construction that's due to happen within this year, besides the SWIFT and the EORN.

So we're aware that programs and launches that we are about to do might not hit this year's construction period because we have to sign contracts with ISPs etc., so that's coming in the near future. But that will be timed for the next construction year, based on—

Ms. Jennifer K. French: But where does that money—where do I see that, then? The \$31.8 million was budgeted; zip was spent. Fine. It rolls over; it adds up; it isn't lost—whatever. The \$45.7 million that we're talking about, with the interim actuals that your fun briefing book here and all of that—less than 10% was spent.

1740

With all of these things that you're listing for me, I can't do the math fast enough. Does that add up to the 90%, or is that the 10% that we're re-highlighting? I want to know why it's only 10% that has been spent, please.

Hon. Laurie Scott: I've listed some of the reasons. I'll let the deputy speak to some. But as you know, we want to continue to highlight that it just gets re-profiled and rolled over. Some of this is contract signing. Some of this is weather. Some of this is construction. But the spend—you're only going to see it increase, because we have done all this groundwork before with EORN, with SWIFT, with the many northern projects we have mentioned. And the soon-to-be announced ones—then we have to do that.

If you wouldn't mind, Deputy, it's yours, if you want to fill in more spaces for MPP French.

Mr. Chris Giannekos: Absolutely—

Ms. Jennifer K. French: I'm clear on the highlights. I know the talking points. I've seen the bumper stickers. I want my numbers.

Mr. Chris Giannekos: There are three things that are happening here, and the minister has mentioned some. The three things lead to delays. The first one is finalizing applications with the recipients, and that takes a lot of due diligence to make sure you get that right. The second thing is the actual procurement that's done by the recipients. It's nothing to do, really, with government; it has everything to do with the recipients being able to procure the services that they require and the construction that they require to get going. The third phase is the actual construction itself. As the minister pointed out, there are tons of externalities there: weather, topography, geography etc.

Those three things may conspire at any one time to delay the actual flow of funds. These being application-based programs, the folks who have won the application and are in procurement and are constructing—we pay them on a receipt basis. So it's up to them to get out there, do the work, send the receipts in to us, and then we reimburse.

Those three things, if I may be totally honest with you, are what's causing these fluctuations that you see. In construction, if you permit me to be so bold, we get huge variations because these are forecasts, and we are, to a certain extent, at the mercy of the recipients that are running these projects. The ministry does as much as it can to ensure that the application is properly done, signed, due diligence etc. Then it's really up to the recipient to be able to deliver on that, and that causes a lot of the fluctuations. Those are the three big factors. The numbers reflect that development on the ground.

Generally speaking, in this ministry, you're talking about hundreds of projects across the province. Each one of them is pretty unique in their own way, and the recipients are as well, from the very sophisticated, larger municipalities to the smaller ones. So the amount of to-ing and fro-ing that is required for us to be able to ensure that we have the information we require—and then quarterly, every year, on an annualized basis, we get revised forecasts. Those forecasts are coming from the recipients. We don't make those up. That's really what's causing all of this in most projects.

Ms. Jennifer K. French: Thank you for taking the time, actually, and spelling that out. That wasn't lost on me.

Chair, the minister had offered earlier for us to have some reports or an update on investments and whatnot from the Solicitor General's office regarding 911. I just wanted to make sure that I say yes, we want that, yes, please—so if the Clerk can make a note that we'll expect that as a committee. Thank you.

I'll hand it back to Mr. West.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Thank you, MPP French.

Mr. Jamie West: I'm looking at an article; I don't know if I'm allowed to use a prop. Earlier, the minister talked about the 60,000 subscribers, the success of different stories. My concern is that in rural areas and in less densely populated areas—the private sector just doesn't want to get into these areas.

Ontera is a good example. Ontera was built by the provincial government. It was sold to Bell. Bell basically hasn't done a lot of investment into it ever since. A couple of times, they've threatened to pull out because it's not profitable enough. I'd like to know, for example, what investment has Bell done into Ontera since taking hold of them? If you can't provide it now, I'd like to have it provided to the committee as well.

Also, what is the government's role in these smaller, harder-to-serve—where there isn't a large profit? Quite frankly, if you have a town with a thousand people and you've got to bring fibre into that town, you're probably not going to, no matter what—unless the P3 is really amazing, I can't imagine there will be a for-profit company wanting to do that. What is the Conservative government's commitment to those areas that require public investment?

