

Legislative
Assembly
of Ontario



Assemblée
législative
de l'Ontario

Official Report of Debates (Hansard)

SP-4

Journal des débats (Hansard)

SP-4

Standing Committee on Social Policy

Estimates

Ministry for Seniors
and Accessibility

Ministry of Education

Comité permanent de la politique sociale

Budget des dépenses

Ministère des Services aux aînés
et de l'Accessibilité

Ministère de l'Éducation

1st Session
44th Parliament

Monday 3 November 2025

1^{re} session
44^e législature

Lundi 3 novembre 2025

Chair: Brian Riddell
Clerk: Vanessa Kattar

Président : Brian Riddell
Greffière : Vanessa Kattar

Hansard on the Internet

Hansard and other documents of the Legislative Assembly can be on your personal computer within hours after each sitting. The address is:

Le Journal des débats sur Internet

L'adresse pour faire paraître sur votre ordinateur personnel le Journal et d'autres documents de l'Assemblée législative en quelques heures seulement après la séance est :

<https://www.ola.org/>

Index inquiries

Reference to a cumulative index of previous issues may be obtained by calling the Hansard Reporting Service indexing staff at 416-325-7400.

Renseignements sur l'index

Adressez vos questions portant sur des numéros précédents du Journal des débats au personnel de l'index, qui vous fourniront des références aux pages dans l'index cumulatif, en composant le 416-325-7400.

Hansard Publications and Language Services
Room 500, West Wing, Legislative Building
111 Wellesley Street West, Queen's Park
Toronto ON M7A 1A2
Telephone 416-325-7400
Published by the Legislative Assembly of Ontario



Journal des débats et services linguistiques
Salle 500, aile ouest, Édifice du Parlement
111, rue Wellesley ouest, Queen's Park
Toronto ON M7A 1A2
Téléphone, 416-325-7400
Publié par l'Assemblée législative de l'Ontario

ISSN 1710-9477

CONTENTS

Monday 3 November 2025

Estimates / Budget des dépenses	SP-33
Ministry for Seniors and Accessibility	SP-33
Hon. Raymond Sung Joon Cho	
Mr. Peter Kaftarian	
Ms. Meenu Sikand	
Mr. Jeffrey Graham	
Ministry of Education / Ministère de l'Éducation	SP-48
Hon. Paul Calandra	
Ms. Denise A. Cole	
Mr. Didier Pomerleau	
Ms. Didem Proulx	
Ms. Holly Moran	

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF ONTARIO

ASSEMBLÉE LÉGISLATIVE DE L'ONTARIO

STANDING COMMITTEE ON
SOCIAL POLICYCOMITÉ PERMANENT DE
LA POLITIQUE SOCIALE

Monday 3 November 2025

Lundi 3 novembre 2025

*The committee met at 1259 in committee room 2.*ESTIMATES
BUDGET DES DÉPENSES
MINISTRY FOR SENIORS AND
ACCESSIBILITY

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): Good afternoon, everyone. The Standing Committee on Social Policy will now come to order. We're meeting to consider the 2025-26 estimates of the Ministry for Seniors and Accessibility for a total of two hours.

From the ministry, we are joined by the Honourable Raymond Cho, Minister for Seniors and Accessibility; ministry officials; and staff. As a reminder, the ministry is required to monitor the proceedings for any questions or issues that the ministry undertakes to address.

Are there any questions from the members before we start?

I am now required to call vote 3501, which sets the review process in motion. We will begin with a statement of not more than 20 minutes from the Minister for Seniors and Accessibility. Minister, the floor is yours.

Hon. Raymond Sung Joon Cho: Good afternoon, everyone. I would like to start by thanking the committee members for your valuable work. I would also like to thank our interim deputy minister, Peter Kaftarian, for his leadership. Along with the ministry executive leadership team, they provide guidance to ministry staff to accomplish our shared goals and fulfill our mandate.

Within the current economic landscape, it's more important than ever to protect what matters most. That's why MSAA is committed to supporting seniors and people with disabilities and protecting their health and well-being.

Each day, our ministry works to empower Ontario seniors so they can age in place in their community of choice, make new connections and stay independent as long as possible, and we work to create a more accessible, inclusive province where people with disabilities can not only participate in the economy and community life, but thrive. To accomplish this, we provide funding for community and not-for-profit organizations, municipalities and other stakeholders to deliver programs and services for seniors and people with disabilities.

My ministry provides funding for important programs that reduce social isolation among seniors by helping them

stay socially and physically active and participate in their communities. For example, we support local community groups, not-for-profit organizations, municipalities, veterans' organizations and Indigenous communities through our annual Seniors Community Grant Program.

Every year, hundreds of organizations receive grants of up to \$25,000 to deliver local projects and support resources that help seniors stay independent and healthy, such as free bus service for rural seniors, to connect them to community programming; physical and social programming, like pickleball and coffee and cards; and increased access to information and support for health promotion such as fall prevention and elder abuse awareness.

Since 2018, we have invested over \$41 million in the Seniors Community Grant Program, supporting over 2,100 grassroots projects that have helped thousands of seniors stay socially and physically active in their communities. This includes an investment specifically for programs dedicated to improving the life of senior veterans.

We also have a robust network of seniors active living centre, or SALC, programs throughout Ontario. These community-based programs help keep seniors fit, active, healthy and socially connected, and they help to build healthier and safer communities by providing community hubs for older adults. Some programs include fitness centres and classes, multicultural social groups, health and wellness services.

Because of the overwhelming success of the program, we are investing in the largest single-year expansion of the SALC Program in its history by a \$70-million increase in funding over three years. This will expand services and activities to more communities and reach even more seniors across the province as we add 97 new programs over the year, for a total of over 400 SALC programs.

We also continue to invest in seniors active living fairs, a public education initiative delivered in partnership with Older Adult Centres' Association of Ontario. Each year, dozens of fairs are held across the province, reaching hundreds of seniors, and they are an important way to raise awareness about programs, services and information available to older adults. They also provide opportunities for seniors to learn new skills, enjoy leisure activities and stay socially connected and engaged. In 2025-26, we are investing up to \$430,000 to deliver over 100 in-person virtual fairs.

Creating more inclusive, incredible and accessible communities is a top priority for our government. That's

why we introduced the Inclusive Community Grants Program in 2020. These grants provide municipalities, not-for-profit organizations and Indigenous communities with up to \$60,000 for local projects to ensure that people of all ages and all abilities can participate in community life. These include important community accessibility upgrades to remove barriers, such as installing accessible benches in public parks and trails, installing hearing loops in municipal facilities and acquiring assistive devices for community use, like mobility mats and skate aids.

Since the program's inception, we've invested over \$5.9 million to support 125 projects promoting inclusivity and accessibility in Ontario, including this year's expansion of 18 additional projects.

In addition, our ministry has tools that foster and promote inclusive community planning and implementation. These include planning guides and age-friendly community outreach programs. More than 70 communities across Ontario use these tools to connect, share information and make their communities more inclusive to seniors and help reduce social isolation and ageism.

For 2024-25, we also invested close to \$1.5 million into the EnAbling Change program. This program provided funding to municipalities, not-for-profits and industry associations across a range of sectors to implement innovative projects to help make Ontario accessible to people of all abilities. EnAbling Change grant recipients produced customized resources and directly communicated about accessibility and inclusion with their network, educating stakeholders about the benefits of inclusive communities and workplaces.

1310

In 2024-25, we supported 19 initiatives, including online support materials aimed at increasing connections to job opportunities for people with disabilities, resources to support and enhance inclusive hiring practices among employers, and an integrated tool kit that will help municipalities accelerate their accessibility policy in the built environment.

Between 2018-19 and 2024-25, we invested over \$8 million into the EnAbling Change program. In a further commitment to protecting and strengthening access to inclusive spaces for all Ontarians, we recently announced the launch of the new Enhancing Access to Spaces for Everyone Grant, or EASE.

EASE grants will provide up to \$60,000 for municipalities, not-for-profit organizations and Indigenous governing bodies in funding for small capital projects, including retrofits that help older adults and people with disabilities participate in community life. Applications for \$2.25 million in EASE grants were received during summer 2025, and the funding will be awarded in fall 2025. EASE replaced the EnAbling Change program and the Inclusive Community Grants Program to maximize impact for older adults and people living with a disability in Ontario.

While not under the direct purview of our ministry, I do want to take a moment to speak about the many other ways that our government is helping to make Ontario more accessible. Every dollar invested in updating our existing infrastructure and developing new buildings is a dollar

invested in creating a more accessible Ontario. This is because all new buildings and all substantial renovations are required to adhere to or exceed the Ontario building code.

It's worth noting that the Ontario building code was updated on January 1 of this year to include additional accessibility features, and I would like to take a moment to thank Minister Flack for his leadership in this area. Our building code has the principles of accessibility incorporated as a basic tenet. This means that all of the new schools, new hospitals and new transit stations all have accessibility features incorporated just by virtue of adhering to the building code. This includes \$2 billion that was provided to school boards in the 2025-26 school year, on top of \$275 million last year, which specifically supported accessibility improvements. I would like to take a moment to thank Minister Calandra for his leadership in this area.

Our government has also made investments in accessible sports infrastructure, including \$3 million specifically to support the construction of the Canadian National Institute for the Blind's new multi-purpose complex at their site in Lake Joe in the Parry Sound-Muskoka region. I would like to take a moment to thank Minister Lumsden for his strong advocacy on this project.

We also continue to vigorously support our parasport participants, everyone from novices to Olympians. As we have seen recently, sport is a wonderful opportunity to help unite us as a province and as a country. I am honoured to be part of a government that ensures all Ontarians can participate.

Another way in which we are ensuring that older adults and people with disabilities have the support they need is through the Home and Vehicle Modifications Program, or HVMP. We proudly fund the HVMP, which is run by March of Dimes. It helps people with mobility disabilities to continue living safely in their homes, participate in their communities and avoid job loss by helping individuals have a safe, affordable and accessible home that meets their needs and reduces any risk of injury to their caregivers by addressing physical barriers. This means funding for structural alterations like adding stairlifts, wheelchair ramps and replacing bathtubs with a roll-in shower. Eligible individuals may receive grants of up to \$15,000 for home modifications, adaptations and devices and/or up to \$15,000 for vehicle modifications every 10 years.

This program has changed so many lives for the better. That's why budget 2025-26 includes an investment of \$5 million per year for up to \$15 million over three years to maintain the total funding available at \$15.6 million per year.

In 2024-25, the Home and Vehicle Modifications Program supported over 2,500 individuals with disabilities in making their homes and/or vehicles more accessible. Since 2018, Ontario has allocated approximately \$105 million to the Home and Vehicle Modifications Program.

One of my favourite things about being the Minister for Seniors and Accessibility is the opportunity to tour the province and meet so many of the people—

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): One minute left, Minister.

Hon. Raymond Sung Joon Cho:—who are positively impacted by the programs and services we fund. Each visit is truly meaningful to me. Whether I am making an announcement or attending a seniors' fair, I have seen firsthand how our small but mighty ministry is accomplishing its goal by helping to empower seniors to live in their community as long as they wish. By helping to remove accessibility barriers in local communities, we demonstrate our unwavering commitment to supporting and protecting the well-being of Ontario seniors and people with disabilities.

1320

Seniors built this province. We are helping them enjoy their golden years, and we are driving change in Ontario each and every day by identifying, removing and preventing barriers for people with disabilities.

In closing, I would like to once again thank committee members, the ministry leadership—

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): Thank you very much, Minister. Thank you for your presentation.

We will now begin questions and answers in rotations of 15 minutes for the official opposition members, 15 minutes for the third-party member, five minutes for the independent member and 15 minutes for the government members.

As always, please remember to make your comments through the Chair.

For any ministry staff appearing, please state your name and title when you are called to speak—and you only have to do that the first time—so that the proceedings can be accurately recorded.

I will now start with the official opposition, and I recognize MPP Vaugeois.

MPP Lise Vaugeois: I want to thank the minister for your presentation.

I want to note that this ministry does a lot of very good work. I've attended many of the seniors active living fairs and so on, and I can see how much people enjoy them. I think they are doing what you intend them to do, and I want to congratulate you for that.

My role is to poke holes, to find the things where people are not being served. I want to look first at renovations and what kind of authority you have over places that are doing renovations but in fact, in some cases, we know they are less accessible than they were before. For example, in Toronto, I have been sent a number of photographs of restaurants and stores. One of them was accessible before, then they did the renovation and it's no longer accessible because it's got a step up.

I'm just wondering—sorry; I should be speaking to you, Chair—what tools we have as a province to address that and encourage all businesses to be thinking—if they're spending the money anyway, make it accessible.

Hon. Raymond Sung Joon Cho: Thank you for your question. This government's decision to build, shown by our record investments in accessible transit and accessible infrastructure, has made Ontario more accessible than ever

before. For more context, we are investing \$17.5 billion in accessible transit across the province. This is not just a record investment in transit but a record investment in accessibility. This includes the new accessible GO stations, new subways and accessible—

MPP Lise Vaugeois: I would like to take my time back. I think I was talking about the accessibility of buildings and what tools we have to—

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): I think your first question was a little long.

MPP Lise Vaugeois: Was it? Okay.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): Yes. Go ahead.

MPP Lise Vaugeois: Thank you.

Also, I'm concerned about the size of the budget for the AODA portion of your work. It seems to be a very small proportion of the budget, and we know that we haven't met the requirements of the AODA. We've missed many things that should have been met by 2025. So, I'm wondering what the plan is to make up for those and move forward?

Hon. Raymond Sung Joon Cho: Mr. Chairman, I'm a super senior, and like most super seniors, I have hearing issues—

MPP Lise Vaugeois: Do you want me to try to repeat that?

Hon. Raymond Sung Joon Cho: Honourable member, if you don't mind, could you ask me the question again so I understand better?

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): Just pause for a second. I'm going to stop the clock for you to repeat your question, and then I'll start the clock.

MPP Lise Vaugeois: Thank you. Okay. I'll try to repeat that: The AODA was required to be compliant by 2025, but we know that's not the case. So I'm wondering where it is in the budget what your plans are to make up for what has not yet been done to meet the AODA.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): Start the clock.

Hon. Raymond Sung Joon Cho: Ontario is meeting, achieving and exceeding the AODA standards each and every day. All 444 municipalities in Ontario have accessibility plans to meet the goals of the AODA in their communities.

Our government is making historic accessibility infrastructure investments all across Ontario. This year, school boards will receive \$3.3 billion, which includes AODA enhancements. We will build AODA standards into the Ontario building code. All new GO Transit station train platforms and the bus stations adhere to the AODA.

Ontario is more accessible than ever—

MPP Lise Vaugeois: Okay. I think I've got the answer. Thank you very much.

Hon. Raymond Sung Joon Cho: As I said before—

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): Thank you, Minister.

MPP Lise Vaugeois: Thank you for that answer. That was very helpful.

You're responsible for retirement homes and maintaining the regulations in retirement homes through their regulatory body. But we continue to have a problem—and I've spoken about this before: The Trespass to Property Act is continually abused by seniors' residences and long-

term-care homes. What I would like is actually is this ministry to take it up. The Ministry of Long-Term Care continues to give out incorrect information about the Trespass to Property Act. We actually succeeded in getting the Ontario Patient Ombudsman to withdraw an incorrect presentation that they were going to do, but this affects people in residences, which does fall under the purview of this ministry. Can we work together to solve the problem of the abuse of the Trespass to Property Act?

Hon. Raymond Sung Joon Cho: Thank you very much for raising that important question. I'd like to refer to our deputy minister to respond to the question.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): Please state your name and your title, please.

Mr. Peter Kaftarian: Hi. Peter Kaftarian. I'm the deputy minister for the Ministry for Seniors and Accessibility—

MPP Lise Vaugeois: I can't hear him.

Mr. Peter Kaftarian: Sorry. I apologize—Peter Kaftarian, deputy minister, Ministry for Seniors and Accessibility. Apologies; I lost my voice on Friday at the Blue Jays game.

Thank you for the question and raising it. I know this is a matter that's come up quite frequently at the Ministry of Long-Term Care. Maybe it's a question back to the committee: Is this something we'd want to hold for discussion at the estimates tomorrow? Because we'll be back tomorrow; I'll be back tomorrow as well as the deputy for long-term care—or would we like to answer it as part of these estimates here?

MPP Lise Vaugeois: Okay. The new Ontario building code: I don't know if you recall, but David Lepofsky from the AODA Alliance was very unhappy with the changes. He tried to get input and have a meeting, and the ministry was not willing to meet.

What we found in the new building code is that if a municipality has a higher standard for looking after people with disabilities, that is now lower because of the harmonization of the building code.

So again, I would like to see this ministry go to bat, to be actually pushing for the higher standard, because, again, we are seeing places, particularly in Toronto, that were accessible, that were renovated and aren't accessible anymore. So we want to be using whatever tools you have in your tool box to bring up that standard.

I don't know if that was a question or a statement.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): That's more of a statement.

MPP Lise Vaugeois: It was more of a statement. Let me phrase it—

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): Do you want to refine your question?

1330

MPP Lise Vaugeois: Yes. Are you willing to meet with David Lepofsky and other representatives from the disability community to address the gaps, the problems that are still there with the AODA and how it's being applied in different municipalities?

Mrs. Daisy Wai: Point of order.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): I recognize MPP Wai on a point of order.

Mrs. Daisy Wai: I am thankful for the member asking the question, but that question is more for long-term care, and then the building code is under the purview of MMAH.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): MPP Wai, would you please speak closer to the mike?

Mrs. Daisy Wai: Okay. I am raising the point of order to the member. Thank you for your question. However, we want to make it clear that what you were mentioning earlier, this is really for the long-term care ministry, as well as the building code is under the purview of MMAH.

MPP Lise Vaugeois: Thank you for that, but I'm going to—

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): Excuse me. You're going to have to make your questions more relevant to estimates for this ministry, please.

MPP Lise Vaugeois: All right. Well, I will say that it is a problem that the ministries are siloed and that things happen in one ministry that harm seniors because of their work, but this is the ministry that is supposed to be standing up for seniors. We need the ministry to be aware of when those bills are harmful. I have, for example—now we're talking about estimates, but Bill 60 makes it easier to evict seniors. We saw that last year, with 200 seniors evicted from Heritage Glen.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): Just remember we're talking about estimates.

MPP Lise Vaugeois: Yes. So, I have a concern, really, about the struggles of people on social assistance. People who are on ODSP—again, it's a problem, because people who are on ODSP are covered by MCSS. But nevertheless, it's in the title of this ministry. What we have is people on ODSP not having enough money to live on and they're choosing MAID. And that's a terrible, terrible thing.

Again, we are dealing with siloed ministries and things really harming people with disabilities, harming people—harming seniors, but we can't actually necessarily talk about them in the context of this ministry. I want to flag that as a problem. I would love to work together with your ministry to actually see if we can problem-solve some of those things.

How much time have I got left?

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): Four minutes and 35 seconds.

We'll now go to the minister for a response.

MPP Lise Vaugeois: Sure. Okay.

Hon. Raymond Sung Joon Cho: Thank you for the question.

Our Premier believes in protecting Ontario, and protecting seniors is protecting Ontario. Our government has not increased a single tax since we came into power. Instead, we are putting more money into seniors' pockets. We introduced free dental care for low-income seniors before the federal government did. We are the only government that doubled the GAINS payment to seniors during tough times. By making life affordable for seniors, we are protecting Ontario.

Thanks to Premier Ford, our government has done more for seniors than all previous governments combined. We stood against the Liberal-NDP carbon tax and—

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): Excuse me for a sec, Minister.

MPP Lise Vaugeois: I only have a couple of minutes left.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): MPP Vaugeois, go ahead.

MPP Lise Vaugeois: Dentists and doctors' offices apparently are not required to be fully accessible. They're not required to provide supports for people who use ASL. I wonder if there's anything that this ministry can do about that.

Hon. Raymond Sung Joon Cho: I will refer that question to the deputy.

Mr. Peter Kaftarian: Hi. Peter Kaftarian, deputy minister of—

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): You just have to say it once.

Mr. Peter Kaftarian: Oh. Apologies.

I'm just pulling up some reference notes for myself. Thank you for the question. I'm actually going to ask, if you don't mind, an ADM from the ministry to come help answer the question further.

Ms. Meenu Sikand: Can you just repeat the question? I didn't get the first—

MPP Lise Vaugeois: Sure—

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): Please state your name and your position, and speak closer to the mike, please.

Ms. Meenu Sikand: Right. Meenu Sikand, ADM for accessibility for Ontarians with disabilities division.

MPP Lise Vaugeois: Thank you. I've heard from people, particularly the deaf community, that doctors and dentists are not required to have their spaces be accessible or to support people with those particular needs. Is there a way to address this under your purview?

Ms. Meenu Sikand: Our ministry is working closely with Ontario Health, the Ministry of Health and all the health partners to raise awareness; also, it is partly covered under the customer service standards that all organizations must provide the accommodations, but we know that the hospitals are still not there. We are continuing to work and raise awareness, as well as creating more tools and working with the ministries so that they do allocate adequate funding to support the accommodations when patients arrive.

MPP Lise Vaugeois: Okay. Thank you. That's probably my time, is it?

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): No, you've got a minute and 16 seconds.

MPP Lise Vaugeois: Oh, good. I thought I was done. All right. Let's see.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): You have one minute remaining.

MPP Lise Vaugeois: Okay. All right.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): It's a courtesy.

MPP Lise Vaugeois: Yes. Thank you. Right.

Again, this is a problem with different ministries doing different things, but the people who are working with the most vulnerable people with disabilities and the most vulnerable seniors have not had their wages increased since the imposition of Bill 124, which means it's extremely difficult for them to actually care for those people who are particularly vulnerable. Do you have any influence in this ministry over the wages that those people receive, and if you don't have a direct role, can you use your influence as the minister to pressure—it's probably the MCCSS—to actually provide living wages and respectful wages for those important workers?