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

Hon. Laurie Scott: I can't speak to Bell, but you can speak with them. I think, historically, Bell was first on the ground here, so they have more historic infrastructure.

The example I gave of the eastern Ontario region—that regional network, EORN, put the request for proposal out, and Rogers won that project.

I've spoken about different Internet service providers—but you are absolutely right, in northern or rural Ontario, it's the capital that needs to be invested. That's why we are working with the Internet service providers and we are working with the municipalities and we brought in that piece of legislation for accessibility—because we own hydro poles. Do utility poles solve all the problems? No, I know not, but it helps greatly—not a little bit, a fair bit.

So we are leveraging as much as we can with the federal government on programs that they have out—mainly the Universal Broadband Fund, which is what we hear about. They've had other smaller programs over the years, some successful. Some used all their money; some did not. We are working with them.

We are working with the ISPs. We are working with the maps. We are drilling down to where the investment needs to be. And we are working with the ISPs on what they see, as in market sounding, to hook up these communities that are, just by their nature, unserved and underserved—where we mostly live, in rural and northern Ontario.

So almost \$4 billion on the table—

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): With that, I'm sorry to say you're out of time on this round.

We will go back to the government. MPP Coe, the floor is yours, sir.

Mr. Lorne Coe: I see I have close to 12 minutes, and I'm pleased to have the opportunity to pose some questions to my colleague the Honourable Laurie Scott.

Minister, thanks so much for being here this afternoon, and, you, Deputy, and other ministry officials.

I know when we sat in opposition, we often talked about the importance of supporting municipal infrastructure, because we saw the evidence of 15 years of neglect with the Liberal government at the time, but your commitment to municipalities and supporting municipal infrastructure is even more apparent now, Minister, with the work that you're doing and have been doing. I know there are examples that I can point to where we've been able to announce those investments; for example, with the region of Durham, millions and millions of dollars to strengthen their transit system, and also other supports for infrastructure within the region of Durham.

Minister, can you spend some time talking about how your ministry is supporting this municipal infrastructure through the Investing in Canada Infrastructure Program, known as ICIP, particularly over the past year, and, within the context of responding, also talk about why the Association of Municipalities of Ontario thinks that this is a big step forward? I believe that, as well.

Hon. Laurie Scott: Thank you for your advocacy for your constituents. We share parts of Durham region; I have the northern part and share with other members and colleagues in the Legislature the other parts of Durham.

1750

No question, the government's historic investment in infrastructure of the \$145 billion over 10 years, and the \$16.9 billion of that we're spending in 2021-22 alone—I know we're in estimates, so we like to put out lots of numbers.

You mentioned the great transit announcement that we made, I believe, with the Minister of Infrastructure federally—Minister McKenna, and many of us—for the transit, which is one of the categories that is in the ICIP program, which is the \$30-billion spend over 10 years with the three levels of government, First Nations and third parties and non-profits that can be included in that.

This stimulation of job creation and the announcements that we have been able to do so far, partnerships with AMO, the Association of Municipalities of Ontario—and these were requests from them. The majority of these requests for ICIP were from the municipalities, especially—no question—on the transit. What did the municipalities need? As with many of these programs, there's always an over-application, I can say, but they were the priorities that the municipalities saw. Supporting those communities with their infrastructure needs and showing that we can work together—as I said, you mentioned already public transit. There have been over 200 public transit projects for municipalities outside the GTHA and \$700 million for over 65 public transit projects for municipalities inside the GTHA.

These are large investments that make it easier for people to work, go to school, get to their jobs, and that are happening now. We have different streams of ICIP that are out there. I know the rural and northern projects, that was the first stream that went out to a lot of our municipalities, that received that for roads and bridges, and some airports that received those dollars, because they don't all have

public transit in their areas—but helping both the urban and the rural areas of the province of Ontario.

And then we have over 70 green infrastructure projects that we are working on, receiving a combined total of \$40 million, to help with water facilities. I know of the first 76 of the green projects, over 40 were First Nations communities that needed that extra assistance for drinking water.

Over \$300 million is being received just in the community, culture and recreation projects—over 275 projects there, totalling \$300 million from our part. So that's helping those 275 communities move forward again. Municipalities, for the most part, were the ones that requested those. There are some non-profit and First Nations that could apply in that specific stream. It's a great boost for the communities and showing what they need. I know lots of communities are very happy and have gone out to tender and are starting those builds this year, and some will be completing those builds this year.