Hon. Raymond Sung Joon Cho: Thank you for the question. When I—

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): Thank you, Minister. That concludes this session.

I will now go to the third party, and I recognize MPP Hazell.

MPP Andrea Hazell: Thank you. Do I need to say my name first?

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): I just did.

MPP Andrea Hazell: Okay. Thank you. I'm going to try to make sure I don't get a point of order.

To the minister, thank you for your presentation. We often meet at many seniors' events in Scarborough and thank you for always showing up for the seniors in Scarborough.

But I have lots of questions here today because in my riding of Scarborough-Guildwood, I do hear a lot of seniors coming to me with accessibility issues. They cannot access a restaurant to go and have a meal with their families, or the elevators are not accessible, or their doctors' offices are not accessible.

I really want to ask the questions around that, but before I do, I noticed in your 2025-26 budget, you've got an accessibility for Ontarians with disabilities division. I think it's \$3.1 million that you have in investments there. Can you explain to me how that is distributed?

Hon. Raymond Sung Joon Cho: Deputy, could you to answer the question, please.

Mr. Peter Kaftarian: Yes. Hi. The \$3.1 million should primarily be covering salaries of staff within the ministry.

MPP Andrea Hazell: So, it covers salaries of staff and ministry. Can you help me to understand, in your 2025-26 budget, how much of that is going into home care for seniors because they want to age in their homes? These are our vulnerable seniors that worked until they retired and contributed to the tax that the government is spending. So, help me understand what the budget entails that is going towards helping seniors to age in their homes? Like, is that part of your budget?

Mr. Peter Kaftarian: The budget for home care would sit in the Ministry of Health estimates.

MPP Andrea Hazell: Okay.

Mr. Peter Kaftarian: Investments that MSAA, Ministry for Seniors and Accessibility, makes that could support seniors would be like the Home and Vehicle Modifications Program, which we're happy to discuss. But when it comes to actual home care in your space, whether

it's in a retirement home or whether it's in your own home, that would be a Ministry-of-Health-funded program.

MPP Andrea Hazell: But isn't this an accessibility issue though? Shouldn't this be part of accessibility?

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): Please state your questions through the Chair, please.

1340

MPP Andrea Hazell: Chair, shouldn't this be an accessibility issue?

Mr. Peter Kaftarian: Thank you for the question. I would say that MSAA has regular and frequent interaction with the Ministry of Health, Ontario Health and Ontario Health atHome. I am the deputy minister for both the Ministry of Long-Term Care and the Ministry for Seniors and Accessibility, so we do have significant and frequent interaction. Although the budget for home care does not sit in the MSAA budget, we do have regular discussions and interaction with the agency that oversees all home care in Ontario as well as the agency that funds home care.

MPP Andrea Hazell: Okay.

In 2024-25—I hope I get this right—the ministry underspent \$5 million on the budget, when accessibility is so far below our legal requirement. Can the ministry justify why you're not spending what you allowed in the budget to support our vulnerable people in our population—which is actually increasing every day. In my riding of Scarborough–Guildwood, there is a very high percentage of seniors, and that's why I care so much about it—and also all through Scarborough.

Mr. Peter Kaftarian: Thank you for the question. The decrease—the forecast for the Ontario Seniors Care at Home Tax Credit was lowered based on the estimates that were provided. Although you may see in the estimates what looks like a reduction, it's just based on the demand for the program. There have actually been new investments—

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): I recognize MPP Wai.

Mrs. Daisy Wai: Yes, a point of order as well. This question is to do with responding for the 2025 estimates, but what you were asking is more on 2024-25. So let's just focus on the estimates and also focus on MSAA, please.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): I'm going to allow this question, so go ahead.

MPP Andrea Hazell: Okay, I'm going to go back. Before we get to the 2025 budget, we need to go back to 2024 in order to do our calculations to know what we're putting forward for the 2025 budget. I'm just asking—I'm speaking through the Chair—you have underspent \$5 million, whereby our seniors are having a hard time with accessibility. So I'm just asking, on the funding, if the members on the opposite side are calling points of order—this is the second point of order—is that a valid question?

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): I allowed it.

MPP Andrea Hazell: Okay.

Mr. Peter Kaftarian: Thank you for the question. The answer to the question: The forecast for the Ontario Seniors Care at Home Tax Credit was lowered by \$23 million due to the updated forecast provided by the Ministry of Finance. That would explain a reduction. But despite the reduction, MSAA will continue focusing on

helping seniors and people with disabilities stay independent, active and socially connected.

As announced in the 2024 fall economic statement, MSAA is investing an additional \$17 million over three years to expand services and activities for seniors through 97 new Seniors Active Living Centres Programs across the province. Then, into 2025-26, the ministry is investing an additional \$1 million in dedicated, focused seniors community grant funding.

The government is investing close to \$1 million annually over three years to continue services and expand the senior safety line. So there is a reduction in one program but investments in the demand as far as the forecast for a tax credit, which is why you're seeing that change.

MPP Andrea Hazell: I want to follow up on that. Can you tell me, in those services and that investment that you've just described, do you know, of your line items, what is coming into Scarborough, and especially Scarborough–Guildwood?

Mr. Peter Kaftarian: Thank you for the question. That's a question we're going to have to take back.

MPP Andrea Hazell: I appreciate that.

I want to move—what's my time?

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): Seven minutes and 35 seconds.

MPP Andrea Hazell: Okay. I want to move on to accessibility when it comes to transportation because that's another area that I'm hearing a lot of concerns about for seniors all across Ontario. For example, the Mimico GO station is not accessible—no complaints from the AODA at all on this. There are lots of complaints that have been going in there from our seniors. It has created a large burden for residents trying to access the station.

We've got to support our seniors in accessing our transit stations. Developers have repeatedly failed to create accessible stations.

How will the ministry in this situation hold other ministries to account? Because I understand you're not going to fully invest in the transportation projects being built, but you're also responsible for the accessibility of your seniors, and they're having a hard time right now accessing our transportation system.

Hon. Raymond Sung Joon Cho: Thank you very much for raising this important question.

One of my proudest moments of being minister is when this Premier made accessibility a criteria for the Investing in Canada Infrastructure Program. This means every dollar spent on transit infrastructure is a dollar toward accessibility. Over \$750 million is being invested to bring 55 new accessible subway cars to Toronto, and \$560 million will go to 60 new fully accessible streetcars thanks to partial funding from our government.

We have invested into infrastructure like no government in recent history. Ontario is getting more accessible, and these are historic projects. For the first time, accessibility is built into every dollar we spend on infrastructure.

Ontario is seeing historic investment in accessible infrastructure that was neglected under the Liberals for 15 years. The historic and generational investment in Ontario

transit is truly compliant with the AODA. New purchased transit vehicles exceed the AODA. All GO Transit routes and stops exceed the AODA. Close to \$3 million has gone to Peel region for accessible transit. Ontario is getting more accessible every day.

Would you like to add some more?

Mr. Peter Kaftarian: I'm happy to give more details if the member would like.

MPP Andrea Hazell: Yes, because I'm still waiting to hear what's coming into Scarborough and Scarborough-Guildwood. I know you mentioned Toronto; I know you mentioned Ontario. I am here representing the people—I'm from Scarborough, and I'm representing my riding, Scarborough-Guildwood.

I understand the government, you said, has given 750—is it million or billion you mentioned in the transit infrastructure?

I'm asking, when will seniors see and get the relief for accessing transportation? Are they going to wait 15 years, 25 years from now? They'll be dead by then.

Mr. Peter Kaftarian: I can continue to give some examples of investments MTO has made. As an example, all washrooms at all the new ONroute centres are accessible.

Pedestrian signals included in new highway—these are more generic; I understand these are not specific to Scarborough, but just as examples. Accessible pedestrian signals are included in new highway infrastructure projects where warranted, and AODA-compliance-specialized intersections that comply with the design of public space is standard. That addresses the needs of pedestrians with cognitive and/or sensory disabilities while enhancing safety, mobility and independence of Ontarians with disabilities.

We also have inspections of traffic control signals with accessible pedestrian signal features every six months to ensure compliance with MTO standards.

1350

If you're looking for specific things in Scarborough, we'd have to take that question back.

MPP Andrea Hazell: Okay. I will appreciate that.

I have no further questions. Thank you to the minister for answering my questions, and thank you.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): You had two minutes and 34 seconds.

MPP Andrea Hazell: Yes, that's okay. I've heard enough. I've got a second round.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): Okay.

We'll now go to the independent member for five minutes. I recognize MPP Clancy.

Ms. Aislinn Clancy: Thank you so much for coming today. I really appreciate your hard work, Minister Cho.

I do have a seniors' centre in my riding, and they get valuable funding that means less seniors are isolated at home because there's accessible, affordable activities for them to participate in.

I'd like to focus my first question on the ADP program. I did a town hall recently, and I've heard from—we have a city councillor in Cambridge, Sheri Roberts, who was there; Regional Councillor Chantal Huinink; and it was

hosted by the KW AccessAbility. There are so many problems with the ADP program that leave people without the equipment that they need. Can you—

Mrs. Daisy Wai: Point of order.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): Point of order. I recognize MPP Wai.

Mrs. Daisy Wai: I'm sorry, member—

Ms. Aislinn Clancy: This is under the—it's listed under the—

Mrs. Daisy Wai: But the ADP is under MOH, though.

Ms. Aislinn Clancy: I have five minutes, and it's this minister's job to work with all the ministries. That's actually part of their work, is to collaborate with the Minister of Health. So I—

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): MPP Clancy, you can continue.

Ms. Aislinn Clancy: I'd like my time back. I really only have—

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): We don't give time back.

Ms. Aislinn Clancy: All right.

At this moment, the ADP program doesn't cover anything related to toileting and anything related to beds, and so it leaves people with barriers in their own home. Can you tell me what we could do to fix the ADP program with the Ministry of Health so that people can go to the washroom in their own home?

Hon. Raymond Sung Joon Cho: Thank you for the question.

Deputy, could you answer the question, please?

Mr. Peter Kaftarian: Hi. Thank you for the question. I know that the ADP program does sit under the Ministry of Health, who we do work with quite regularly at MSAA. So even though it's an MOH-funded program, there is an investment of over \$650 million in the ADP program that supports 475,000 Ontarians with disabilities for various devices: hearing aids, diabetic equipment, supplies and more.

When it comes to our ongoing work, I may ask Meenu, who's our ADM, if she would like to comment further.

Ms. Meenu Sikand: Thank you. The deputy minister mentioned that there is funding for the ADP program, but there have been improvements as well. For example, last year, the number of white canes that can be utilized under ADP program was moved from two to six. So there is always—when the community is coming back with additional requirements, that their health requirements are not being met, we do work with other ministries as part of their analysis.

For at home, modifications can be covered under the HVMP program, which the deputy minister just mentioned has been increased with an additional \$5 million for the next three years in addition to what was the originally allocated budget. That will cover any extra changes to the bathroom and other facilities. However, that ADP has to be functioning in tandem with those dollars to make sure that people with disabilities can live.

Ms. Aislinn Clancy: I guess my request is that the budget have enough staffing required to take on the ADP

program as a whole. At the moment, if you're not on ODSP, you only get 75% coverage for your equipment. Lots of people are low-income. We know seniors are facing an affordability crisis. They can't afford the 25% that the ADP costs. So I ask your staff to create enough budget in your staffing to work on this with the Ministry of Health. We know that that's not happening.

Ms. Meenu Sikand: If I may take the liberty, I just want to say that—

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): One minute remaining.

Ms. Meenu Sikand: I'm sorry—accessibility is something that purposefully—as an ADM, I believe that it has to be integrated within the programs, because if you centralize it, sometimes there is no—you cannot determine what will be the demand. But if we continue to infuse an accessibility lens into those programs, then they will continue to meet the demand as it evolves. So we have been working closely—

Ms. Aislinn Clancy: Can we follow up with this after?

Ms. Meenu Sikand: Sure.

Ms. Aislinn Clancy: I have a lot of feedback on the ADP program, and I'd really like your help to kind of work the Ministry of Health.

We know there's a health care shortage of human resources, and with the right equipment, we could alleviate part of the burden on the system and create a scenario where seniors have enough for their roof and food and can make sure that they have equipment they need to cope—and folks with disabilities to manoeuvre in their homes and in the community in a comfortable, dignified way.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): We'll now go to the government side for 15 minutes. I recognize MPP Wai.

Mrs. Daisy Wai: Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Minister Cho, for your presentation. Thank you for answering our members on different areas.

We have heard of many incredible programs that are going on to support our seniors, including the seniors community grants and our expanded Seniors Active Living Centres Program. In my riding of Richmond Hill, I'm really happy that these programs are loved by our seniors and the community—they help support them a lot.

I would like to return to something you mentioned earlier on, which is to support seniors across the whole government, not just the Ministry for Seniors and Accessibility. This week, we are having a seniors active living fair in Richmond Hill. These events will be phenomenally successful to connect our seniors into the programs and supports that are available to them.

It has been wonderful to see the additional investments made to expand these fairs, and I'm hoping, Minister, that you could please share with us why these fairs are so important and how your ministry is expanding access to them for seniors.

Hon. Raymond Sung Joon Cho: Thank you, MPP Daisy Wai, for that important question, for the incredible job you are doing to support seniors in Richmond Hill and for the marvellous job you are doing as my parliamentary assistant, helping seniors all across Ontario.

Under the leadership of Premier Ford, we have expanded our in-person seniors active living fairs across Ontario. As we came out of COVID, we found that seniors were craving the opportunity to get together in person. We have continued to see that seniors fairs allow hundreds and, in some cases, thousands of seniors to meet with local community organizations that offer programs and supports, and, more importantly, to have fun.

Our seniors fairs have continued to partner with our local SALCs so that we expand the role of SALCs as key hubs in our communities. The seniors active living fairs are key ways that, through in-person connection and supported by additional virtual fairs, we are striving to help seniors be more aware of supports available to them.

I love to visit your seniors fairs and see the passion and energy, not only of your seniors, but also those who offer programs and services for them. These people often tell me that seeing our active seniors has given them energy too. Our expansion of in-person seniors fairs is an important way that we are helping seniors to be connected, thereby fighting against social isolation and protecting against abuse and fraud.

Mrs. Daisy Wai: Thank you, Minister. I'll pass the time to MPP Leardi.

Mr. Anthony Leardi: Minister, in my riding of Essex, we've suffered directly from the impact of Donald Trump's tariffs. The financial uncertainty caused has particularly affected our seniors. Thankfully, the people in Essex who I represent are incredibly resilient; they understand the importance of supporting each other and the importance of creating and sustaining community hubs.

1400

Over the past three years, we have seen two new seniors active living centres in the communities I represent. At our new centres in Amherstburg and Kingsville, I have seen first-hand how our seniors are thriving. Every time I visit these centres, I see seniors who are happy, who are learning new skills and who are making important social connections.

My question for you, Minister, is this: Could you please speak to why it is that you sought to increase the number of seniors active living centres across Ontario?

Hon. Raymond Sung Joon Cho: Thank you, MPP Leardi, for that very important question, and thank you for working so hard for seniors in Essex.

I had the pleasure of visiting the seniors' centres in Amherstburg and Kingsville with you. I had a great time when I was there. Our funding for seniors active living centres makes sure that our seniors in Essex and all over Ontario have access to programs and services that keep our seniors fit, active, healthy, socially connected, close to their homes and in their communities. Our seniors active living centres bring our seniors together, because we know that social isolation is public enemy number one for our seniors.

These centres are great places to connect with our old friends and make new ones. The experience that you describe for seniors in Essex is exactly why we sought to expand our SALC network. Our first expansion was 17

more centres, and this past year we've been working on adding the next 100 locations. This is helping hundreds of thousands of seniors to stay active, fit and connected.

I'd like to share a quick story about why we continue to expand programs and supports for our seniors. It comes from when I was near Thunder Bay, visiting seniors in that part of our province. It was a seniors active living centre, and a 92-year-old woman came up to me and said, "Minister Cho, this seniors active living centre saved my life." That's what she told me. I was really intrigued, so I asked her, "How did this centre save your life?" She continued; the answer was, "A few years ago, my husband died, and after he died, I withdrew from everyone around me. I walled myself off and I cut off my friends and family in my grief. My physical health was declining, as I was deep in depression. Thankfully, two of my friends got worried and came and knocked on my door and said, 'Come on, we are going out.' They took me to this centre. And here I started making new friends and meeting old friends, learning new skills. I have fun and have found joy in my life again. This centre has given me a new life." And that's the story she told me.

MPP Leardi, I have heard versions of this story from all across our beautiful province. We know that social isolation is enemy number one for our seniors. And it is hearing stories like this that has helped give me extra energy to push to expand our seniors active living centres network for our seniors. Thank you for the question, again.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): I recognize MPP Smith.

Ms. Laura Smith: What's the time right now? How much time do I have?

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): It is five minutes and one second.

Ms. Laura Smith: Thank you.

Thank you so much, Minister Cho, for your fantastic news in the delivery of the seniors active living centres and the expansion across Ontario. Helping our seniors stay connected and fit is a very important issue. I brought a private member's bill on dementia, and I know first-hand how keeping our seniors connected really increases their likelihood of a longer and, let's say, brighter longevity.

In my riding of Thornhill, we've seen incredible partnerships because of recent changes with the recent local community groups. One of the groups that I've been working with is the Bernard Betel Centre. I've actually delivered Meals on Wheels to this location. I've gone to their seniors' groups, and I know how important the connections are.

I understand that the rules around who can be a partner in the Seniors Active Living Centres Program were expanded recently to enable this to happen. I'm hoping that you could talk about why this change was brought about, and also about the recent funding changes that have been put in place for our seniors active living centres. Could you please also speak to the kinds of activities that are being funded to help seniors stay active?

Hon. Raymond Sung Joon Cho: Thank you, MPP Smith, for your important question and for how hard you

are working for our seniors in Thornhill. Every time I come visit your riding, I can feel that, and seniors love you because you work so hard for them.

Our government, under the leadership of Premier Ford, believes it's important to help our seniors stay active, healthy and connected in our communities. We also believe that the best way to support our seniors is to build large webs of advocates all working together. This way we can ensure that there are many different opportunities to help our seniors fight against social isolation and to help connect with them in a way that makes them feel comfortable.

We changed the regulation to enable more organizations to partner with our government. We have kept our municipal partnerships, which remain very important, and have added the ability for community groups, including Legions, to help deliver the Seniors Active Living Centres Program.

We also heard from our partners that they wanted predictable funding. This is why we increased our base grant for seniors active living centre operators to \$55,000 per year, a 10% increase over the previous year. This helps our operators to create engaging activities for our seniors and helps them as they also suffer from the effects of Donald Trump's tariffs.

I have been honoured to travel the province and visit many SALCs in every corner of Ontario. I have seen seniors who are laughing, learning, being active.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): One minute.

Hon. Raymond Sung Joon Cho: Whether it's yoga, Pilates, lawn bowling or pickleball, we are seeing seniors embracing the opportunity to be active. This is incredibly important to me personally.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): You have 40 seconds left.

Ms. Laura Smith: Thank you very much, Minister. I'm wondering if you can talk about some of the different activities a little bit more in depth, if there's anything more you can talk about. You talked about pickleball and some of the things that happen in the senior centres.

1410

Hon. Raymond Sung Joon Cho: Okay. Next year, I'll be a 90-year-old young man, and I believe that being active, including playing golf and lots of walking—by the way, if we're talking about golf, when I was young, in prime time, I hit two holes-in-one.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): Thank you, Minister.

Hon. Raymond Sung Joon Cho: My time is up.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): I don't want to get you excited.

We'll now go to the official opposition. I recognize MPP Vaugeois.

MPP Lise Vaugeois: Thank you very much, Chair. I notice that employment is one of the goals in your ministry for people with disabilities. I'm wondering if you are aware that new employment barriers have been created by the way that the new SSMs have been set up in different parts of the province. In Thunder Bay in particular, Serco is now looking after employment for people with dis-

abilities, and it's excluding quite a few people who the March of Dimes were able to employ previously, but under the new model, those people are left out. You have to be able to work 20 hours a week, but they have people who could work nine hours a week. The funding has also changed, and that is undermining the work of the March of Dimes.

Are you aware of how that has undermined employment for people with disabilities?

Hon. Raymond Sung Joon Cho: Thank you for the question. DM, please respond to the question.

Mr. Peter Kaftarian: Thanks for the question. The government is committed to helping people with disabilities gain meaningful employment and participate in the economy. We're working across the government, so MSA does work with other ministries to align efforts that support employment for people with disabilities. This includes working closely with the Ministry of Labour, Immigration, Training and Skills Development to identify opportunities to promote and target employment programs for people with disabilities and older adults.

So the government's helping community organizations and businesses create inclusive employment and training opportunities that benefit everyone. For example, there has been support and programs to train over 4,000 people who have a disability through 2024-25 through Better Jobs Ontario to complete—

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): Thank you.

We'll go back to the MPP.

MPP Lise Vaugeois: Thank you very much. I'll just end with a comment that it's a substantial group of people who are now cut out that weren't before. It's worth a conversation, I hope.

Do you have the room in your budget—we get these generalized budgets; it's really hard to tell exactly what's included and what isn't—to look at the new mobility issues that have come up? Because, in different municipalities, you can ride your scooter on the sidewalk, but there are these new scooters that have lids over them, they're like mini cars, and there's no clear standard of where these are allowed to be used. Now even people with regular scooters are getting ticketed on the sidewalks, but they're not allowed to drive on the road either.

We need some legislative guidance that I think would standardize this across the province, and I'm wondering if you have the capacity within your ministry to do that kind of work.

Mr. Peter Kaftarian: Thank you for the question. I do believe, as we partner with other ministries at MSAA, this is something that we would have to have discussions on. We're constantly looking at what new things are possible with working with our partners, but we could work with municipal affairs and housing and take that back. Thank you for the question.

MPP Lise Vaugeois: Okay. Thank you.

We have a lot of difficulty accessing services in the north, and when I say the "north"—the north is a really big place; it's not just my riding, which is huge, but many other ridings. So when I say the "north," I really mean that

I'm looking for an answer that each riding could take away.

I'm wondering if you are able to break down how much money comes to each of these northern ridings for accessibility, in particular transit, which is a huge gap for us in the north—accessible transit.

Interjection.

Mr. Peter Kaftarian: Thank you, Minister. I'm going to ask for Meenu, who's the ADM of our accessibility team—if you want to comment on this further.

Ms. Meenu Sikand: Again, the transit is with the Ministry of Transportation, so we wouldn't have those numbers. But I know that the Ministry of Transportation—we work closely, and they have been a very good partner in making sure that all of the publicly funded buses, when they are purchased, are accessible, and they have been implementing that.

Mr. Peter Kaftarian: And if it's helpful, I'm happy to talk a bit about some of the programs that the ministry has invested in before. I don't have a breakdown by area, but I could talk a bit about—in northern Ontario, one of our previous grants has been merged into another one. The Inclusive Community Grants Program was consolidated with the EnAbling Change program, as the minister had referenced in his opening remarks, for the EASE Grant.

This grant is a grant program. It's now \$2.25 million and it's to help people with disabilities and older adults live active, safe and socially connected lives. In 2024-25, there were 10 projects in northern Ontario that received \$340,000 through the program. I'm just giving this as an example of opportunities where the ministry can make investments.

MPP Lise Vaugeois: Is it possible to get that breakdown at another time?

Mr. Peter Kaftarian: Yes, we can take that back.

MPP Lise Vaugeois: Thank you very much.

Elder abuse funding: Does that come through your ministry?

Mr. Peter Kaftarian: Yes.

MPP Lise Vaugeois: Yes? They need more. They have been frozen for a long time. I know they were cut back. During COVID they got a little bit more, but they are really burning out and struggling to do the work that's needed. Do you have the capacity to increase their budget?

Hon. Raymond Sung Joon Cho: Thank you for the important question.

When considering elder abuse, it is important for us to look at all of the funding which helps address the root cause of abuse, which is social isolation. This is why the more than doubling of the seniors community grant from \$3 million up to now \$7 million is so important.

This grant program also enables us to strengthen more than 300 community partnerships every year. It's also why the expansion of the Seniors Active Living Centres Program is so important. Here we have increased the number of community hubs—

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): Thank you, Minister. Please, go ahead.

MPP Lise Vaugeois: Thank you very much.

If elder abuse could be addressed by one single program, we wouldn't need Elder Abuse Prevention Ontario. We wouldn't need police officers who specialize in elder abuse. There are many things that we wouldn't need if there was a one-stop shop that fixed everything. But we know that that is not the case. While the SALC Program is wonderful and breaks some of the isolation, we also know that people are often trapped in their homes. There are many ways that people can be abused.

So my question is, again, can that budget be increased so that more people are getting the help that they need when they're dealing with elder abuse?

Hon. Raymond Sung Joon Cho: There are important ways that we are helping to address the underlying causes of elder abuse further. By expanding the number of languages which can be used to access Ontario 211 to nearly 200, we are making sure that language does not act as a barrier for any Ontarian to access the information they need to help support those who are currently experiencing abuse.

We have also increased our investment in the Seniors Safety Line. The Seniors Safety Line is the only province-wide, 24/7 crisis and support line available to seniors, offering translation services in over 240 languages. Last year, we announced an additional \$1 million over three years to expand the services available through this important program. These are only a few of the programs we have to help support seniors in distress, and they help frame the answer to your question. Elder Abuse Prevention Ontario, or EAPO—

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): Thank you, Minister. 1420

MPP Lise Vaugeois: How much time have I got?

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): You have five minutes and 30 seconds.

MPP Lise Vaugeois: Oh, my goodness. I won't need that much time.

Is the Seniors Safety Line staffed 24/7?

Mr. Peter Kaftarian: Thanks for the question. The short answer is yes.

MPP Lise Vaugeois: Okay. Thank you. I cede my time.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): Okay. This is a rotation, so we just keep on going.

MPP Lise Vaugeois: Okay.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): You can use your time if you wish.

MPP Lise Vaugeois: I think I've asked my questions. Thank you.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): Okay. We'll go to the third party. I recognize MPP Hazell.

MPP Andrea Hazell: To the minister, I want to thank you again for coming in.

Hon. Raymond Sung Joon Cho: Thank you.

MPP Andrea Hazell: I just have a few questions, because you know I like you a lot.

Hon. Raymond Sung Joon Cho: I know you do. You should raise an easy question, then.

MPP Andrea Hazell: I am going to do that, Minister. We're from Scarborough, man. We love each other.

I missed the beginning of your presentation, and I want to take this information back. I'm pretty sure you've done some breakdowns. It's with regards to, I think, the \$59.7 million, and that includes the strategic partnerships. When I entered the room, you were speaking about strategic partnerships. Can you help me to understand how that works in your budget? What does that look like for the seniors and working in partnerships?

Hon. Raymond Sung Joon Cho: Okay. Thank you for the very important question. Our strategy for seniors is simple: We're empowering seniors to live in their communities as long as they wish.

There are some powerful ideas here, including the importance of providing seniors with a choice. Providing choice is part of recognizing the importance of seniors as people. It's about providing them with dignity and respect. It means helping seniors stay healthy and active, and socially connected. I don't believe any previous government has done as much to enhance the lives of seniors as ours has.

The Ministry for Seniors and Accessibility is the first of its kind in the history of Ontario, specifically created to serve the needs of seniors. Far from neglecting seniors, the province's fastest-growing demographic, MSAA, through its many programs and initiatives, is working to create programs where seniors can live in their community of choice. This includes providing funding for community organizations, municipalities and other stakeholders to deliver programs and services for seniors.

A good example of this is the Seniors Community Grant Program, SCG, which funds organizations to help older adults remain active, engage in their communities and continue learning. In 2025-26, the ministry more than doubled funding for the program to \$7 million, providing grants up to \$25,000 to over 300 local not-for-profit community groups and organizations across Ontario to deliver programs to older adults. Examples of SCG programs include art therapy; educational workshops on topics like cyber security, nutrition and mental health; and volunteer-related opportunities.

MSAA also plays an important role in supporting seniors to stay active, healthy and engaged. For example, through—

MPP Andrea Hazell: I have a follow-up question.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): Go ahead.

MPP Andrea Hazell: I just want to make sure that all the investments that you're speaking about are actually reaching the organizations that actually take care of the seniors on the front line. I need to know some of those success stories so I could share that with my community.

Hon. Raymond Sung Joon Cho: You know, for example, through MSAA's seniors active living centres, we are providing a variety of cultural, learning and recreational programs for Ontario's seniors that promote health, well-being and social connections. Actually, before I see any written report, I feel that at every seniors active living centre, all the seniors are so happy and they're so active and they actually run these seniors active living centres.

I think it's a win-win-win, not only for seniors—by helping them remain and live in their own house, we are saving a lot of taxpayers' money. When seniors stay happy and active, we are helping not to increase health care money. When they go to the hospital, you know, health care costs a huge amount, so it's a win-win-win. That is why, as I said, this year, we are increasing 97 more seniors active living centres. It didn't happen before. Only our government does that.

One program—I feel so happy and so proud every time I go out and visit seniors active living centres, and seniors are so happy and they feel so proud and over 90% of programs are run by senior volunteers. So, in so many ways, it's a very successful program. I hope I answered your question.

MPP Andrea Hazell: Thank you. Yes. I have another follow-up question. We've heard this question with the elder abuse funding. I do get a lot of calls in my office. I do know of seniors that are actually going through this right now. And it's really sad to hear that you grow old and a lot of it stems—and I'm not saying this is all of it that stems from the situation—but it's the toughness of some of the seniors with fixed income, the hardship that they go through, unable to fully pay rent, unable to buy groceries. Their life is just unaffordable. And then they're going through this elder abuse inside of long-term-care homes and also in their own homes. And so I just want to ask, do you have any portion in this budget dedicated to improving the lives of seniors who are experiencing those horrible situations?

Hon. Raymond Sung Joon Cho: DM, could you answer that question?

Mr. Peter Kaftarian: Sure. Thanks for the question. We talked a little earlier about Elder Abuse Prevention Ontario. This would be the main source of investment from the ministry into prevention. I, too, see articles. I read an article today about abuse and these are hard things to read about. In this year, through this budget, \$866,000 is provided to EAPO, Elder Abuse Prevention Ontario, to focus activities on increasing community capacity to recognize, respond and support seniors at risk, promote public awareness of elder abuse through educational forums and increase knowledge of elder abuse front-line responders.

I know we talked about seniors active living fairs earlier. I attended a fair in Whitby and there was a large booth—there was a large contingent of seniors at the fair. There was quite a large booth on elder abuse prevention, as a tool for sharing information, tools and tips for people attending the fair. But the main area of—so, the fairs are an investment, but the EAPO we do fund as well.

MPP Andrea Hazell: Thank you for the explanation. I just have one more question that I really—

Hon. Raymond Sung Joon Cho: Before you ask it, can I add some more?

MPP Andrea Hazell: Oh, absolutely.

Hon. Raymond Sung Joon Cho: The elder abuse is a very important question you're raising—

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): You have five minutes and 57 seconds.

1430

Hon. Raymond Sung Joon Cho: So when considering elder abuse, it's important for us to look at all of the funding that helps address the root cause of abuse, which is social isolation. When seniors are isolated, they are more likely to be abused.

This is why we have more than doubled the seniors community grant from \$3 million to now being \$7 million—important. With this money, we are helping not-for-profit community groups run different programs and projects. This grant alone enables us to strengthen more than 300 community partnerships every year, and that's very successful beside the SALCs, seniors active living centres. It's also why the expansion of seniors active living centres—I already mentioned that. We're also supporting seniors active living fairs.

We are attacking against senior abuse. The key is how to bring seniors together. When they are connected, they are healthy, happy, and also, we are helping them to not become the victim of senior abuse. That's the answer.

MPP Andrea Hazell: Okay. I just have one more follow-up question, and that would be my last question.

My question is actually a concern coming from my riding of Scarborough-Guildwood. They want to ask, are you partnering with local agencies? I think I did ask this question, but a different way. If you're partnering with local agencies, such as senior wellness centres, culture organizations and faith-based groups to reduce isolation and improve service access for seniors in Ontario in multicultural communities, what measurable outcome can you share with us that this is actually working when you are working with people on the ground?

Mr. Peter Kaftarian: Thank you for the question. Some examples of some partnerships that we have—and in each of these partnerships we will have a transfer payment agreement that lays out expectations of what we expect from our partners.

One example is the Older Adult Centres' Association of Ontario. We provide funding, and they help run the fairs.

We've got Elder Abuse Prevention Ontario, which I spoke about briefly just in my previous answer.

The Alzheimer Society of Ontario: We provide funding to support safety and resources for seniors living with dementia and their caregivers.

Queen's University, the Ontario age-friendly communities: funding to support the development of inclusive and accessible age-friendly community initiatives.

The Seniors Safety Line that we discussed is 24/7, with an additional investment of \$200,000 this year.

Apologies for my French—*Fédération des aînés et des retraités francophones de l'Ontario*, the federation of seniors and retired Francophones of Ontario: funding to support programs, services and social engagement to the francophone seniors. As an example, we also have the *Action ontarienne contre la violence faite aux femmes*, the Ontario—

MPP Andrea Hazell: Can I just ask a quick follow-up because of time?

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): You may.

MPP Andrea Hazell: Do you have any measurements in place that this is working at the lower level?

Mr. Peter Kaftarian: Yes. Yes, we do. Do you want me to keep going, then?

Interjection.

Mr. Peter Kaftarian: So we will have metrics and measurements that we would expect from a reporting perspective on, for example, number of seniors who attended, number of participants who attended these events, so we can make sure, and reporting on what was discussed, who was presenting at the fairs. We do track all this information.

MPP Andrea Hazell: Okay. Thank you.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): You have one minute, 31 seconds.

MPP Andrea Hazell: I'm good.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): I will now go to MPP Clancy from the independent party.

Ms. Aislinn Clancy: Thank you very much. This is a question related to your collaborations with the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services. I know you work more in the retirement home space. I mean, retirement homes can be quite unaffordable, and we're noticing that a lot of seniors are ending up homeless.

In my riding of Kitchener Centre, actually in the OHT4, the fastest-growing community of people facing homelessness is seniors. We know that has a lot to do with OAS and ODSP not being enough for the rent. For example, we've seen people receiving income assistance—so people with disabilities etc.—double from 14,500 to 26,500. So in two years, the people receiving income supports facing homelessness has doubled. We know that 40% of people using food banks are on ODSP.

Your ministry and the staff who are paid from this budget—what is the work they're doing to address homelessness in the senior population and address food insecurity for homeless seniors or low-income seniors?

Hon. Raymond Sung Joon Cho: Okay. I will answer that question, and if I need help, then I'll refer to the DM.

Thank you for raising an important question. Many of the initiatives to support seniors sit in other ministries of our government. This is because supporting seniors is so important, so it is a cross-ministry collaboration. That said, I can speak generally to many actions that our government has made and is making.

Let me start by saying that our government is the only one in recent history to not increase a single tax since coming into power. This alone has been a great help to seniors as the cost of living rises around the world. This is just the first step in our fight for seniors' affordability.

Additionally, we fought against the carbon tax pushed by the federal Liberal government. We also stopped any increase to the gas tax then went a step further and made our gas tax cut permanent—

Ms. Aislinn Clancy: Sorry. Sir, I appreciate that. I'm asking about ODSP and homelessness. Because the cost of living has gone up so much, seniors' homelessness is going up. So is your government pushing the Minister of

Municipal Affairs and Housing, the Ministry of Health, MCCSS to increase the housing allowance for seniors, increase investments in supportive housing for seniors? Because seniors are becoming homeless. I appreciate what you're doing helps somewhat, but it's not keeping people from becoming homeless. Seniors are becoming homeless. Can you talk about homelessness?

Hon. Raymond Sung Joon Cho: Yes. Thank you for raising an important question.

DM, would you respond to that?

Mr. Peter Kaftarian: Thanks for the question. I think the short answer is, working at Ministry for Seniors and Accessibility, we're constantly working with our partner ministries on a series of issues. An issue like this for seniors' housing—we're very aware of some of the challenges of increasing costs of all kinds of things due to inflation. So, in this case, we would be, and the team would be, working with the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing or MCCSS to make sure there's awareness of the programs that we have that we fund within the ministry directly, but ensuring some of the challenges that seniors are facing, which I think we've talked a fair bit about today, are on the forefront of the team that's doing work in the other ministries.

Ms. Aislinn Clancy: Can you report back?

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): One minute.

Ms. Aislinn Clancy: I had a senior, for example, she got her continence supplies covered when she was on ODSP. She became homeless because they were no longer covered when she shifted to Old Age Security. So there are some real gaps in the income supports for people with disabilities and for seniors that make them more likely to be homeless.

I know that we do see in my seniors' centre—I have to give a shout-out to Rockway community centre that does a really good job with the seniors' program. Thank you for the foundational funding that you provide them, and I know they do a lot to help out with some food programs. But my hope is that the staff that are paid through your ministry can push on this issue, because the supportive housing and long-term care—Sunnyside, in my riding—they're not given incentives to expand.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): Thank you very much.

We'll now go to the government side. I recognize MPP Jordan.

Mr. John Jordan: Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Minister. I'd like to pick up on something you mentioned in your answer to MPP Smith about developing networks of advocates for seniors.

I have the honour of representing Lanark-Frontenac-Kingston, which, as you know, is a very rural riding with a lot of small towns and villages with significant distances between them—a beautiful riding, as you know, and I want to thank you for coming to the riding. It was a pleasure to have you. We visited many of these centres, including Smiths Falls and Perth—

Interruption.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): Sorry to interrupt. Division bells are ringing and there's a vote in the House, so I'm suspending our committee meeting for now.

As there is a division bell being called in the House, pursuant to standing order 130, I must suspend the committee meeting at this time to enable members to make their way to the chamber to vote.

I ask members to please return promptly to the committee meeting, and we will resume shortly after the vote in the House.

The committee recessed from 1440 to 1500.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): Committee members, welcome back. We will now resume consideration of the estimates of the Ministry for Seniors and Accessibility.

There are 14 minutes and 26 seconds remaining for the government. MPP Jordan, you have the floor.

Mr. John Jordan: Thank you, Chair, and as I was saying, it was a pleasure to have the minister come and visit my riding, which has many small villages and towns, and they're located far apart. We even made our way up to Robertson Lake, which was a bit of an adventure, I think you'd agree, Minister.

Social isolation is of extra importance in rural and small-town Ontario, especially during winter. It can be incredibly difficult for seniors to connect into the networks of supports available to them. Both weather and distance can inhibit access to programs and activities. Minister, could you please speak to how your ministry is working to help break down barriers of social isolation for those living in rural and small-town Ontario?

Hon. Raymond Sung Joon Cho: Thank you, MPP Jordan, for the important question. And I appreciated the opportunity to see first-hand the incredible work you are doing to support our seniors in Lanark–Frontenac–Kingston.

I think you raise a very important question, which is: How do we help support our seniors when geography can be a significant barrier to access? When you took me to your riding—it's a huge riding, so that's why I'm saying that. During COVID, I restructured the Seniors Community Grant Program to focus on groups who serve seniors who face challenges accessing services from the 299 SALCs in place at that time.

One of the key issues I identified was that many communities were far from the existing centres. To help address this, we changed the weighted criteria for SCG applicants to prioritize historically underserved communities. This enabled us to focus on developing new partnerships with organizations like the township of Montague and the local association in your riding, as well as hundreds of other organizations who similarly engaged to provide seniors with as many options as possible to connect.

These partnerships laid the groundwork so that during our recent round of SALC expansions, we were able to expand our network of advocates into many communities that had not had a funded SALC Program. Our SCG Program helped to build many of the partnerships that would then become new sources.

Our government believes that every senior deserves to live in their community as long as they choose to. The

expansion of our Seniors Community Grant Program now offers \$7 million in funding to over 300 organizations every year. This helped us to break down many barriers related to geography and language which might perpetuate social isolation for seniors.

I do have to say, you are absolutely right about how beautiful your riding is. I will echo that everyone should go and walk through the vibrant downtown of Perth and Smiths Falls and head out to Clayton to play pickleball.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): I recognize MPP Pang.

Mr. Billy Pang: Thank you, Mr. Chair. Minister Cho, I would like to return to something that you spoke about earlier. You mentioned how our government is trying to break down barriers caused by both geography and language. My riding of Markham–Unionville is wonderfully diverse. It boasts many different linguistic communities, and, as you know, many of our seniors feel most comfortable in their first language growing up. For those seniors, they can feel as isolated as those who face geographic barriers, and I appreciate that you took time to address this as a concern for you.

Minister, could you please speak about how the government is breaking down linguistic barriers so that seniors can stay connected in our communities?

Hon. Raymond Sung Joon Cho: Thank you, MPP Pang, for that important question and for all the incredible work you are doing to help support our seniors in Markham–Unionville. I saw that; I witnessed it when I had a visit in your riding.

Ontario has changed significantly since I first moved here in 1967. Our province has become much more diverse, with large communities that started all across the world and now call Ontario home. This has enabled our province to become a vibrant hub of multiculturalism and provides Ontarians with so many opportunities to learn about where our neighbours and friends came from. We are so much stronger as a province because of the multicultural threads that have been woven into the tapestry of our province.

The evolution of our province has also created unique challenges. As you said, often, as people age, they feel more comfortable in the language of their youth. To help ensure that language does not create a barrier for these seniors, it is important for us to ensure that we are reaching out in the language they feel more comfortable in. This is why I really appreciate 211 Ontario and the Seniors Safety Line: both operate in nearly 200 languages. I look at that and I say, "Oh, my God, 200 languages is a lot of languages," and then I learned that both organizations continue to actively look at what extra languages they can add capacity for. This is marvellous. And 211 Ontario, in particular, is crucially important because it acts as a conduit to all our programs and services the government offers. By breaking down the barriers caused by language, we can help ensure that our seniors are less likely to become victims of fraud and abuse.

We are targeting the root causes of these issues to strengthen the supports for all seniors. In the Seniors

Community Grant Program and through our seniors active living centres expansion, we have included language, along with geography, as a focus area.

In Markham–Unionville, organizations like the Angus Glen Older Adults Club and Kindred Spirits Orchestra, through seniors community grants, are developing programs that specifically support seniors who don't normally speak English or French.

We'll continue to work to break down barriers with seniors so that everyone can live with the dignity and respect they deserve.

1510

Mr. Billy Pang: Thank you, Minister.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): I recognize MPP Denault.

MPP Billy Denault: Thank you to the minister for the work you're doing. It's certainly appreciated what the ministry does in my riding of Renfrew–Nipissing–Pembroke, having 14 SALCs. I had the privilege of touring 11 of the 14 over the summer, so I want to personally thank you and the ministry for those investments that the ministry has made and more in my rural riding.

Prior to the break, Minister, you were speaking about the importance of seniors' fairs. We have had some great seniors' fairs in my riding. I recently attended one in Arnprior on your behalf. I got to see our seniors rave about the great time they had and how much they learned. In my riding of Renfrew–Nipissing–Pembroke, we've seen a drastic increase in digital literacy amongst seniors. They're embracing a plethora of digital platforms, including Facebook, Instagram and TikTok—which I know a lot about—not only to speak with their grandchildren but to engage with the broader community.