Of course, we're in the process of announcing the over \$1 billion in the COVID-19 stream—250 of which is the municipalities. The provincial side here—and thank you to everyone who built that program for municipalities so they could apply quickly. Federal approval, although it wasn't as quick as I'd like—and I say that with a little nudge to make it faster, to approve those projects, because they are in that COVID-19 stream to be completed, the majority of them, anyway, by the end of this year.

So there's great news for municipalities. I feel, as you feel, like I speak to municipalities a lot, with some good news from lots of different ministries—but in this case, today, I'll take it from the Ministry of Infrastructure, with those good news, those builds.

Mr. Lorne Coe: It has been good news for many of the municipalities and towns that comprise the region of Durham. For a long, long time, there wasn't any level of investment in infrastructure in the region of Durham. Thanks to your leadership and the support of your staff, we can see the real difference in supporting communities.

Minister, I'm going to move into a different direction now, please. If you would just spend a little bit of time—and you did this to some extent in your introductory remarks and you did it well, but could you talk about what specific supports your ministry has put in place to address infrastructure improvements needed in light of the COVID-19 pandemic and the challenges that that has presented over the last year and a half?

Hon. Laurie Scott: Great question.

We do live in unusual times, and right now we're not ready to fully write the history of it, but we'll reflect at some point when we get through this—the highlight of collaboration that we've seen with all our partners, including the federal government, to fight what may well be the most challenging event, I think, of our lifetime, the COVID-19 pandemic.

The ICIP program, the Investing in Canada Infrastructure Program, was originally divided into those four streams that I mentioned earlier today. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, we worked with the federal government to

introduce the new COVID-19 resilience stream, often just called the COVID-19 stream. Unfortunately, there are no new monies that the federal government gave us in order to take advantage of the COVID-19 stream, so we had to redirect the existing funds under the ICIP program. In late October, we announced we were reallocating originally intended ICIP dollars from the green stream, because that's the only stream we had left, to provide up to \$1 billion in combined federal-provincial funding. Then we worked with the federal government to implement it as quickly as possible, so that we can ensure provincial priorities are met and burdens are reduced for risk events wherever possible.

We recently announced with the federal government, in some of the cities—I know we announced in Ottawa. Yesterday, we announced northern Ontario's COVID-19 stream. Like all things in politics, some days get thrown off and the announcements for regions aren't made, but we will get those announcements. The federal government, really, is the one that says when we can make the announcements. Hopefully, we're going to announce all the regions for the COVID-19 stream.

The municipalities, most of them, have been notified on the q.t. at the moment, but we'll make those announcements in all the regions. I know you have some good news in Durham for your dollars of investments that will be coming out soon, but we can't say it publicly yet.

Again, the investments in municipalities were brought to us to see what they could get done quickly to benefit their communities and within the parameters that the federal government has shown us.

In some cities we've already announced enhancements to municipal buildings. We've been successful in shelters—in Ottawa, the Carling Family Shelter had investments, as well as the Cornerstone women's shelter. I know that there have been investments in trails and more comfortable

environments for some of our municipally owned arenas and community centres.

There will be more announcements as soon as we can get approvals from the federal government to do so. I'm hoping they are coming to you soon.

Mr. Lorne Coe: You've already been to Whitby a few times, virtually. We're thankful for the money that was allocated for the updating of the recreational complex in Whitby, which has been well used over the years, including by my children. We're always pleased, now that we're entering the stages, Minister, to not only see you virtually but to see you and your staff live in Whitby, with your counterparts federally as well. We look forward to those announcements, Minister. Thank you very much for all your strong work and leadership on this particular file.

Chair, I think I have less than two minutes right now. Those are the questions that I had at the present time. I don't know what your timing is, but I have got 5:59 and I think the committee is scheduled to adjourn at 6 o'clock—

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): You are quite correct, MPP Coe. I have about a minute.

Mr. Lorne Coe: Well, I think that we've covered substantially, in the questions I did ask the minister, the extent and breadth of which the minister and her staff are supporting municipalities across Ontario—because they all had the same challenges, didn't they, Chair? Some 15 years of a dearth of investment in municipalities across this great province—that has since been corrected, and we're seeing substantive differences, not only in improving the lives of residents in those municipalities, but also job creation.

The Chair (Mr. Peter Tabuns): Thank you. And with that, we have come to 6 o'clock by my watch. That's all the time we have available today. The committee is now adjourned until June 9, 2021, at 9 a.m.

The committee adjourned at 1800.

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