Increasingly, our seniors are wanting to learn about programs and services in the channels and at the time of their choosing. It's often by turning to these digital programs that seniors are learning how to stay safe and not become victims of abuse or fraud.

Minister, could you please speak to how the ministry is seeking to engage with our digitally literate seniors?

Hon. Raymond Sung Joon Cho: Thank you, MPP Denault, for that insightful question, and thank you for the incredible work you are doing to support seniors in Renfrew–Nipissing–Pembroke.

By the way, as a rookie MPP, you are doing a great job. You know you have big shoes to fill in your riding. Thank you for the incredible work you are doing in Renfrew–Nipissing–Pembroke. When I attended a seniors' fair recently in Cambridge, I had many seniors who shared how much they appreciate your hard work and how personable you are. I was really impressed.

You raise a very important point in your question, which is about recognizing that seniors today are not the same as they were six years ago before COVID's attack. Now, seniors are incredibly digitally literate, and they have become savvy at accessing information about programs and support lines.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): One minute and 35 seconds remaining for the government. I recognize MPP Leardi.

Mr. Anthony Leardi: With the one minute that is left, I want to thank the minister for the incredible Seniors Active Living Centres Program. I know that grants of that amount are up to, I think, \$50,000 per seniors active living centre. So, with the time that's remaining, I was hoping that the minister might comment about seniors active living centres and the grant funding that is available under that program.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): Forty-five seconds.

Hon. Raymond Sung Joon Cho: Okay. Actually, we have increased the baseline for senior active living centres to \$55,000, not \$50,000, so that they could run more diverse programs.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): Twenty-five seconds.

Mr. Anthony Leardi: Thank you for that correction, Minister, that funding has gone up to \$55,000. That's per centre, so Amherstburg can get that, Kingsville can get that, Bell River can get that and Essex—

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): Thank you very much.

We'll now go to the official opposition. I recognize MPP Vaugeois.

MPP Lise Vaugeois: Can you tell me how much was the accessibility directorate's budget for 2024-25 specifically?

Mr. Peter Kaftarian: Thanks for the question. I'm going to have to phone a friend and ask the CAO to come up to the table—Jeffrey Graham.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): Please state your name and your title—

Mr. Jeffrey Graham: Jeffrey Graham, chief administrative officer and assistant deputy minister for corporate services in the Ministry for Seniors and Accessibility—

MPP Lise Vaugeois: It's hard to hear.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): —and please speak closer to the mike.

Mr. Jeffrey Graham: Oh—closer to the mike.

Can I just ask you to repeat the question, please?

MPP Lise Vaugeois: How much was the accessibility directorate's budget for 2024-25?

Mr. Jeffrey Graham: So, the accessibility directorate office, that was consumed as part of the Ministry for Seniors and Accessibility. At one time—back in 2019, I believe the year was—the ADO, the accessibility directorate office, was merged into the Ministry for Seniors and Accessibility.

MPP Lise Vaugeois: So there is no specific budget for implementing the AODA?

Mr. Jeffrey Graham: There is a budget for implementing the AODA; that's part of the ministry's budget. If you just give me one second, I can pull up the actual amount for you. It is—we'll have to take that back.

There are different components of the budget that relate to accessibility. Part of it is within the accessibility for Ontarians with disabilities division, and then there are other programs—transfer payment programs—that are part of that strategic partnerships division, which includes programs such as, now, the EASED program, which was the Inclusive Community Grants Program, and so on.

MPP Lise Vaugeois: Is it possible to get those breakdowns later?

Mr. Jeffrey Graham: We can give you that breakdown by program.

MPP Lise Vaugeois: I do have a question about the historical trend tables. You see actuals from 2022-23 are quite a bit higher than the estimates for 2025-26, so it's less—it's really estimates going down each year, which surprises me, because, as was mentioned earlier, we have increasing numbers of seniors who are going to need more support. So I'm wondering why the budget is going down.

Mr. Jeffrey Graham: Jeffrey Graham again, CAO for the ministry.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): You don't have to say it every time.

Mr. Jeffrey Graham: Okay. The reason for the decrease in the budget, again, was not due to a decrease in transfer payment programs; it was a decrease to the seniors care at home tax credit. That's a tax credit program that's delivered through the Ministry of Finance to provide personal income tax credits to low- and medium-income seniors aged 70 and older for medical expenses and other supports to age at home. That's a utilization-based program based on—

MPP Lise Vaugeois: Okay. That's fine. Thank you. I still find it pretty shocking how much it's going down, and it does worry me.

How is the province anticipating ensuring that upcoming events, such as Ontario's participation in the World Cup, are going to be accessible?

Mr. Peter Kaftarian: Thanks for the question. The Ministry for Seniors and Accessibility will be working closely with the Ministry of Sport—we already are—so there's quite a large coordination effort being taken place by the Ministry of Sport and Ministry for Seniors and Accessibility—needs, requirements. We're at the table helping provide that information to ensure, as the planning goes on for the event, that appropriate planning is taking place.

MPP Lise Vaugeois: Thank you very much. Now, there are a lot of threats of the province taking over the control of school boards and school districts. What is the anticipated cost to this ministry to ensure Ontario's school environments are AODA compliant?

Mr. Peter Kaftarian: Thanks for the question. We work closely with the Ministry of Education. I know there was an announcement just this year about multi-year funding for accessibility improvements within schools. We do have a standards development committee as part of the AODA who has submitted recommendations to the ministry. Those recommendations have been shared with the Ministry of Education.

Officials are staying close together and regularly discussing to ensure that there's awareness because of the money that's been provided to education, that those investments are making the appropriate modifications to the schools. But also, there's awareness of the recommendations that came back from the committee that's done important work for the ministry.

MPP Lise Vaugeois: Thank you very much. The fact that there isn't enough money in the school system to actually support students with special needs is a huge

problem. I'll be happy if we can have a few physical barriers removed, but it doesn't actually remove the problem of lack of staff, lack of funding and many, many children actually being sent home because the schools aren't prepared to support them.

Do I have any time left?

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): One minute remaining.

MPP Lise Vaugeois: What is the estimated rate of the legislated fulfillment of a fully accessible Ontario as of the legislated deadline of this year? We're looking for a percentage here for the government, the OPS, agencies and so on. Do you have a target for fulfilling the remaining aspects of the AODA?

Hon. Raymond Sung Joon Cho: Thank you for the question. Ontario is meeting, achieving and exceeding the AODA standard each and every day. All 444 municipalities in Ontario have accessibility plans to meet the goals of the AODA in their communities. Our government is making historic accessible infrastructure investments all across Ontario.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): Thank you, Minister.

This concludes the committee's consideration of the estimates of the Ministry for Seniors and Accessibility. I would like to thank the minister and his staff for coming today.

Standing order 69 requires that the Chair put, without further amendment or debate, every question necessary to dispose of the estimates. Are the members ready to vote?

Shall vote 3501, ministry administration program, carry? All those in favour, please put your hand up. All those opposed, please put your hand up. The motion will carry.

Shall vote 3502, policy program and strategic partnership, carry? All those in favour, please put your hand up. All those opposed, please put your hand up. The motion is carried.

Shall vote 3503, accessibility for Ontarians with disabilities, carry? All those in favour? All those opposed? Carried.

Shall the 2025-26 estimates for the Ministry for Seniors and Accessibility carry? All those in favour? All those opposed? Carried.

Shall the Chair report the 2025-26 estimates of the Ministry for Seniors and Accessibility to the House? All those in favour? All those opposed? Carried.

That concludes our consideration of the estimates of the Ministry for Seniors and Accessibility. I'd like to thank you all for your participation throughout the estimates process.

We will take a brief recess, and we'll resume with consideration of the estimates of the Ministry of Education in 10 minutes.

The committee recessed from 1524 to 1531.

MINISTRY OF EDUCATION
MINISTÈRE DE L'ÉDUCATION

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): We will now begin consideration of the 2025-26 estimates for the Ministry of Education for a total of three hours.

From the Ministry of Education, we are joined by the Honourable Paul Calandra, Minister of Education, and deputy ministers and staff.

As a reminder, the ministry is required to monitor the proceedings for any questions or issues that the ministry undertakes to address.

Are there any questions from members before we start?

I am now required to call vote 1001, which sets the review process in motion. We will begin with a statement of not more than 20 minutes from the Minister of Education.

Minister, the floor is yours, sir.

Hon. Paul Calandra: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair, and thank you, members. I know I am as excited to be here as you are as excited to have me here in front of you. So I appreciate this opportunity to be here.

Look, let me say this, colleagues: It's obviously been a very busy number of months in the education space. I certainly thank all of you for your patience and understanding and, of course, all of your advocacy and the help that you've given me as we've undertaken a number of reviews across the system.

Obviously, today, we're talking about the estimates. I know that all of you will have reviewed, and you will have seen that, this year, we're presenting estimates in excess of \$42 billion, which is a more than \$3-billion increase in our estimates year over year, which includes, of course, an over 3% increase in the core education funding allotment. So there is a lot of work that has gone on to get us to here.

I just wanted to take a moment, colleagues, if I may, to recap some of the things that have been happening in education, and maybe take quite the step back, if you'll be patient with me.

As you've heard me say on a number of occasions, the education system over the last 50 years, whether it's NDP, Liberal or Progressive Conservative governments—over those years, many of those governments have often chosen to download responsibility for education to our school board partners. What that has left us with has been a fragmentation of the education system, in my opinion. Now, this is something that obviously started with the Bob Rae government but did not stop with governments after that.

Of course, one of the larger changes that happened in the education system was back in 1997, when the then-Harris government made significant changes. There were board amalgamations during that time frame, francophone boards were established and given new authorities, but at the same time, the government removed the ability of local school boards or trustees to tax people directly.

A lot of you will recall, at that point, education taxes, property taxes had become a very challenging way of sustaining the education system. Before the changes were made, what often happened is that in some communities, the cost of education through property taxes just became completely unaffordable for many communities. It was very difficult for communities and residents to sustain a quality education system. And in other communities, their large tax base meant that they were getting a quality of

education that exceeded or surpassed those communities that were not able or did not have the same tax base. So it was an even more fragmented system whereby some of the larger boards, be it in Toronto or the GTA—some of our larger tax base communities—had a quality of education that exceeded some of our northern boards, some of our rural boards.

So the decision was made at that time that we would move to a per-student, per-pupil funding model, obviously based on enrolment, and the funding would follow the student. That's the way the system has operated, really, since 1997. In that time, while the funding follows the student, many of the decisions are more baked-in, as you often hear us say. So some of the funding envelopes are set by the Ministry of Education, thereby even further reducing school boards or trustees' ability to manoeuvre within those envelopes.

A lot of that did not change. When the subsequent government followed the Harris government, back in 2003 to 2018, much of that stayed the same. The per-pupil funding model was not modified. It was followed. There were obviously increases, decreases, whatever, made to the funding formula during that time period, but a lot of other things were put on the table that began to, again, decentralize the system further, further removing the education system from a more cohesive system to one that different boards and trustees manoeuvred in a way that they felt was best for either themselves or their communities, and that certainly wasn't arrested during that time period. That is when much of the conflict started to begin within the education system. I always like to talk about an education system that pits parents against teachers and students, a more divisive school system than we have seen in a long period of time, and I think, then, of what parents would ultimately expect.

Fast forward to 2018, and obviously the new government was elected on a promise that it would begin to review how education was delivered in the province of Ontario. My predecessors, obviously Minister Thompson to start, began the process of really halting some of the changes that were embedded in the system that were to take place. And then Minister Lecce, who followed Minister Thompson, began the process of looking at the curriculum because we had seen through that time period as well that the results that parents were expecting—and, frankly, the results that teachers were expecting—were not necessarily matching the investments that were being made in education. There was a very sharp difference between people's expectations and the results we were getting. We were seeing massive challenges in reading, challenges in writing, certainly big challenges in math. We were on a challenging footprint when it came to getting people or our students to be excited and energized about STEM. We knew that we had to do something a lot different; so began the process, at that time, of recalibrating the education system, looking at the curriculum and seeing how we could bring the curriculum back to a more—perhaps it's an overused term, but it's I think it's a relevant term—back-to-basics approach, whether it was for math,

sciences or literacy, and how we can attach the resources that we're making and ensure the resources that we're putting into it—ensure that then results in a positive outcome for students.

Now, obviously, a lot of that work was challenged by the pandemic. When the pandemic hit, in particular, there was a great challenge that the Ministry of Education faced. Now, it wasn't just the Ministry of Education. In fairness, it was across government. The ability to transition quickly to a system of online learning was not something that had been contemplated in the education system. Some very tentative steps had been made. TVOntario/TFO had allowed for online courses. Many of you remember that we had also put in place where our students could, or mandatory, take two online courses. But we still were at a point where the transition to online learning was really in its infancy when the pandemic hit.

1540

The work that was done by the ministry at that point in order to maintain a stable education system for our students truly was, frankly, second to none. I only reference that as well for a number of reasons, but the individuals behind me are ultimately the people who were responsible for transitioning all of our students to online learning, supporting teachers during this transition.

But it also highlighted the need for us to quickly adjust, and how quickly can we adjust, when faced with challenges. That really changed how we looked at education. I would say, quite honestly, it delayed some of the changes that I'm sure Minister Lecce would have wanted to bring in. But ultimately, Ontario came out of the pandemic with a system that allowed our students to continue to get educated, allowed our teachers the best ability to teach students. No doubt not the experience that our students wanted, and certainly not the experience that teachers wanted to give to their students, but it allowed us to at least deliver as high a quality of education as we possibly could given the circumstances that we had.

And then post-pandemic—I know that a number of us have talked about this—frankly, the challenges that were in the system during that time, the challenges that they faced, that their kids faced as they came out of the pandemic, we started to see that almost immediately in the system. There was a cohort of students and children who were faced with some very difficult challenges. Some excelled during the pandemic, and some were highly challenged during that time period, whether it was their ability to learn—and we saw challenges, again, in some of the core subject areas of math and literacy—and then just others whether it was mental health during that time period as well. So we knew that we had to make some changes, and we had to address that coming out of out of the pandemic.

To his credit, Minister Lecce and the individuals behind me and Parliament, frankly, as a whole—we put in place a number of supports to allow our students and our teachers to start to address—very focused on math and a number of other challenges that our students were facing. Then we looked at the EQAO results, and how are those supports?

How have they been helpful? Are they doing what we need them to do to get our students to the next level?

Despite all of these investments, colleagues, there still remains a great deal of challenges within the education system. I don't think any of us would say that we have a perfect system right now. I don't think if you talk to parents—they would say that they are always supportive of the educators and their teachers, but they want to ensure that we are doing all that we can both as a government and as legislators to make sure that our students succeed. It was on that vein that we have started to look at some of the challenges that we face in the system.

Predominantly, over the last number of months, we have started to look, as you all know, at the governance model within our education system. We've been looking at every school board, how they spend their money, and do the results show up, given the over \$40-billion investment. What is holding them back? Are there challenges within the governance model? And we are looking very closely at how we can modify that governance model to reassert that it is the students, parents and teachers that come first in the education system, and that we need to put more of an emphasis on student achievement through results.

We have taken responsibility for five different boards across the province of Ontario, as many of you know—very difficult decision to assume responsibility on some of these boards. These boards represent some of the largest boards in the province and a vast majority of the students across the province, be it the Toronto Catholic, Toronto district, Ottawa, Dufferin-Peel and Thames Valley.

Now, each of them has a different challenge that they are faced with. Some of these boards have historical decisions that are putting them at the edge of bankruptcy. The Dufferin-Peel Catholic board has a historical decision that was made a number of years ago that needs to be addressed, and that is why we've assumed responsibility for that board.

Thames Valley: I think all of us know—and all of us, hopefully, can agree—that what we saw out of the Thames Valley was completely unacceptable, the reallocation of funds out of the classroom for expensive retreats at the SkyDome hotel—completely unacceptable—and a number of other issues that that board faces.

The Ottawa-Carleton board, which I've referred to as a hot mess, had fighting between trustees, resignations with trustees, a declining enrolment as the parents in that board chose to send their kids to the Catholic system as opposed to the public system—issues that just kept continuing, including, obviously, debt and deficits that were not being addressed, and similar issues with both Toronto Catholic and the Toronto public.

At the same time that we've sent our supervisors in there, I think I've been also very clear that their mandate is not only to get those boards back on track, but their mandate is also to review the funding formula, let us know if there are challenges with that funding formula that impact these boards in a unique way that don't seem to impact other boards. Again, colleagues, as you know, it's

a per-student funding model. Many boards are able to operate in surplus with the funding that they that they have. So, we will continue that work and that review as these boards are under supervision.

Also, you will know, colleagues, that we have put in place one of the largest capital projects in the province's history. I think it's close to \$23 billion over 10 years, which is bringing massive builds of new pupil placements across the province of Ontario, but also updating older schools to meet the needs of growing communities or really, frankly, just to repair or replace outdated and older schools in communities across the province. Frankly, it's been a very big success across the province of Ontario, and I have to congratulate some of the boards that have been able to undertake these capital builds.

But still, that has also highlighted for us some of the challenges in delivering capital in different parts of the province of Ontario. As I talked about boards that are challenged, we can't help but also identify the Near North school board, which has also run into some significant challenges in building and delivering a brand new JK-to-12 state-of-the-art school for many, many reasons, be it that trustees are fighting with each other—some trustees support the build; other trustees do not support the build. You have trustees who were sowing dissent within their community, but also a very real challenge that a board that doesn't often build is tasked with the construction of a \$58-million school in its community. So that is something that we are also going to take a look at: Those boards that don't often build, what is their capacity to actually deliver capital for their communities?

Also, the ministry is responsible for child care, and obviously that is something that continues to be very important across the province of Ontario. It's a close to \$6-billion endeavour. Many of the new schools that we are building also have daycares attached to them. And it's something, obviously, that parents have come to rely on.

1550

There is so much more, and I'm sure we'll get into it in the questions and answers.

All in all, colleagues, this is just to say that, yes, while the funding is increasing, while we're moving in a proper direction, there is a tremendous amount of work that still needs to be done:

- to refocus education back to ensuring that our teachers have the resources that they need to deliver the highest quality of education so that our students are prepared for the jobs of tomorrow and so that our parents can have confidence in a public education system that meets their children's needs;

- to rebuild a system that focuses on things that bring people together and not things that divide communities;

- to, frankly, as I said on a number of occasions, refocus, centralize, but still respect that, in some communities, there has to be differences on how we deliver; and

- ultimately, to ensure that no matter what part of this province you are in, you will have access to the same high quality of education that I think parents and taxpayers expect the government to deliver on their behalf.

With that, colleagues, I'll turn it over to you if you have any questions.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): One minute remaining.

Hon. Paul Calandra: I'll cede that one minute to whoever has some questions, Mr. Chair.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): All right. Thank you for your presentation, Minister.

We will now begin the questions and answers, with a rotation of 15 minutes for the official opposition members, 15 minutes for the third party member, five minutes for the independent member and 15 minutes for the government members. As always, please remember to make your comments through the Chair.

For any ministry staff appearing, please state your name and title when you are called on to speak so that the proceedings can be accurately recorded.

I will now start with the official opposition, and I recognize MPP Pasma.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: Thank you for being here, Minister. I don't have much time, so I'm going to dive right in.

The Financial Accountability Officer of Ontario last year—the amount that's actually going to school boards to support our students—was at the lowest level that it's been at in the last 10 years, and that your government's spending plan is going to lower it even further over the next three years by \$400. These funding cuts from your government are affecting literally every part of education, so that's what I want to dig into today.

I'm going to start with special education. According to the Ontario Public School Boards' Association, the English public school boards are spending \$582.7 million more on special education than what they're getting from your government. We know that they're not alone; 71 out of 72 school boards in the province are running a deficit in special education. They're committing more than what they're getting from you.

What I want to know is, what is the total amount, in dollars, of the gap between what you're giving school boards and what they're spending on special education?

Hon. Paul Calandra: Look, I think that's highlighted in the estimates. But at the same time, I'll say this: It is one of the primary reasons why I want to make sure that every dollar goes back into the classroom. So when money is used in other areas other than classroom education, then you have these challenges, whether it's Mark Watson—

Ms. Chandra Pasma: Chair, I'm going to reclaim my time, because that's not answering the question that I asked, which was: What is the total amount, in dollars, of the gap between what you're giving school boards on special education and what they are spending on special education? It is not about resources going elsewhere; it's them putting more resources than what you're giving them. So, what I want to know is, what is that dollar amount?

Hon. Paul Calandra: Look, we provide record levels of funding for special education in the province of Ontario. There are some boards that have made the decision to provide additional funds.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: Seventy-one out of 72 boards.

Hon. Paul Calandra: Having said that, I have actually looked at that. I've asked for a review within the supervised boards to see if we are indeed spending enough money on special education.

I've been in a number of classrooms. I've talked to a lot of teachers, and what I'm hearing from a lot of teachers is that whilst there is a record level of spending in special education, results aren't necessary—

Ms. Chandra Pasma: Okay. I'm going to reclaim my time because this is once again not answering the question.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): Let's not talk over each other. One person at a time. MPP Pasma, go ahead.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: Thank you, Chair. My question was about a number.

Minister, I find it impossible to believe that you're sitting around waiting for four supervisors with no experience in education to report to you on what your government is spending on special education, and whether or not it's enough. I've read estimates that say that gap is \$850 million. That's \$850 million that the boards are committing—more than what you're giving them. You have an entire ministry at your disposal, so you either know the number and you don't want to share it, or you are deliberately not finding out that number so that you don't need to do anything about it.

I would appreciate it if you could ask your ministry staff to find out what that number is and submit it to the committee in writing. Will you do that?

Hon. Paul Calandra: Look, I can tell you this: We spent, I think, in excess of \$3.85 billion on special education across the province of Ontario, and I'm uncertain that the results of \$3.85 billion match the expectations of parents across the system—

Ms. Chandra Pasma: Okay. Well, I can tell you for sure—

Hon. Paul Calandra: —so that is what my focus is on—

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): MPP Pasma, we have to let the minister answer.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: The minister is not answering the question that I asked.

Hon. Paul Calandra: Thank you—\$3.85 billion is what the province of Ontario invests in school boards across the province of Ontario for special education.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: I can tell you that parents are not happy with the outcome that they're getting from that, because—

Hon. Paul Calandra: I agree.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: —school boards are providing an additional \$850 million on top of what you're providing. And that's for a system that is basically held together with shoestring and tape, thanks to our school board trustees, and it's failing our kids who have disabilities and learning exceptionalities. Have you read the Community Living report on the special education crisis in the classroom?

Hon. Paul Calandra: Look, MPP Pasma, I've actually said to not only our supervisors but to every board that I

have visited, every classroom that I have visited, every teacher that I have spoken with, that although—and I'll say it again—although we spend close to \$4 billion on special education, I am not certain that the results that we're seeing out of that investment match parents' expectations; I don't disagree with you at all. But I want to make sure that whatever investments or reinvestments are made in special education actually match parents' expectations and have a result for the children who are actually receiving this help.

I talk to teachers all the time, and they say whether it's an IEP, whether it's a special needs child in their classroom, it isn't necessarily always about the funding that is attached to it; it is about how do you utilize the funding to get the best result for the child that they are teaching. That is what I want to get out of the system. I don't think parents care—we could spend \$20 billion. If it's not giving me the results that I need, what's the point? For me, the point is the result of the funding. What do we get out of it—

Ms. Chandra Pasma: I'm sorry. Are you blaming the teachers and education workers who are tasked with delivering those IEPs and keeping children safe when there's not enough staff in the schools? Are you saying that's the problem if the problem isn't funding?

Hon. Paul Calandra: No, I think I just said the exact opposite. You're the one who just blamed the teachers, not me.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: No, you're saying that you're providing—

Hon. Paul Calandra: No, just the opposite.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: —more than enough money and children are being failed.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): Please make comments through the Chair.

Hon. Paul Calandra: No, actually, I didn't say that that at all. What I said is, I want to make sure that the close to \$4 billion in funding that we do provide is giving us adequate results, that it matches parents' and teachers' expectations. I have said that not only here to you just right now; I've said that in the House. I've said that to every single teacher.

And I'll say it again: I could provide \$20 billion. If it doesn't match expectations, if it doesn't provide a result for the child, then something has to change. And I don't think right now the investments that we're making—although it's record level of investment, I don't think parents care. I don't think a parent cares that the minister comes here and says, "Oh, it's record levels of investment." Do you know what I think parents care about and what teachers care about? What is the result, that the teacher has the resources that they need to provide the best result for the child that they're charged with during the day, and that's what I'm going to be focused on.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: The Ontario Autism Coalition parents have been here saying that they're not happy with the result and that they know that the primary cause of that result is the underfunding by your government. We've had Community Living Ontario here presenting a survey of parents who say they're unhappy with the record of your

government and that the key challenge is funding. The Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario: a report that said the crisis in the classrooms in special education is the result of your government's funding.

I'm not sure how much more clearly parents, teachers and education workers can state that they're not happy with the outcome—but the outcome is being caused by the fact that your government is not providing sufficient funding. School boards are stepping up and trying to do right by these kids by providing hundreds of millions of dollars more than what you're giving, and that's still for a system where 31% of kids with disabilities are told to stay home, that they can't come to school because the school can't meet their needs. Six per cent of kids with disabilities are being excluded entirely. That's more than 21,000 children. There's 43% of parents that say only some of their kids' IEP is being followed, and 11% say it's not being followed at all. That's your government's record. That's what happens when you put insufficient funding towards special education. That's what happens when school boards are trying to do their best by these kids but they do not have the fiscal space because your government is underfunding special education.

1600

How can you justify the funding being so low when this is what the outcome is for our kids with disabilities, who have every right to an equitable education in the province of Ontario?

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): MPP Pasma, please make your comments through the Chair.

Hon. Paul Calandra: Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you to the member. Look, again, we can go back and forth on this, but I think we're actually somewhat on the same page. I think we both want to see that the children who have special needs and the teachers who are charged with that education have the resources they need to provide our kids the best possible outcome. That has to be the goal. Presumably, we share the same goal: that children have the utmost ability to succeed in the system and we should ensure that whatever amount we spend gives them that best opportunity to succeed.

That's why I'm taking a look at that, yes, but the system itself shows a great deal of discrepancy between boards. That's why I've been talking about that we need to further centralize and focus the resources that go into—whether it's special education. That's why we have to rout out some of the waste that happens within our school boards, that waste that comes from our trustees—

Ms. Chandra Pasma: I'm going to reclaim my time, Chair.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): You have five minutes and 38 seconds.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: This is not about waste. Parents of kids with disabilities don't want to hear spin. What they want to hear is an apology for the government's failure to protect and teach their children, and they want to hear a commitment to provide funding so that their kids can be safe and their kids can learn at school.

Hon. Paul Calandra: I guess we'll disagree on that. I'll guess we'll disagree on whether a trustee who spends \$200,000 on vacation to Italy is waste—

Ms. Chandra Pasma: I'm going to move on with my time to mental health—

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): Let the minister finish, please.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: I didn't ask a question there. I didn't ask a question there, Minister.

Hon. Paul Calandra: I know you didn't ask a question on that, because you don't want to ask questions on those issues that really impact classroom education, right?

Ms. Chandra Pasma: We're here to discuss—

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): MPP Pasma, please let the minister finish.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: Chair, I would like to be able to ask the minister some questions, and I think if you check with the Clerk about whether or not I have the opportunity to ask the minister questions, the minister was answering something I didn't even ask.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): You do, but you have to let him answer it, too.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: But I didn't ask a question.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): Well, you interrupted him.

Go ahead.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: Thank you. I want to move on to another area where our funding model is badly failing kids. We know that kids are experiencing high rates of mental health challenges, but only one in 10 schools has regularly scheduled access to a mental health professional and half have none at all. I've heard from principals who say it's breaking their hearts that they have nothing to offer these kids.

Some 90% of them say that they need more help than what they're given, but last year your government cut funding for mental health in schools, and this year it increased by only one cent per student per day. In light of the shocking access to mental health care in our schools, how can you justify spending only 23 cents per student per day?

Hon. Paul Calandra: We also provided significant funding through what is called REP and FEP funding to school boards to assist with mental health funding. The ministry works very closely with Minister Thanigasalam and Minister Jones with respect to mental health funding; we have a number of partners that are within the system that might not necessarily appear in core education funding but allow us to address mental health issues. We have partnerships with our First Nations communities and First Nations boards, and a number of individualized boards have come to us with funding that they require that, as I said, is not necessarily within the core education funding, but for special programs for mental health that they need to address local issues.

Look, I'm very proud of what we have done on mental health within the education system. There's still more to do, but that's why we're working so closely with mental health and addictions minister Thanigasalam as well as Minister Jones and a number of partners within the space

who are helping guide us on how we can address—look, not solely, but a lot of challenges we saw coming out of the pandemic were on mental health and addictions. That is why the previous minister put significant resources into dealing with that challenge, but I think it's work that is, frankly, ongoing.

I'll just say this last thing about it: Again, it's in a space where it shouldn't be dependent on a board-to-board issue, and it shouldn't be different from board to board. It's part of that centralization that I think needs to happen. Should some of this be part of core education funding—more solidified in core education funding and outside of what we call this REP and FEP? Probably, yes; I think so because I think more boards would want to offer services that the core funding model does not allow them to do right now.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: The number of psychologists in our schools has gone down under your government compared to the Liberals, and there's only 0.29 regulated mental health professionals per school right now, and not even all of that 23 cents per student is being spent on supports in our schools. So why aren't you increasing the amount for mental health by enough that we can actually hire the mental health professionals that our kids need?

Hon. Paul Calandra: Again, we work with Minister Jones and Minister Thanigasalam through what we call our REP and FEP funding. Individualized boards have come forward with specialized programs that they need for mental health and addictions. We are funding them through that.

But again, I'll repeat: I think that there is an opportunity for us to look at, again, a more centralized and more cohesive delivery of mental health services across boards so that it is not contingent on an application basis. Could a greater part of that be part of core education funding? I think so, but that is something that I'm looking at right now.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: Well, I will repeat: You only have 0.29 regulated mental health professionals per school.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): One minute.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: You don't have the money in here to hire new ones. I don't see how centralization is going to make a difference to our kids. Only one in 10 schools has regularly scheduled access to a mental health professional. Unless you increase that funding, there's just no way to provide any additional support to our kids, and they deserve it. When they step forward and they're brave enough to say, "I need help," that help should be there for them. But the funding isn't here to make sure that help is there for them.

Hon. Paul Calandra: As I've said—I'll repeat again: There is funding that is delivered through different programs through the Ministry of Education, but I do want to look at opportunities to focus more and centralize that through core education funding so that it's delivered to all boards equally.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: I think the results of your current funding model speak for themselves, and it's not a great record.

Hon. Paul Calandra: Actually, I think the current funding model is one that has been in place for many, many years, frankly. It is something that always needs to be looked at and always needs to be reviewed. I don't disagree with you there.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): Thank you, Minister. We'll now go to the third party. I recognize MPP Collard.

Mme Lucille Collard: Thank you, Minister, for showing up. It might be a long three hours for you being in the hot seat there, but you can understand we do have important questions. Not surprisingly, I will be asking you about francophone education. You know that's very important to my community, to Ontario.

I need to broach the subject of the shortage of teachers. A while ago, there was a working group established by your very government to try to identify the obstacles for teacher retention, but also teacher recruitment. That group provided you with recommendations. I don't think that the implementation has been very successful, because we're still seeing a great shortage of French teachers.

Can you please tell us what the plan is to address the shortage? What's your strategy in the immediate, medium and long term to make sure that we resolve this? Because it's affecting the whole province. When we don't train or educate enough French people, then they can't become those bilingual workers either in the health care sector, education, the law sector. So, what is your strategy for shortage of teachers?

Hon. Paul Calandra: Yes, the immediate response was to increase placements in teachers' college for more students to become French teachers. There was an immediate reinvestment to increase the supply of French teachers coming out of teachers' college.

But you're not wrong. The popularity on the French side has been—it's a huge success, frankly. The popularity not only on the francophone boards themselves, but on the other boards which are offering—

Mme Lucille Collard: Immersion.

Hon. Paul Calandra: French immersion, yes—I don't think there's any community in the province of Ontario that hasn't looked at offering French immersion in their schools. As the popularity of French language learning has increased, we have had some challenges keeping—but it's not just Ontario.

It's something that we talked about at the Council of Ministers of Education when we met in Toronto. Every Minister of Education across the country is facing the same challenge. It is something that we decided we would have to work together on. And it's not just them; it's not a blame of the federal government at all. Part of it is that we have to be able to encourage people to come into Canada. Because what we're afraid of now—as the Council of Ministers of Education, we were afraid that we would go after each other's teachers. As much as we're educating more, getting more through the system, the need across the country is so immense. And, ironically, in Quebec, it was just the opposite. They needed English teachers. It is

something we are all seized with. We don't have a direct answer right now, but it is twofold—

M^{me} Lucille Collard: So you don't have a strategy right now.

1610

Hon. Paul Calandra: Well, we're working on a strategy through the Council of Ministers of Education. We have increased the amount of seats with respect to French-language teachers coming out of the system already. So it is a twofold approach, working with our colleagues across the country, increasing the amount of teachers who can come out of the system and teach in the system. And that, I'm hoping, will provide us—

M^{me} Lucille Collard: Okay, thanks. But I think we need to work with the workforce we have right now, and one of the big problems is also the retention of teachers. Teachers don't stay in their job more than five years because the working conditions are horrendous. It's very difficult. We've been talking about mental health support and kids with special needs. There's not enough support in the classroom, which makes it very difficult for teachers. Are you addressing that, the retention piece? And are you listening to the recommendations from the school boards that are really wanting to help you solve this issue? Do you have any kind of solutions that you're working on?

Hon. Paul Calandra: Yes, honestly, a really good question because you saw when we were in the board—you were with me, I think, when we were in—maybe it wasn't you, sorry. But when we were in Ottawa recently and we provided some funding in co-operation with the federal government and we—

M^{me} Lucille Collard: I wasn't invited.

Hon. Paul Calandra: Did we not invite you?

M^{me} Lucille Collard: I was not invited. Anyway.

Hon. Paul Calandra: You know I would always invite you. It was a wonderful meeting, anyway.

M^{me} Lucille Collard: You can text me next time.

Hon. Paul Calandra: But the passion we saw in the school, in that system, the teachers, the educators in that system—the passion was second to none. And I would disagree with the analysis that, somehow, they felt discouraged. I think just the opposite. When I visit French-language schools, it seems to be just the opposite.

But, does that mean that there aren't challenges? Of course, absolutely, there are challenges across the system. We hear safety is a challenge. We hear resources for teachers to deliver on the curriculum is a challenge. We hear from directors of education that there are challenges in being able to quickly address some of the problems that they're—

M^{me} Lucille Collard: Can I move to just another question, just because the fact is that we still have a problem with retention and recruitment. You and I and the Minister of Francophone Affairs talked about a potential solution to reduce the certification program from two years to one year. There seemed to be an interest in looking at that. Where are you at in evaluating this solution?

Hon. Paul Calandra: Yes, it is something I'm looking at, obviously in co-operation with Minister Quinn,

colleges and universities, and with the colleges that deliver teacher education. So it is something that I'm looking at. I haven't made a decision yet. It has to be balanced by overall enrolment.

Look, I'll say this. On the French side, there is very strong interest and enrolment. On the English side, enrolment seems to have steadied off. So, although we've put more money into more seats for French students to come out, I think more has to be done because of the of the extraordinary popularity. Like, it is—

M^{me} Lucille Collard: Okay. Can I ask you another focused question?

Hon. Paul Calandra: Yes, sure.

M^{me} Lucille Collard: What percentage of the education budget is specifically allocated to French-language education, and has that budget increased or decreased over the last three years? Can you answer that?

Hon. Paul Calandra: I'm going to call a friend for that, if that's okay.

Ms. Denise A. Cole: I wasn't aware you could call a friend.

M^{me} Lucille Collard: We all need friends.

Hon. Paul Calandra: I do have some friends.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: Other than John Vanthof?

Hon. Paul Calandra: Other than John Vanthof, yes. Other than John Vanthof.

Ms. Denise A. Cole: We're going to call many friends for this. Didier.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): Please state your name and title, please.

Ms. Denise A. Cole: I'm Denise Cole. I'm the Deputy Minister of Education. Along with me is Didier Pomerleau, our assistant deputy minister for French education.

Didier, over to you.

Mr. Didier Pomerleau: Thank you, Mrs. Deputy Minister. I'm Didier Pomerleau, assistant deputy minister for French-language education.

Overall, the allocation or budget for French-language education for 2025-26 was roughly \$2.3 billion. This is broken down by roughly \$2.1 billion to the core education fund, another \$36 million to the official languages and education funding from the federal government, another \$18 million from the REP-FEP fund, half a million dollars from the partner sustainability grant, another \$30 million for TFO and, rounding out, \$18 million for the—

M^{me} Lucille Collard: I'm sorry; I'm listening for the answer, which should have been—has it increased or decreased over the last three years, the amount of money that is dedicated to French-language education?

Mr. Didier Pomerleau: This is the amount that's there right now, and it has been increasing steadily over the past five years.

M^{me} Lucille Collard: It has?

Mr. Didier Pomerleau: It has.

M^{me} Lucille Collard: Okay.

Mr. Didier Pomerleau: And as a percentage of the total ministry budget—that, I don't know, but it's roughly stable.

M^{me} Lucille Collard: Thank you very much. I'm going to go back to the minister, and it's a question I know you care about because you've adopted a bill on that: Why are French-language boards still forced to rent temporary spaces—that's when they can find some—while neighbouring English boards have underused buildings? I can refer you to the specific case in Ottawa Centre where there is no secondary education for French, and the parents and communities have been asking to borrow some of the space in an adult high school on the anglophone side to be able to offer the secondary education, and this is not happening.

Can you give me an update on this file? Because the parents are still talking to me about this.

Hon. Paul Calandra: I wish it was just that one board, but we have examples—the Near North District School Board, Parry Sound, is another example where an underutilized school from the English side should be—an agreement was made to transfer it to the exploding and ever-increasing French-language board, but the Near North District School Board has refused to transfer that property over, despite an agreement to do so.

Bill 33 will allow me more opportunities to do that, and I put every single school board on notice that the properties are the assets of the people of the province of Ontario, and where French-language boards require a building, an underutilized English building doesn't necessarily have to just stay in the English system. It's the students who we should care about, and we've told every single one of those boards, "If it needs to be transferred, then you'd better transfer it. Don't wait for me to do it for you; we will do it for you."

This is the nonsense that goes on in far too many—I'll stop there because you have another question.

M^{me} Lucille Collard: Nothing is happening on this file. Okay.

How much time do I have left?

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): Three minutes, 49 seconds.

M^{me} Lucille Collard: I want to ask another question about the school infrastructure. This is another area where there's a big deficit for our French-language schools. Everywhere in Ontario, we still have regions where there's no school available, no francophone school, and parents, as you may understand, won't put their kids on the bus for an hour and a half in the morning and same in the afternoon, so we lose them; they go into the English system, and very often that's how assimilation happens.

What are you doing, and are you increasing funding for the infrastructure for the French schools?

Hon. Paul Calandra: Look, where it's required, we're constitutionally obligated to provide a school for the French system, and, as numbers increase, the funding is there to provide either new schools—again, I think it goes back to the heart of it: Underutilized schools in another system should be transferred over because those students are coming from somewhere, right? We saw that in Ottawa. As Ottawa public has decreased, the Catholic and the French systems have increased.

We can transfer schools, but there is also funding available for new builds where numbers warrant.

M^{me} Lucille Collard: Thank you. That's all the questions that I have for now. Am I allowed to give my time to my colleague?

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): No.

M^{me} Lucille Collard: Sorry.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): So you're finished?

M^{me} Lucille Collard: Yes, I'm done. Thank you very much.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): We'll go to the independent member. MPP Clancy, go ahead.

1620

Ms. Aislinn Clancy: I just wanted to start off by thanking all of the staff from the ministry for coming today. I know it's a big endeavour to get everybody under the same roof. Hopefully, you get some team-building time or something and you can enjoy some time together—and the minister for giving so much time today.

I'm grateful for the advances we've made in the Right to Read report—good news. There's still a gap for those teenagers in high school that funding has gone—but some shifts. There was a new school built in my riding, St. Patrick. I do appreciate the building of new infrastructure and new child care spaces we have coming to the Waterloo region.

I know you're talking about making sure the money gets to the classroom. One of the ways in which budgets are difficult in boards is that there are certain budget envelopes where it's not keeping up with the actual cost of things. I appreciate that we're spending record amounts, but studies say that it's not keeping up with inflation, so there is that \$1,500 gap per student because of inflation. I'm going to be talking about inflation a bit, and a few budget envelopes where boards are really not given the funding from the government that they are obliged to spend.

One gap, for example, is Bill 124 compensation. Will you be, in future budgets, ensuring that you've made those school boards whole when it comes to CPP enhancements and Bill 124 compensation?

Hon. Paul Calandra: Well, we have close to \$3 billion worth of compensation for teachers, which includes Bill 124.

Ms. Aislinn Clancy: Okay. But from my understanding, from the school board staff that I talk to—I worked as an education worker until two years ago—that across the board for all the different envelopes, those have not been made whole in all the school boards for CPP and Bill 124 compensation. I appreciate the number, but I would ask that you go back to those school boards and see where that gap is, because that's money that they have no choice but to pay out.

Hon. Paul Calandra: I can assure you, MPP Clancy, that I will be very aggressive in every single board across the province in ensuring that the funding that is allocated to them is used for the purposes that it's been allocated to them, and that's why I've taken over five boards.

Ms. Aislinn Clancy: But you understand that if they have to pay money that you haven't given to them—if

there is a gap in the amount they're obliged to pay out, for example, for CPP or Bill 124, and you're not filling that gap, that is the short change.

I appreciate that if money is for special education it has to go to special education, but if you have not given them—this is where we're coming up with deficits, right? When it comes to cyber security, when it comes to the cost of technology upgrades, all of these things—maybe you're bumping it up by 1% or 2%, but it doesn't address—even with construction, you have to admit; construction inflation is different than this 1% to 2%, right?

We're seeing a gap in the amount that things cost and the amount that the government is providing to the school boards to operate. They're not a bake sale; they can't just raise money some other way. There's no magic, right?

Hon. Paul Calandra: Our challenges with a number of the boards is not the funding that they receive, it is how they utilize the funding that they are given. These estimates include billions of extra dollars to address Bill 124. It includes an over 3% increase in funding, which is significantly higher than inflation.

In our capital spend, we have made whole the shortfalls as a result of the increase in cost of delivering capital programs to every—probably St. Patrick's, in your riding, received additional funding on that. We have a number of boards that are operating at a surplus position. But boards have made decisions to fund things in different ways that is costing them.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): One minute.

Hon. Paul Calandra: The Dufferin-Peel board, in particular, has a historical challenge that was made many, many years ago, which has cost them—

Ms. Aislinn Clancy: Can I—I'll ask you to go back because I do think there are some gaps in some of the costs that I mentioned, and I'd like you to make those whole.

I'd like to talk a little bit about the infrastructure deficit. It's a \$21.7-billion deficit. I had a school literally fall apart this year and was closed. All of the ways that this school board had to pivot, putting in portables and making a lot of changes—those things were left unfunded. I think we need a bit of wiggle room for school boards when they have to address these emergencies.

Can you tell me your plan to fill in that \$21.7-billion gap for infrastructure?

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): Thank you. We'll now move to the government side. I recognize MPP Pang.

Mr. Billy Pang: Thank you, Mr. Chair. Through you to the minister: As a former school board trustee, I can understand that Ontario's education system depends on strong and accountable school board leadership. The government's focus on modernizing governance aims to ensure consistency, transparency and responsiveness across all the boards. Minister, can you share how these efforts, including Bill 33, are improving accountability and supporting more effective decision-making for students and families?

Hon. Paul Calandra: Well, I guess you would know better than many of us that under the system the way it currently works, I have to wait for a board to become,

frankly, under financial difficulty before I'm able to step in. Some people would say that's the better way of doing it.

You look at Near North school board: There's a school board right now that is in a surplus, yet students are learning in a half-demolished high school. Why? Not because of the ministry, but because trustees and the director of education were unable to fulfill a capital build that they had on their plate for 10 years. Why? Because the trustees started fighting with each other and you had some trustees going into the community and sowing dissension within the community about this new build. They had signed an agreement with the French board that they would transfer schools from the English board to the French board once they got their new school, but that didn't happen; you had a director of education who, frankly, it would appear, gave himself a \$150,000 raise but didn't do performance reviews. That's just one problem.

You then go into the Thames Valley board, where the difficulty and challenges in that board are nothing short of gross—nothing short of gross—where you had a director of education that was literally out of control and a system that went from a surplus to a deficit. Why? Because a director of education was out of control and because trustees refuse to live up to their obligation. They had the ability to fire the director of education and hire a different one, but they didn't.

So, Bill 33, what does it allow us to do? Bill 33 in particular allows us to move in more quickly. When we know things are challenged, why should the Minister of Education have to wait until a board is in a deficit position before we can launch an investigation? Why should I wait until things have fallen apart so badly in a board, then I step in? I don't think parents accept that, I don't think students want that and I know 100% that teachers don't like that approach. So Bill 33 allows us to move in much more quickly, much more effectively to address things very head-on, frankly, so that we can restore the system back to what it's meant to be: focused on students, parents and teachers. Bill 33 is just one example, but there's more.

Honestly, we looked at curriculum and how it's delivered across the system, so we're reviewing that, as well. We paused some curriculum, as you know—the delivery of some new pieces of curriculum—because we wanted to give teachers more opportunity to understand it and appreciate it and be ready to deliver that curriculum.

So, there is a lot of work that is being done right now. This is just a start. We assumed responsibility for five boards—not always easy decisions to make, but the right decisions. And if you look in the boards that we've assumed responsibility for, the temperature has come down, decisions are being made in those boards, which helps refocus funding back to where it belongs, and that is in the classroom, and a focus, really, on results. I think that should be across the board, frankly.

Yes, lots of people have a reason to want to keep the system the way it is: Don't make any changes, because if you don't make any changes then you constantly have somebody to blame. Well, what I'm saying to people is

that I want to change the system, so if you have to focus your blame on somebody, you focus it on the minister and the Ministry of Education. If your students are failing, we are the ones who are responsible for it. But we will also be the people that are responsible for delivering an education system that is the same and equal to all students across the province of Ontario—it's got to be our goal—and a system that removes the conflict that we currently have and that focuses squarely on teachers and their ability to deliver for their students, full stop. Anybody who says differently obviously wants the system to continue to fail, and I disagree with them. I think most parents and teachers would agree with me.

1630

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): I recognize MPP Coe.

Mr. Lorne Coe: Chair, through you: Thank you, Minister, for being here.

Ontario parents have been clear that they want safer schools and stronger connections between students and the community. One parent, Kaveeta Ajwani, whose child attends Vimy Ridge Public School in Ajax near my riding in Whitby, shared her experience, saying, "My kids had major bullying issues, and the bullying did increase once the" school resource officer "program was taken away."

She also said, Minister, police "are a valuable part of the community and the only way that the next generation is going to grow up to learn to respect them and know that they're the good guys is by having them involved in the community."

Minister, could you speak to how important it is that we listen to parents like Ms. Ajwani, who see first-hand the impact of removing school resource officers, and why it's critical that we put students and families ahead of out-of-touch school board trustees who are making decisions that undermine school safety?

Hon. Paul Calandra: Again, it's a really good question. As you know, obviously, Bill 33 mandates that boards will allow a school resource officer in where there is a program that is being offered by a local police service. That can have many different forms and different ways of functioning.

But I think you hit the nail on the head when you said that—what does a police officer in a school mean? I was in MPP Bouma's riding and the resource officer program there was an educational program that helped kids understand the different things that policing does. Now, this particular police officer—all the students knew her. She assisted in coaching and so on and so forth. But it was also about, "Look, policing isn't just about policing. There are also many different careers that come from it." But this resource officer was also somebody who the students could turn to, not only just in the school but in the community, if they had a challenge.

More and more, teachers have said to me that they just feel safer when there is somebody the kids can turn to in a school, or somebody they can turn to for advice. So I have every confidence that our police services, working with our school boards, will reintroduce programs in those schools that don't have them—there are many boards that

already have them—that focus on introducing or helping students appreciate what it is that our police officers do.

Kids should not feel afraid of our police services. And our trustees should not make kids feel afraid of our police services—just the opposite. If our police can help make children feel safer, if our police can help a teacher feel safer, if our police can help make a school community better understand some of the challenges that they're facing, then they should be allowed to do that. Bill 33 allows them to do that.

But I wish I could say it was just about the school resource officer, right? I know that's why Minister Lecce brought in some tougher rules with respect to vaping in the bathrooms because a lot of kids didn't feel safe even going to the washroom. So, we have to do more on that front as well. I'm excited by the opportunity, and I've been speaking to a lot of police forces.

I'll just say this last thing about student safety. One of the things that we're also working on right now is a province-wide protocol for when police are brought into a school. We have too many instances where a child has been hurt in the school and a board has not followed its own protocol for when it calls in the police to investigate, and we have too many different protocols for that. There's a protocol in Peel; there's a protocol in York region; one in Toronto. Every board has a different protocol. And one of the things that we're working on right now—I know PA Ciriello and PA Dixon have been working on that with the police—not only talking about how the SRO program is going to work, but the protocol for bringing police in to assist in investigations when something has gone wrong.

Mr. Lorne Coe: Thank you, Minister.

To MPP Denault, please.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): Please go ahead, MPP Denault.

MPP Billy Denault: Through you, Chair: Thank you to the minister and his staff for being here with us today.

In your remarks, Minister, you mentioned the province's capital program for schools across the province of Ontario. In my riding, I was just at the grand opening of St. Thomas the Apostle Elementary School in Renfrew, and it was great to see, through so many members of the community, that positive investment. The province provided a total investment of \$23.5 million to that project, and of course, as you know, Minister, investments like this, investments in school infrastructure, help ensure that students learn in a safe, modern and inspiring environment. So, through you, Chair, I was curious if the minister could maybe expand a little bit on the government's record of capital investments and how they're improving access to quality schools across Ontario.

Hon. Paul Calandra: Thank you. As I said in my remarks, we've brought forward a \$23-billion program—I think I'm right—with respect to new builds and renovations and extensions of existing builds. Every corner of the province is, frankly, being touched by this program. A lot of boards have done some really, really good work in helping move quickly to bring in their proposals. This is the time of year when a lot of these proposals are brought in. And look, it's been a huge success.

I think one of the challenges that we do have on that front is that we still have a lot of school boards that are holding on to schools that they have maybe surplus. When you surplus a school and when that school is sold, that money is then put back into the system for the repair backlog. We have far too many school boards that, as opposed to utilizing that option, are sitting on those properties. So I think we have to look at that for sure.

We did have a short-term challenge, as I said, when, coming out of COVID, there was so much building going on, whether it was hospitals, whether it was long-term care and roads. Some of the boards were seeing increased costs to deliver on the capital, but the decision was made, obviously, by the government that we would cover the increased costs for them so we're still able to deliver on the important infrastructure.

As I said, many of our board partners have done a really, really good job in delivering it. There are some challenges that we're going to look at in how we can make it easier, especially for those boards that don't necessarily deliver a capital project very often.

It's not even just the school board, I would say. Sometimes in smaller communities as well, smaller municipalities, they're also not used to delivering a large piece of infrastructure. So, when a build of, in Parry Sound's case, a \$58-million school—we have to do a better job of connecting the municipality and the board and the contractors so that they work together and that they're able to deliver on the infrastructure on time.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): I recognize MPP Jordan. You have one minute and 28 seconds.

Mr. John Jordan: Minister, you spoke about recalibrating education in your remarks. Ontario's focus on back-to-basics learning reflects a commitment to ensuring students develop strong foundational skills in literacy, math and life preparation, career preparation, job preparation. How is this renewed focus helping students achieve better results and prepare for future opportunity?

Hon. Paul Calandra: Look, we're starting to see some positive impacts on the literacy side for sure. We're starting to see some positive impacts in STEM. If I'm honest, despite the investments in math and the challenges on the back-to-basics curriculum, I still think that there is a lot of room for us to improve on some of the math scores, frankly. So we are going to continue to review how we deliver math across the province, but that's not to suggest that some of the other core areas—look, I've been encouraged by the improvements out of back-to-basics curriculum. I'm hearing it from teachers as well, that it makes more sense, it's easier for them to teach, kids understand things a lot better—need additional resources to help them deliver on that curriculum. But I think, so far, the back-to-basics curriculum is moving us in a positive direction.

1640

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): Thank you, Minister. We'll now go to the official opposition. I recognize MPP Pasma.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: Thank you, Chair. Minister, the failure of special education funding and the lack of support

for mental health that I was talking about in the last round, along with larger class sizes, is contributing to a violence crisis in our schools because kids whose needs aren't met are being frustrated or dysregulated.

The Auditor General says that violent incident reports have risen 114% under your government. Some 77% of ETFO members say that they've personally experienced or witnessed violence, and 75% of OSSTF members say that violence is getting worse. Despite this crisis, you are only giving 15.4 cents per student per day to student well-being. So when teachers, education workers and principals say that the solution to this violence problem begins with hiring more caring adults, particularly EAs, child and youth workers and paraprofessional staff, I would like to know how much of this 15.4 cents per student is going towards actually hiring those positions.

Hon. Paul Calandra: Not only have we increased the amount of teachers in the system, but the reality is this: Safety in our schools goes beyond just the things you're talking about. As the school resource officers were removed from the schools, we saw instances of violence in our schools increase. So that is one way that we are going to address this.

I've heard from many teachers as well—many, many educators, not only teachers, but principals—that some of the division we see within our schools comes from the division brought forward by school boards, by a curriculum that is so vast and wide open that it puts parents in conflict with teachers, thereby making students frustrated. Whether it's eliminating vaping in the washrooms with monitors to make that safer, the return of the school resource officers, hiring additional teachers, as we have done—these are all things that I hope will help address that.

At the same time, MPPs Ciriello and Dixon are working with our police forces, and, ultimately, we will work with our boards to come up with a better protocol and a unified protocol on when we involve police in our schools to ensure the safety of our students.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: Minister, your funding cuts in education have funded 5,000 fewer educator positions every single year. This is not an issue of "We just need a few more police officers;" this is fundamentally about needing more caring adults. This is what teachers and education workers and principals are asking for.

A police officer is not trained to deal with a small child with disabilities who is dysregulated, a child who just needs more academic support and that support isn't being met. What teachers want to see is that the violence is prevented from happening in the first place, not that it's being responded to after it has already taken place. According to WSIB data, last year, teachers outstripped firefighters and police officers for injury reports.

Do you think your government's failure to do anything about this crisis of violence might be related to the fact that there are more than 46,000 teachers in Ontario who are certified with the Ontario College of Teachers—so they remain connected enough to the education system that they're prepared to pay those fees—but they are not currently working in our system?

Hon. Paul Calandra: We've provided additional resources just shy of \$120 million on that. But at the same time, it's not just about that. It is about safety in our schools. You can't separate what happens in a school from our police, frankly. That has to be one part of it. Teachers have told me—I visited so many schools since March. They have told me that since the school resource officers were removed from their schools, they have felt less safe, and that it's not just about adding more people into a classroom.

It doesn't matter that we've provided record levels of funding for special education; it doesn't matter that we've provided record levels of funding in the education system, that we're going to be close to \$43 billion. I don't think parents care about that. I don't think teachers care about that. What they care about is, is their school safe; can their teachers feel safe in the school? I don't think, right now, we're at that point.

The return of the school resource officers is one of the ways that we will make our schools safe. Some of the things that Minister Lecce brought in will help on that front as well, so I feel quite encouraged by the direction, frankly, that we're going in.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: Minister, at a certain point, the word "record" stops to have any meaning when you use it that way.

What is the total amount of the school repair backlog currently, in dollars?

Interjection.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): Please state your name and your title, please.

Ms. Didem Proulx: Hello, my name is Didem Proulx. I'm the assistant deputy minister of the capital and business supports division at the Ministry of Education. Thank you for the question.

The government has been making significant investments in school renewal. This year, \$2 billion is being provided to address renewal needs across a system that is supporting meeting renewal needs. There are, on an annual basis, about 3,000 schools that benefit from investments that are made, and as a result of these investments, the facility condition index across the province is stable.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: Okay, but it's stable at what number? Because the government hasn't released that number for the past four years. So what is that number at?

Ms. Didem Proulx: The facility condition index is stable around 28% and has been for the last number of years.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: Okay, but my question was in dollars. What's the amount?

Ms. Didem Proulx: As you know, we are part of a five-year cycle in which about 1,000 schools are assessed on an annual basis, so we are midway through the cycle, and we don't have an updated number.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: This is a number that previous Ministers of Education were able to provide, and then suddenly, four years ago, ministers stopped being able to provide that number. I know you know the number because school boards are reporting the number to you, so

why don't you think parents deserve the transparency of just telling us what the number is?

Hon. Paul Calandra: Look, I believe that what parents—I'm not going to speak for parents; I'll let you do that. What I think the system needs to provide is new schools where they're needed. I think the system needs to be able to repair schools when they require repair. I think the government of Ontario has a responsibility to provide the resources to do that. We are providing a record-number dollar amount in not only the repair backlog but in building new schools, renovations, repairs on the existing programs, as I said earlier.

We also have to look at school boards that are not necessarily selling off the surplus properties that they have deemed as surplus and that are sitting on them—some in your own community, some in MPP Hazell's riding. We can talk about Robert Borden: That school has been closed for 10 years on 14 acres of land, and it has not been surplused. It has been empty, has not been surplused, and if it was surplused, that money would be used for some of the repair backlog.

You have the Near North District School Board—

Ms. Chandra Pasma: I'm going to reclaim my time, Minister, because that's not actually answering the question that I asked. Fundamentally, the Financial Accountability Officer disagrees with you about whether or not you are actually putting forward the funds that are necessary. They say that the cost to bring and keep all schools in a state of good repair and build the new schools we need over the next 10 years is \$31.4 billion, but your government is only committing \$18.7 billion. The FAO says that if you don't increase funding for school repairs, then, by 2034, 75% of all school buildings in the province will be below a state of good repair.

Why aren't you listening to the Financial Accountability Officer, and why are you underfunding safe school infrastructure for our kids?

Hon. Paul Calandra: Just the opposite: Over \$23 billion—it's a record level of investment in our schools, in our capital projects in the province of Ontario. We are doing everything that we possibly can to not only address the repair backlog but to bring new schools—new, more modern, state-of-the-art schools to every corner of the province, including in your riding and in every community across the province, and we're not going to stop at that. We've significantly increased the funding to address that.

We are going to go back to our school boards and ask them as well to look at their surplus schools and start getting them to do what they're supposed to do: sell their surplus schools and put that money back into the repair backlog. We have the Near North District School Board: The director of education 10 years ago surplused a school and decided to make it his office as opposed to selling the school and putting it into the repair backlog.

1650

Look, this isn't just about the funding that goes into—again, I said I don't think parents care that it's a record level of funding. Who cares? Do you know what people care about? That they have a brand new, state-of-the-art

school for their children and that school boards can deliver on a capital project. Right now, they're not seeing that.

Not only are we dealing with the repair backlog, but we're also building new, state-of-the-art schools that—for far too long in this province, that was not the case. We are building so many new schools and renovating so many new schools, because for far too long, that wasn't the priority of the education system. There's certainly more work to be done and we're going to continue on this record-setting plan of investing and improving the system for students, parents and teachers.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: Do you know why we have a Financial Accountability Officer in Ontario? It's so that the public can have access to the facts and the data without partisan spin.

Your government is requiring school boards to post signs, which they have to pay for, praising your government at every school that's getting money to build, to renovate—also at new school building sites. For the TDSB alone, it cost them \$400,000 to post these signs. That's equivalent to hiring four more EAs to support students.

So, why, if you are so concerned about making sure that money goes directly to supporting kids, are you requiring school boards to spend money celebrating your government?

Hon. Paul Calandra: I'm not sure it's celebrating the government. The sign says, "A new school is being built here."

Ms. Chandra Pasma: I don't think you've seen one recently, then, Minister.

Hon. Paul Calandra: Well, if the schools want to celebrate us, then it's for good reason, because we're making massive reinvestments in those schools in what was otherwise a school that had not been addressed. I actually look at it as a positive thing. You go into your community and you see, first of all, "Wow, a new school is being built." Well, how long did it take for that school to be built? Where did the money come for that? It came from taxpayers for that school to be built.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: You passed a regulation requiring the school boards to post those signs and to require them to pay for it. I don't think this is school boards patting you on the back out of the joy of their hearts.

Moving on to student transportation: Your predecessor, Minister Lecce, made absolutely disastrous changes to the transportation funding formula that ignored what the real costs of providing student transportation are, and led to four out of five school boards across the province running a deficit for student transportation; chaos in Ottawa, because they couldn't renew all their contracts; eight weeks in Renfrew county with no school buses running.

You increased the formula a little bit, but you didn't fix it, so now three out of five school boards across the province are running a deficit this year. That's still the majority.

You know that when boards have to take money out of somewhere else in order to actually get kids to school, that money is coming out of the classroom. Why aren't you covering the real costs of getting our kids to school?

Hon. Paul Calandra: As you know, the school board transportation is governed through an RFP process. That

was something that was brought in by, I want to say, the McGuinty government back in 2004—unless I'm wrong? Was it?

Ms. Didem Proulx: In 2010.

Hon. Paul Calandra: Excuse me, in 2010. The RFP, which is done by a consortium, seeks out what the cost of delivering transportation is, and that is awarded independently of the government. We provide a student transportation model to cover the costs of delivering.

In certain circumstances, we see—again, as we talked about earlier with Madame Collard, the increasing popularity of French-language boards means that a lot more students who want to access French-language boards are travelling a greater distance, so that costs more. We also see that, in a number of communities, the fact that previous governments didn't invest in new schools meant that people had to travel a greater distance to get to the schools.

Now, if you're suggesting to me that I cancel the RFPs, which is mandated by government and I suspect, probably, by the Auditor General, I'd be certainly willing to look at—

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): One minute remaining.

Hon. Paul Calandra: I would be certainly willing to look at that option. I take that as your advice that you would think that I should take a look at that. I can certainly look at that.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: No, my advice is that you should properly fund this. But you would know, Minister, because you are the subject of the lawsuit, that the French school boards are suing your government for having disastrously changed the funding formula, which means that franco-phone students can no longer equitably get to school.

It is the fact that your government requires school boards, through the consortia, to contract out to private companies. That means that you should know that school boards don't control the cost. They can only contract at what private companies are prepared to offer the service at, and private companies are not going to offer the service if the contract doesn't actually cover their costs, because that's just business sense.

When you're providing funding that is far below the cost of what a company can actually provide the service for, then that creates a deficit.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): Thank you. We will now move on to the third party. I recognize MPP Hazell.

MPP Andrea Hazell: Thank you for coming in and making your presentation. I'm just happy I'm here with this opportunity to ask you some questions, just representing the underserved people in Scarborough, the families that have students that go to school in Scarborough, but especially my riding of Scarborough-Guildwood. So my questions are very organic. These are my constituency—these are concerned families that came in, and I've put it formally so you can understand and give me your answers.

My first one is around the estimates: 87% of all special education funding is based on either a general enrolment or an estimation of the number of children with special

needs. Only 13% of funding is based on the known needs of children receiving support.

Does the minister believe kids with special needs are getting enough support under this model? They do not think your model is working.

Hon. Paul Calandra: Thank you for the question. As I said earlier, I'm taking a look at whether the funding allows teachers to ensure that the students, the children who are receiving the service, are getting the best out of it. I've heard on both sides that the funding is enough, but the outcomes don't match the investment that we're making. I've heard on the other side from some educators that there needs to be more funding but specialized funding, focused funding in certain parts of the special education mandate. I am looking at both right now to ensure that the funding matches expectations.

MPP Andrea Hazell: What I'm concerned about is, these numbers can be different in different regions. You're familiar with Scarborough and you're very familiar with Scarborough-Guildwood.

Hon. Paul Calandra: Very much. I am, yes.

MPP Andrea Hazell: The underserved and the new immigrants—the percentage is high. That's why I really want to bring this to you. Please, I'm asking you to pay close attention to the regions that have a high immigration count and are underserved.

Hon. Paul Calandra: Scarborough has always had that challenge. There's a lot of really, really quality schools there in the secondary—West Hill Collegiate, the Catholic Pope John Paul, which I'm a graduate of, Sir Oliver Mowat. Then a lot of the elementary schools in that area have been have always dealt with, frankly, immigration and the challenges that come with a very diverse population. The motel strip on Scarborough has always been a challenge for, particularly, on the elementary and the teachers in that area. It's always been a challenge that needs to be addressed.

I don't want to speak for you, but when you see something like Sir Robert Borden, shuttered for like 10 years, and nothing happening with it—that is a huge facility that should have been sold, and the funding should have been put back in the local schools to make them better. Instead, they sat on it, and they're sitting on it, sitting on it, sitting on it and have nothing to do with it.

I'll just say this too: As well, we do work closely with the federal government in some of those instances when there's special funding that is required. We always have, dating back to the 1990s, especially when certain immigration challenges happen along that motel strip and there are so many kids. The teachers, in particular, have a real, big challenge because you have kids coming in and out of some of their classes. They may be in a classroom for a short period of time, and then they transition out into permanent housing somewhere else. It is a challenge specific to your neighbourhood. It's something that that community has dealt with for many years, sometimes very well.

I do completely appreciate the challenge that they, and some areas of Etobicoke and some parts of Ottawa, face

when it comes to dealing with the challenges of new communities coming in in a very quick and short—you've done a great job of it. They really, really have done a heroic job, frankly, in Scarborough, in your community, for many, many years, but they've always gotten the help that they need. Sometimes they just need a little bit more. I absolutely agree with you.

MPP Andrea Hazell: I just want to make sure I ask the question and it is on record, so when I'm here next year and you are the Minister of Education, I can come back to you with this question.

1700

Hon. Paul Calandra: It's always going to be a challenge for Scarborough, because they've always lived up to the challenge and they've always done such a good job of it. So, it's probably always a question you're going to always want to ask me.

MPP Andrea Hazell: Okay. I want to go on to the backlog for school repairs. The repairs now exceed \$16 billion, and I'm just asking you, when will your ministry table a credible plan? Like, do you have a plan to get rid of the backlog? In June, I visited about 17 schools and took part in their graduation, and because of the air quality, three students fainted. I'm talking about all across three schools, not just one, so it's really bad. The quality of air—are you doing anything about this?

Hon. Paul Calandra: Look, when it comes to the repair backlog, when it comes to building new schools, again, in your community—if you don't mind, we'll focus on your community. West Hill is an older school, right, but it serves a very diverse population. So, many of the schools in your area, the high schools, are some of our older schools. That's why it's so important that when you have the surplus property, the school board does something about it; they don't just sit on it. So, it's not about the billions that we are putting in to address some of the backlogs.

That is one part of it, but the boards also have to do their part. When you don't sell the surplus property to fix some of the challenges in that local community—think about it. I mean, you better than me, MPP Hazell. Just, again, on that property alone, if I'm not mistaken, that's a 14-acre property in a high-needs area. It's a very high-needs area but still a very valuable property that could be used to help offset the repair backlog, and I wish that was it. There is land that's available that is sitting vacant in other parts of Toronto. There's land that is available in Ottawa, in Hamilton. So they have to do their part as well. We will do our part, but they also have to do their part. Bill 33 allows us to step in and help boards understand that a school that sits idle without anybody in it is not a school that helps the students in the system.

MPP Andrea Hazell: But in the meantime of that process going through, these are our vulnerable kids that are sitting every day in these schools that badly need these repairs, and I'm just worried about the air quality. I'm just focusing on the air quality, because what I have experienced—

Hon. Paul Calandra: Through the pandemic, Minister Lecce did provide air filtration systems through—

MPP Andrea Hazell: I can walk the schools in my riding and tell you what doesn't have air quality.

Hon. Paul Calandra: The funding was there for them to put the air filtration systems in it.

MPP Andrea Hazell: Because in the summer; I'm talking about June—

Hon. Paul Calandra: Are you talking about the heat, like, air conditioning?

MPP Andrea Hazell: Yes, the heat. In June, like there is no way for the students to get away from it. We're just—

Interjection: The temperature.

Hon. Paul Calandra: Yes, air conditioning you're talking about, yes.

MPP Andrea Hazell: That's a huge concern.

But I want to move on to a third or second question—I don't know where I am in the round. I got the number: It's 1,813 schools in the province. So, I'm not just supporting the schools in my riding, and I know you've explained about selling off a school that has been there for 10 years that is not being used. These are great ideas, but we're—I think we said \$16 billion behind in the backlog. What are your plans to make sure that we've solved that issue and not waiting to sell private lands?

Hon. Paul Calandra: As I said, we have an over \$23-billion program. It is the highest level of funding that we've ever had in this province in the shortest period of time in order to deal with not only the repair backlog but also to deliver new schools to different communities, which then allows you to decommission some of the older schools, and we're seeing that in a number of—so, when we go back to the Near North, the brand new, state-of-the-art school there that will eventually open, JK to 12, allows two very old schools to be decommissioned, one which will go to the French board and the other one which will just simply be decommissioned and can be sold, but kids will have a brand new, state-of-the-art school with daycare available to them. So it is double: When you build a new, state-of-the-art school, it allows you to take an old property, in many instances, out of commission and use those resources to put back in. So, really, the funding does allow us to do that in a bigger way than we have ever done before in the province, frankly.

But it's not just about that, though. School boards also have to play a role in this, and that's why it is also our responsibility to ensure that boards play a role.

MPP Andrea Hazell: I have a minute?

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): You have four minutes and forty seconds.

MPP Andrea Hazell: Thank you.

I'm going to switch on a whole different realm of questions here. Are there any plans to revise—and this is a hot topic, a very hot topic. Are you looking at revising your class size model? It's too big for one teacher to—I think it's 23 students.

Hon. Paul Calandra: I think it's 24, right?

MPP Andrea Hazell: Twenty-four? Yes, so—

Interjection.

MPP Andrea Hazell: Are you going to revise that model?

Hon. Paul Calandra: Well, as you know, next year we open up negotiations with our teachers and that is often something that is handled through direct negotiations with our teacher partners.

MPP Andrea Hazell: Can you detail that? Because I need to take this back to my people in Scarborough—Guildwood and I need to be able to explain that to them. Are we going to be revisiting the capping of class sizes?

Hon. Paul Calandra: As I say, it's something that has always been a part of our negotiation with our teacher partners in the system. I think right now it's a cap of 24 on the elementary side. But again, in the new year, we'll enter into negotiations with our teacher partners and it has never not been something that they have brought forward as well.

MPP Andrea Hazell: Okay. I'm good.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): We'll now go to the independent member. MPP Clancy.

Ms. Aislinn Clancy: I just want to echo that the caps need to—I think you could show leadership in this area—caps on kindergarten classrooms especially. And especially investments in those kindergarten prep programs would be a great investment between MCCSS and yourselves. I see so many kids who show up at the first day of school completely unprepared. I was a school social worker for 11 years and the shock is appalling. Especially with COVID: We know that COVID just led to major maturity backsliding, and the kids are really not okay. That's where a lot of these behaviours showed up. It wasn't the same before.

I appreciate that we kind of use a formula and model as we go along, but I have to tell you, as somebody who was in it until 2023, that the kids are not okay. So the demand for some of this special education funding has really changed; it's been transformational.

That's why we do end up with a big demand for EAs and we do see a higher—I'm going to say that we don't quite cover all the sick days for teachers. I'm just curious: I have a question about fail-to-fills. Are you collecting data from the school boards on the fail-to-fills? So that's when principals are scrambling every day to try to ensure that classrooms are staffed, and that's not including EAs, oftentimes.

Hon. Paul Calandra: Look, we've heard from a lot of principals and vice-principals that one of their biggest challenges has been staff absenteeism. Many of our principals and vice-principals feel less like educators and more like human resource managers because of the high level of absenteeism. I accept that teachers are going to have a higher level of absenteeism, just given the fact that they're dealing with children who are going to bring sicknesses to them. I think we all accept that. I'm not sure that we collect—we try to collect data from boards, but this has been a problem—

Ms. Aislinn Clancy: Could I get that data? Could somebody follow up with me on the data?

Hon. Paul Calandra: Let me finish, because that is one of the problems that we have, whether it's in education, whether it was my time as Minister of Municipal Affairs

and Housing: It's the province's inability to have the data that it requires to make appropriate decisions. It was a problem at municipal affairs and housing, and it is a problem that exists between the ministry and our school boards. It is not easy for us to get data. We have to ask them to submit that data, and sometimes it doesn't come on time. But it is something that I want to address and I want to fix because we don't have access to critical data in the right amount of time.

Ms. Aislinn Clancy: Yes, because there are two things. I think that data would tell us a lot about why kids miss out on their special education. I heard a story of a special teacher who, out of two weeks, was able to provide that reading recovery program for one day because she was covering other people.

1710

I think a lot of it has to do with workplace conditions. The kids are not okay. The situations have changed, and I will blame COVID, tech dependence and other things for the dysregulation in the students, and that's why I think the help of EAs is special.

I do think we need to improve the wages for EAs and ECEs. ECEs don't even have a wage grid. Could you explore funding ECEs in a way that has to do with their seniority and their expertise? Because I can imagine none of us in this room would want to work in a profession where we become experts, we go to school, and we get paid less than a lifeguard in a local municipality, who is getting paid more than someone who has gone to college and has been in the field of ECE for a very long time.

So ECEs, especially, and EAs—are you prepared to explore a wage grid so that we can adequately compensate these specialists?

Hon. Paul Calandra: We do have a wage grid, so I'm not certain where you're—

Ms. Aislinn Clancy: For ECEs.

Hon. Paul Calandra: In school, yes.

Ms. Aislinn Clancy: In schools—okay. But what about our child care centres?

Hon. Paul Calandra: Oh, child care centres.

Interjection.

Hon. Paul Calandra: Yes, go on.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): Please state your name and your title.

Ms. Holly Moran: My name is Holly Moran. I'm the assistant deputy minister for early years and child care with the Ministry of Education.

There's not currently a wage grid for the ECEs in child care, but what we have introduced is a wage floor—

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): Please speak into the mike.

Ms. Holly Moran: Sorry. I'm too far back in the chair.

We don't currently have a wage grid for ECEs in child care programs, but what we have introduced is a wage floor that matches the entry-level wage for the ECE in the collectively bargained full-day kindergarten classroom. So the workers are paid the same at the entry level.

We've also introduced, for the ECEs in child care, a dollar-an-hour wage increase year over year during the term of the CWELCC agreement to match the—

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): Thank you. We'll now move on to the government side. I recognize MPP Wai.

Hon. Paul Calandra: The time doesn't last very long, eh?

Ms. Aislinn Clancy: That's why I need to chase you.

Mrs. Daisy Wai: Before I ask my question, I would like to say thank you to the minister and the ministers before you. I have to say, before 2018, I was so disappointed with the education system that I was finally willing to put myself forward to run as an MPP. I have seen the generation that are poor in math when they go through discovery math, and when they go through—like now, when the minister is getting everything back to the basics and letting them learn about the finance and everything.

I really thank you when you mentioned to me how important it is when you focus now on students, on teachers and for parents. Parents bring their children to Canada as immigrants because they want to give a good education for them. With that, I just want to say thank you very much.

I would like to ask the questions. Please help me to make sure that this thing is being carried through properly. Through you, Chair, families want confidence that the local school boards are managing resources responsibly and focusing on student outcomes. That's why I care about the outcomes.

Minister, how is the government promoting stronger financial management and oversight within the school boards so that they can foster public trust in the education system and so that our children will be able to have proper education?

Hon. Paul Calandra: I think the most important piece of legislation that we have right now is, frankly, Bill 33, which is in front of the Legislature, and members will have an opportunity to vote on it, presumably soon. It allows the ministry to reassume its responsibility to ensure that our children, their parents and our teachers have the utmost confidence that the system is working on their behalf. There are far too many examples where that isn't the case. I've already touched on the five boards that we have assumed responsibility for. I think everybody understands the challenges that those five boards have, and I don't think that is acceptable to anybody.

Part of the exercise of Bill 33 is allowing the minister to move in much more quickly when a school board goes off the rails. But at the same time, I've made no secret of the fact that I am looking at a governance review. I'm reviewing how education is delivered in the province of Ontario, and I'm reviewing whether a trustee model is still the best way to deliver education. Is it the best way to support our teachers? Are there other things that we can do to support teachers as well in the classroom? Are there better tools to assist them in delivering the curriculum? Can the curriculum be more focused than it is right now so that there are fewer divisions, but, more importantly, that teachers have the resources and the tools that they need to deliver on that curriculum?

Again, as the members have raised: Having new, state-of-the-art schools to replace older buildings that no longer function in a positive way for students is another way of doing it. But there are also other things too, like the focus on the trades, allowing students to move into the trades much more quickly than we would have in the past—very, very, very important tools to ensure that we reach every single child who wants to have clear and positive path in the system.

At the core of this, at the core of all of these changes, is ensuring that we work with teachers, that they are the leaders within the system—far too often, they are not the leaders in the system; they should be—and that they have the resources that they need to deliver the highest quality of education for our students. If I've heard it once, I've heard it a million times from every teacher that I've spoken to: "Let me do what I am paid to do. Let me do what I want to do. I want to be a teacher. I don't want to be a parent. Let me teach. Give me the tools and resources I need to deliver the best quality of education possible." So, all of the things that we are doing are refocusing the system on providing teachers the resources and the tools that they need so that our students can succeed.

Mrs. Daisy Wai: Thank you very much, Minister. I can see the future.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): I recognize MPP Leardi.

Mr. Anthony Leardi: Through you, Chair, to the minister: When I was an elementary school teacher, we had a wonderful, wonderful program in the Essex county school system. It was called VIP: Values, Influence and Peers. That was a program delivered to children in grade 6, and this was a program that taught them to stay away from drugs, to stay away from alcohol until they were old enough to handle alcohol and to practise and put into place good habits. That program was always delivered by a police officer. When I saw the police officer walk into my school and the grade 6 students light up and be so happy to engage with a real police officer on a positive basis, that really, really brought home the message that having police in our schools to deliver a program like Values, Influences and Peers was so vital to the proper development of good students and to good citizens, because I believe in developing good citizens.

That's why I was very, very surprised to hear that the Leader of the Opposition referred to officers in schools as part of a school-to-prison pipeline. I was very, very surprised to hear that phrase, because that is utterly, utterly the opposite of what I experienced in real life as an elementary school teacher. I would like to hear the minister answer this question: Is this government going to remain focused on ensuring that every student learns in an environment that is safe and welcoming and engaging positively with law enforcement officers?

Hon. Paul Calandra: Absolutely. First and foremost, I think we all remember—I mean, I'm significantly older than many of you, I suppose. But some of my memories, whether it was in high school, when the police officers came with a wrecked car and they talked about the impact

of drinking and driving in communities—they went to every single classroom and taught us this is what could happen. They taught us about the punishments associated with drinking and driving.

This was back in the 1980s, when I was a child at elementary school in grade 4. The police officer came into the classroom. The first question they always get, I'll never forget—I can't remember the officer's name. The first question—he says, "I'm not going to show you my weapon, so don't ask me, but ask me any other question that you want." By the time we left that class, we were excited and happy. He was forceful in his messaging, but we felt safe and secure with him at that young age. So to remove that from the system I think was a very, very big mistake.

1720

Now, not all schools, not all boards removed the SRO program. As I said, in MPP Bouma's riding, they have a very, very successful program. And then, in other boards, I talk to teachers, and they say, "Help us bring them back. Please bring them back because our students need to see the positive aspects of policing." One teacher in particular said to me, "Whether our board wants it or not, they're important. They're important to us. So, please, don't listen to the noise. Do what has to be done and bring the police back in."

As I speak to our policing officials, they're excited to come back in boards where they've been excluded from. They're excited to work with boards, to bring back a program that works for that individual board.

I've talked to a lot of students. When we were in Brant—again, not to keep bringing it up, but when they asked at the end of that, "Who wants to be in policing?" three quarters of the kids put up their hand. But it wasn't just about being a police officer. Some wanted to be crime scene photographer; some wanted to get into forensics. We had a couple that wanted to answer 911 calls and be on dispatch. It was amazing what came out of that. It was a positive interaction.

So, it's not just about schools being safe. It is about returning respect and helping people understand that our police are people that we can depend upon, that we should trust, and it fosters a positive relationship with our teachers, our students. Ultimately, our parents feel that their children are more connected with law enforcement that way. I think it's a very positive thing and we can do it in a positive and professional way, and we can work with boards to ensure that everybody feels safe with it.

I haven't heard that quote. Sorry. I didn't know that the Leader of the Opposition had said that.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): I recognize MPP Denault.

MPP Billy Denault: Chair, through you: I want to talk briefly about volunteerism, Minister, because volunteerism is very important in our communities, especially in rural communities like where I'm from. Volunteerism and education foster civic pride, mentorship and collaboration between parents, educators and students.

So my question is, through you, Chair: Can the minister talk about the new measures in Bill 33 that will help

further recognize students who go above and beyond volunteering in our communities?

Hon. Paul Calandra: Yes, that's a good question. The community service hours are—a lot of students take it one of two ways, right? Some of them find it a challenge, and then there's the mad dash or mad scramble at the end of a term to get it done. But then there are those that love the opportunity that comes with volunteering and community service.

Bill 33 puts in place some additional measures to recognize those students that go above and beyond. I'm actually heartened that it is more often the case—and I hear this from a lot of educators—that kids have far exceeded the bare minimum. They have said to us, "Listen, you should recognize the standouts, although there are even more than you could have ever possibly imagined." So Bill 33 allows us to do that with a recognition of those who have gone above and beyond. I am actually quite excited by that, frankly, because it's an idea that really came from educators who said, "Here are my superstars."

I went to one class. It was a summer school, actually. The teacher was excited by it. She said, "In one of my classes, every single one of those students will be receiving recognition because they have far surpassed it. And some of them are here during the summer, volunteering their time right now."

So it is a good, positive way just to recognize those who go above and beyond, but I think it'll become the norm. As things become more competitive in society, I think it gives kids a leg-up, frankly. It's actually quite a good initiative that really comes from the classroom.

MPP Billy Denault: Thank you.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): Next question? I recognize MPP Pang.

Mr. Billy Pang: Since I got elected as a former school board trustee in 2014, I've committed to more than 40 parents' groups throughout the GTA. Many, many groups are from Toronto, so when they heard about the lucky draw system for the special education, they were in an uproar.

Through you, Mr. Chair: Our education system is built on the principles of fairness, choice and opportunity. When the TDSB announced changes to the application process for its specialty schools—Minister, can you explain why the government directed the supervisor at the Toronto District School Board to change the merit-based application process for the specialty programs?

Hon. Paul Calandra: It's interesting. When I became the minister, there were two areas that were obviously a challenge: the amount of calls that we were getting from parents' frustration in the Ottawa-Carleton board, and the amount of calls that that we were getting with respect to the lottery system in Toronto—

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): One minute.

Hon. Paul Calandra: —not just from parents, but also from students who were losing their motivation at many of these specialized programs. Across the board, it was one of our top challenges. We knew that we had to move quickly.

We ordered the supervisor to review the lottery system and see if we could move back to a merit-based system. I'm happy that the TDSB moved back in that direction. We're seeing, across the board, parents, teachers and students excited by the change back to a merit-based system.

Mr. Billy Pang: When you reversed the system, did you hear anything from the parents that they appreciate—

Hon. Paul Calandra: Yes; a lot of students, to be honest with you. I received a lot of messages from students—

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): Thank you, Minister.

We have one hour and five minutes left. Do you guys want to take a five-minute break? If you do, put your hand up.

Interjections.

Hon. Paul Calandra: I've just had four glasses of water, so—

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): We'll take a five-minute break, starting now. It's 5:27.

The committee recessed from 1728 to 1732.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): We're starting back up again, and we'll go to the official opposition. I recognize MPP Pasma.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: Two years ago, funding for destreaming was over \$100 million dollars; last year, it was \$3 million; and this year, it's only \$400,000. That's a 99.6% cut in two years for an approach that was necessary but has never been adequately funded in order to succeed. Teachers say that destreaming, as it's been put into practice, is letting some students down because they can't get the support that they need in large classes and there aren't adequate resources.

How can you justify a 99% cut in funding for destreaming when these students need more support, not less?

Hon. Paul Calandra: I think that part of this funding then goes into core education, right? As the students transition into a destreamed environment, that becomes part of their core education funding.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: And your core education funding cuts have taken more than 5,000 educators out of the system, so it's kind of a cyclical argument here that you've cut funding for destreaming so that kids could get support through core education funding, which you've also cut. No matter which stream we're talking about here, these kids aren't getting the supports that they need. They are in classes that are too large, and they don't have the education workers available. This is setting kids up to fail, not setting kids up for success.

Why isn't the funding there to actually support destreaming and make it successful? Because these kids deserve that.

Hon. Paul Calandra: I guess I would—not "I guess," I know I absolutely disagree with you that funding has decreased. As a matter of fact, the vote in front of you has an increase in funding of over \$3 billion, and it has an over 3% increase in core education funding. It also highlights the fact, and the spending plan highlights the fact, that there will be more investments and higher investments made in education over the next number of years.

The funding this year is significantly higher than the funding last year. The funding last year was significantly higher than the funding the year before it, and the funding the year before it was significantly higher than the year before that. Every single year funding has increased across the province of Ontario.

It is true that we are putting more money into core education funding, so once students achieve success in one area, that funding—and something that I want to ensure—becomes part of the core education system. There has not been a cut to education; in fact, there has been a significant increase to education. You can continue to repeat something that is untrue. You've said you've read the estimates. You said that you've looked at it. You see in front of you an over \$3-billion increase. You see an over 3% increase in core education funding. You see a significant increase in capital funding.

So across the board, the funding that we are providing in education is at record levels. You're seeing a record level of funding on special education. At every single point, the government is increasing funding.

But again, as I said earlier, I really don't think it matters to parents that we are at record levels. What matters is—

Ms. Chandra Pasma: Chair, I'm reclaiming my time, because this isn't about my question, which was actually about destreaming—

Hon. Paul Calandra: What are the results that their kids are getting?

Ms. Chandra Pasma: But Minister—

Hon. Paul Calandra: Are the kids getting the results that they want, and are they being delivered to the highest potential? That is what we're looking at right now.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): Thank you, Minister. Go ahead.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: I don't have much time to ask questions on behalf of the people of Ontario, so I'd appreciate it if you showed them some respect and actually answered the question that I've asked.

Inflation since 2018 is 23%. Per-student funding increased only 18%. That's a cut. If you have any understanding about how funding works, what inflation means, what population growth means, that is a cut.

You don't have to take my word for it as an opposition MPP. You can take the word of the Financial Accountability Officer, who, as I said, is there to provide the facts for the people of Ontario, not partisan spin. The FAO says that per-student funding in Ontario was at the lowest rate it's been in the last 10 years and that your government's spending plan will lower it by another \$400 over the next three years.

My next question is, what is the total compensation for each supervisor you've appointed, including salary, benefits and any performance bonus?

Hon. Paul Calandra: Supervisors are eligible—and correct me if I'm wrong—for \$2,000 a day to a maximum of three days a week.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: Sorry, \$200 a day?

Hon. Paul Calandra: For \$2,000 a day to a maximum of three days a week.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: For \$2,000 a day, okay. What about benefits?

Hon. Paul Calandra: It's inclusive. I don't know about benefits.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: And there are no bonuses?

Hon. Paul Calandra: No.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: Okay. Thank you. I'm going to turn the rest of this round over to MPP Armstrong.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): Go ahead, MPP Armstrong.

Ms. Teresa J. Armstrong: Thank you. Good evening, Minister, and thank you for attending estimates. I'm going to just change the questions to child care for the moment.

As you know, there have been a few reports out recently. The Auditor General did an in-depth review of the child care file. Also, the Financial Accountability Officer did one as well. So the timing is actually quite good.

You're aware, obviously, that there's a time limit that's coming up in March, that we have to sign on to a new agreement. I understand your ministry has signed on in principle. However, that isn't an assurance that it will continue.

One of the things that I've been advocating for on many aspects of the child care file—it's just not one focus—is the workforce that needs to happen, because we can build all the spaces we want, but if we don't have the workforce to fill those spaces, we're not going to have the child care services.

The Auditor General did find in a recent report that the ministry doesn't track metrics necessary for success. You yourself admitted just a little bit ago that you don't have a lot of data, that you're not getting data that you need in order to make successful programs in the education file.

Again, I'm maybe giving some background information. In 2023, the ministry created an advisory workforce. They assured us that all the things that you could ever want are being discussed, are being addressed. We did ask for that workforce report to be made public, but that didn't happen.

So I took steps in creating a bill, as you probably are aware, Bill 191, which was called the child care workforce committee bill. It took it back to experts, people who work in the field, academics, all kinds of populations to actually come to the table and make sure that we have a strategy that actually is going to recruit workers into the workforce, retain them and as well look at the wages because the ministry, the FAO and the Auditor General did indicate that we are not the top-paying province when it comes to child care for registered ECEs and ECEs.

1740

What happened was, this all came to light, and—I'll be honest with you—I thought that I was expecting more when we took on this early learning child care program, the Canada-wide early years. And I thought the government at the time said they're negotiating a deal, it's going to be the best deal, just wait and see—because Ontario was behind in signing on originally. Now we've come to the point where it's been revealed the government doesn't

collect wait-list data; it doesn't update estimates on how many workers you need. That was also not there. You haven't analyzed for child care costs in Ontario that differ from other provinces and territories, and you haven't established clear performance targets for key partners of the workforce strategy. Those things are actually what the Auditor General said. Quite honestly, in Ontario, we have higher costs. We're actually the highest cost in child care in all of the provinces.

One of the things I'm going to quote from the Auditor General, on page 45—this is what the Auditor General said about the government—"They do not measure the effectiveness of specific ministry initiatives to improve on recruitment and retention of RECEs, such as the wage enhancement grant, the qualifications upgrade program ... and the dual credit program. The ministry does not have clear targets for how many RECEs were expected to be trained and to join the child-care sector through these initiatives." That kind of statement and the fact that you're not following through with that data and collecting it to make sure this program is successful—I'm very worried that when you sign on to this—I hope you're going to sign on to the agreement—that it's going to be a successful program.

I'll wrap it up with my question shortly.

I know that you've also come out and said that the not-for-profit agencies haven't stepped up to fill all the spaces, but I know that they want to fill those spaces. This government changed the funding formula twice. In the most recent one there's a cap of 8% for profits. So, that 8% is a big margin that could be used where not-for-profit agencies can actually deliver the services without a profit, whereas you have the private sector—they're going to want their 8% profit.

So with that, I just want to ask the minister: What measures are being taken to track these metrics and has the government allocated any additional resources to ensure the child care program can be a success?

Hon. Paul Calandra: Well, let me just start by this: We're obviously still working closely with the federal government with respect to the extension of the of the CWELCC program. It is something that Minister Hadju and myself have been actively engaged in negotiations on over the last week to 10 days. I'm encouraged and I'm optimistic that we're going to come to an agreement. As I said, the federal minister has been working very closely with us and very positively, despite certain challenges that they have as well—so, in an optimistic—there.

As you know, though, of course, child care is delivered through system service managers in the province of Ontario, and that does provide a bit of a challenge because when we—not a challenge; it's bad choice of words. It provides a challenge in the access to data that we would have that other provinces are able to get much more quickly. We do request data from the system service managers, all of whom collect it in a much different way. So, York region collects it different than Toronto and so on and so forth. You're not wrong in that being a difficulty or a challenge. It's a challenge not only in us getting the

information and the data that we need in a timely fashion, but it also becomes—and I would just say she's done amazing—you've done amazing work on the child care front. The entire team has done just extraordinary work on the child care front. But it is a challenge when—in full disclosure, in all honesty—we're to provide data to the federal government. It also becomes a challenge because we need to collect that data from all of the system service managers. So we have to find a better way of collecting and accumulating that data, using it in a way that benefits ourselves, benefits the child care operators and ultimately our partners in the federal government. So I don't disagree with you on that.

CWELCC has highlighted some of the deficiencies in us collecting the data that we need to support some of the arguments with the federal government. But having said that—I know we're very fond of the FAO here today—the FAO did also highlight that there was a \$2-billion shortfall in the federal program. But again, I'm very, very, very optimistic and encouraged, just given the attention that Minister Hajdu has given the file over the last little bit. It has been a very, very positive working relationship, so I'm encouraged.

Part of that, too, is some of the federal funding also went into staffing that was required. Again, it's a challenge that we're all facing. When we met with ministers of education across the country, they were all faced with the same challenges on recruiting people and their ability to come through for CWELCC, based on the challenges of getting the appropriate staffing in.

Ms. Teresa J. Armstrong: I appreciate your answers or attempt to answer. I only have a small amount of time left on this round.

I encourage the government to make that data that they're seeking public, so that you can get information and advice and consultation and opinions from experts in academia because—

Hon. Paul Calandra: Completely agree.

Ms. Teresa J. Armstrong: Yes. So I hope that that will happen, because under the last minister, there was not enough transparency when it came to what was going on. Now, with the new Auditor General's report and the FAO, I'm not surprised. I'm surprised at the degree that things are kind of off track when it comes to that, but not surprised that it happened.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): One minute remaining.

Ms. Teresa J. Armstrong: The other thing I would like to quickly add is: Can you please assure us that not-for-profits will maintain the minimum at least 70%? I would like to see that grow, because I believe that child care and seniors care shouldn't be a private, profiteering enterprise. But can you agree that at least the 70% that's in the agreement now will be sustained?

Hon. Paul Calandra: As I said, I don't want to—Minister Hajdu and myself were working very closely on an agreement on CWELCC. I don't want to see any spaces that are available for parents going unused. Whether it's in the not-for-profit or for-profit, if there is a space or if there

is funding available, I think it needs to be delivered to parents.

Whether you're private or not-for-profit, you have to follow the rules as set out by the CWELCC agreement. You follow the exact same regulations and regulatory burden that anybody else faces. But ultimately, at the top of it for me is that no space that is available for—

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): Thank you, Minister. We'll now move on to the third party, and I recognize MPP Hazell.

MPP Andrea Hazell: My question is, can you explain why per-pupil funding in Ontario continues to lag behind inflation despite the growing pressures faced by school boards? We know that schools are being underfunded.

Hon. Paul Calandra: It is actually higher than inflation; this year, it's 3.2%, if I'm not mistaken, which is higher than inflation—

MPP Andrea Hazell: Are we playing catch-up?

Hon. Paul Calandra: —and in periods of deflation during portions of COVID, we did not claw back, either. We actually increased funding quite substantially during that time period as well.

We've increased funding over and above inflation on the capital side, as well, and that is projected to continue to increase over the next number of years through the estimates that you're voting on.

MPP Andrea Hazell: I don't know what I'm missing. But there's a follow-up question asking you to justify the record of investments you're making when the boards are being forced to cut staff and special programs just to balance their budgets. I think I'm missing something. I'm not keeping up with your explanation.

Hon. Paul Calandra: Again, the per-pupil funding model has continued to increase, and so that funding, frankly, follows the student. We have a number of boards that are able to operate on balance or in surplus positions with the same level of funding, and we still have other boards that have made decisions that are outside of the funding formula that are causing them some challenges.

Again, if you look at Dufferin-Peel Catholic, trustees there made a decision that has put the board to the brink of bankruptcy, and the government has had to step in.

MPP Andrea Hazell: But that's not all of them.

Hon. Paul Calandra: It's not a per-pupil funding issue; it is a decision that trustees made that moved that board to the brink of bankruptcy.

You look at Thames Valley—the very same situation. Decisions were made or not being made that turned a surplus into a deficit.

Ultimately, I think what matters is student achievement. Do the teachers have the resources that they need to provide our students with the highest quality of education and the resources that they need, and can we readjust resources to follow the teachers in the classroom as opposed to the whims of trustees and certain boards?

1750

MPP Andrea Hazell: Minister, Ontario's teacher shortage has reached a crisis point. I'm pretty sure you already know that from the cuts to funding in our public

education system. What specific measures are you taking beyond temporary certification pathways to retain qualified teachers?

Hon. Paul Calandra: Yes, we're looking at that. Depending on who you ask, I would say that, whether there's a teacher shortfall or not, I tend to think that we can do more to get teachers into the classroom quicker.

We are taking a look, as I said earlier on, with Minister Quinn about teacher certification and how long that certification period needs to be. But I also have heard from some of our partners that there might not necessarily be a teacher shortfall. So we're analyzing the data now.

But I think, suffice it to say, that two things need to happen: We need to get prospective teachers through the system quicker, and we also need—one of the things I've heard constantly is that prospective teachers need to spend more time in front of kids before they get into the classroom full-time. So that is something that I'm looking at very, very closely. I'm working with teachers on that right now.

MPP Andrea Hazell: Can I just ask you a follow-up question?

Hon. Paul Calandra: Yes.

MPP Andrea Hazell: Do you track teachers' burnout? I'm very curious about that. Because teachers are experiencing a lot of burnout situations, right? We're saying we're not short-staffed, so do you have data on that?

Hon. Paul Calandra: Look, we collect data from the boards with respect to teacher absences. I think there can be no doubt that, over the last couple of years, there has been a challenge on—I've heard it from principals and vice-principals. They are faced with higher absentee rates than they ever have been before.

I also have heard anecdotally from some of our partners that one of the challenges with new teachers in the system is that they are not spending as much time in front of kids as they should in the training process, which then leads them to lack a complete understanding of how challenging the job is when they get there. So I think we have to do that. We have to find out what it is that is causing some of the challenges in the system, but we will work on that with our partners over the next little bit. I've gotten advice from the unions, I've gotten advice from principals, and I've gotten a lot of advice from teachers themselves on what some of the challenges are with respect to absenteeism.

I'll say this, as I said earlier: I accept that teachers are going to have a higher absentee rate than most people just given the fact where they are, who they're working with, the amount of people that they come into contact with. But it is something that we are absolutely tracking and absolutely working with our partners to address. It's part of the reason why we want better safety in schools, more resources for teachers.

I'll hear from teachers too—and I promise I'll stop here and not take your time. But a lot of teachers tell me this: "I need more resources in the classroom. I shouldn't have to be begging and pleading a parent for a box of Kleenex. I should have more resources in my classroom to address some of the challenges." And that leads to part of the

difficulty in the classroom. So we're going to address that and make a better system that takes away the division in the school system and allows teachers to focus on what they want to do—and that's teach—and provide kids with the best opportunity to succeed.

MPP Andrea Hazell: Thank you.

Here's my last question and it's around mental health and the students. We hear a lot of the students going through that crisis. It's coming off COVID; it hasn't stopped. We do not have enough teachers with those types of experiences to look after the kids with those psychological and mental issues.

I am just worried that these kids are going to fall through the cracks. I'm talking about underserved students here. There is a ratio—there's data out there that says you can save them from zero to seven, and after seven they fall through the cracks and after that, that's jail time when they come into the teenage world. This is affecting us—my people; the underserved people. I'm just asking you, what implementations have you got planned to put better resources in school to save our kids?

Hon. Paul Calandra: Look, again, this is one of those things I can tell you: We've put more money into mental health, right? Great. Not the answer that you want, and I appreciate that.

What we're seeing is that a lot of different boards have tried different things when it comes to addressing mental health issues within their boards, and we fund that in a way that is—I don't want to say unorganized, because it's not. The school boards are providing applications. We give them funding, but I think that we have to do even more than the funding increases that we have done to centralize and refocus what are different pots of money for mental health into a more focused pot that all boards can use. At the same time, we have to work with Minister Jones and Minister Thanigasalam, who are primarily responsible for delivering mental health services.

Look, I am very, very understanding, through personal reasons, how important it is that we address mental health with students and parents when they need it. It's not just about the service; it's about how you access the service. A lot of people don't even know how to access the services that are available to them. There may be a multitude of services available, but they don't know how to access it.

In your community—not just to single out your community, because I've been there, in the sense that if you're a new Canadian or you're a child of an immigrant who's facing challenges, you might not necessarily know how to go about accessing that service and you might not know who to go to. West Hill community services does extraordinary work for kids in that community.

I think it has to be more focused, more centralized, and it has to be more a bigger part of core education funding. We have graduation coaches, and they do phenomenal work, but we have to do a better job of having more people have access to that. So it's twofold.

MPP Andrea Hazell: Can I hear that name again? Because I—

Ms. Denise A. Cole: Graduation coaches.

MPP Andrea Hazell: Okay. Of Ontario?

Ms. Denise A. Cole: It's just a role.

MPP Andrea Hazell: Oh, okay.

Hon. Paul Calandra: It's a role that is in our high schools.

MPP Andrea Hazell: Sorry, because I have to share this information with the people in my constituency as well.

Interjections.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): Say that again, please.

Ms. Denise A. Cole: Denise—

MPP Andrea Hazell: I thought you were speaking to me.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): I wasn't.

Ms. Denise A. Cole: Denise Cole.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): Can you move the mike a little closer to yourself? Thank you.

Ms. Denise A. Cole: Yes, sorry—Denise Cole, Deputy Minister of Education.

Graduation coaches are coaches that we fund in priority schools in priority neighbourhoods to work with the students to increase graduation rates.

MPP Andrea Hazell: Can I get the list of those schools that are in Scarborough–Guildwood that are priorities?

Ms. Denise A. Cole: Yes.

MPP Andrea Hazell: That would be very helpful. Thank you.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): Sorry. Unless you have another question—

MPP Andrea Hazell: I'm good.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): Okay. You're finished? You had four minutes and 44 seconds.

MPP Andrea Hazell: I've already grilled. I've got the answers I needed.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): All right, as long as you're happy.

We'll go to the independent member. I recognize MPP Clancy.

Ms. Aislinn Clancy: I'm going to just transition from that. I was a social worker, and often—I would say 100% of the time—I had more than 100 students on my caseload by the end of the year, oftentimes 120.

So I just want to say I think we can do more because you can imagine 120. I'm putting out fires, at best.

Hon. Paul Calandra: But you can appreciate it's not just in a school, right?

Ms. Aislinn Clancy: Pardon me?

Hon. Paul Calandra: It's not just in a school.

Ms. Aislinn Clancy: I'd go to people's homes.

Hon. Paul Calandra: Within the community, the services that are—

Ms. Aislinn Clancy: I need to make sure that I can transition people to services.

Hon. Paul Calandra: Exactly.

Ms. Aislinn Clancy: Because half of the time—

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): Let the minister answer—

Hon. Paul Calandra: No, no. Sorry, I interrupted her.

Ms. Aislinn Clancy: We're chatting.

Hon. Paul Calandra: I interrupted you.

Ms. Aislinn Clancy: I didn't ask anything.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): I just wanted—

Hon. Paul Calandra: No, no. Sorry.

Ms. Aislinn Clancy: Yes. Sorry.

Hon. Paul Calandra: That's my fault. Give her more time. I apologize.

Ms. Aislinn Clancy: Part of the gap is that there are wait-lists, and the transition of quality services is lacking. It's turned into a baseline of brief solution-focused stuff, so anybody with beyond your average mental health situation ends up on my caseload forever. I'd say that 100 to 120 is the norm. I worked in two different school boards, public and Catholic.

I think we do need more school social workers in schools because we are the front lines of helping kids and families know what's in the community and translate that into action.

I do have to say, one thing I need to ask—

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): MPP Clancy, I was informed your mike is not working. Can you use the one beside you?

Ms. Aislinn Clancy: Oh, okay. Can you hear me? I can hear me.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): Yes, that's what they're telling me.

Ms. Aislinn Clancy: Can you hear me?

Interjections.

Ms. Aislinn Clancy: Okay, we're good.

Can you comment? Under the Occupational Health and Safety Act, schools are considered industrial. They don't have their own, but health care has their own OHSA. I think there's a lot of weirdness to that because from what I hear from staff, a lot of the injuries at work have to do with students that they are teaching. There are a lot of classrooms.

Definitely in June—I have a lot of old schools in my riding. I get clips. They're showing me that the temperature in the classroom is over 30 degrees. Perhaps is there room in next year's budget to kind of explore how we can add some workplace safety in for staff working in these conditions?

1800

Hon. Paul Calandra: Look, I'll say this: I think our teachers, education workers have some of the hard-fought and well-deserved protections available to almost anybody in the workplace when it comes to supports through their contracting.

Having said that, we are funding, whether it's air conditioning in schools—the deputy reminded me that we are paying over \$675 million, to MPP Hazell's question, on air quality in schools. We're providing funding for cooling centres in schools. Not every school can be air conditioned, frankly. It just can't. I was the Minister of Long-Term Care, and it was a very challenging thing just to air condition our long-term-care homes. So, not every school can be air conditioned, but there are rooms within schools that can be. We are working on that very diligently

and school boards are working with us on it. Can we do better? Yes, we are. That's why we have such a level of record funding when it comes not only to air monitoring or air purification but also on cooling centres within schools.

Ms. Aislinn Clancy: Could you speak to the issue of overcrowding? Definitely, I know there's some mandated caps for junior classrooms and primary, but our kindergarten classes and our secondary school classes can get very crowded and it's physically not enough space for people to teach. What can we do to improve the ratios, because the crowding—I think these conditions—

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): One minute.

Ms. Aislinn Clancy: —the violent, explosive behaviour that can be harmful to staff, the heat and the crowding of classrooms leads to a lot of burnout and then people leave the profession. Can you talk about the overcrowding?

Hon. Paul Calandra: Yes, very quickly. That is why we are building many new schools; that's why we are adding on to so many of the older schools. A lot of the older schools in the system do not have the ability. And let's be honest, too: There was a rapid increase in population over a very short period of time that the province had to deal with coming out of COVID. So that is why there's also a record level of funding to increase the builds across the province of Ontario, and I'm very confident that it will be part of what we discuss with our partners as we enter into a new round of negotiations in the new year.

Ms. Aislinn Clancy: Okay. Thank you.

Hon. Paul Calandra: Sorry to go so fast, but I didn't want to—

Ms. Aislinn Clancy: Yes, yes, cross the finish line.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): Twelve seconds.

Ms. Aislinn Clancy: Thanks to all our education workers. I really appreciate the hard work they do every day.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): All right. Now we will go to the government side, and I recognize MPP Jordan.

Mr. John Jordan: Minister, you've raised questionable spending practices a few times, as well, and now these five boards I understand the government is trying to get back on track. These inappropriate expenses undermine our public confidence and take funds away from the students. So now, moving forward, how is the government strengthening accountability measures to ensure that educational funding is focused on learning, and how are we going to get public confidence back?

Hon. Paul Calandra: I think that is a really, really big part of it, public confidence in the system, and as I said at the outset too, it's not only the school boards themselves. Look, there have been lots of questionable decisions made by school boards, and when parents lose confidence in their school board, they show that lack of confidence. We see it in the Ottawa-Carleton board. As parents lost faith in a board that was literally a hot mess—people were arguing, resigning—parents chose to move their kids out of that system and into the Catholic system, which then puts pressure on the school because their per-student

funding is reduced. So it's not only wasteful spending; it's when trustees can't get along, when they move funding into areas that is no business of theirs to move it into.

You have, again, issues in Thames Valley. I think earlier I said that they were gross, and they're gross. There's no other way to describe what happened at Thames Valley. They took a surplus and turned it into a deficit so they could entertain themselves at the Skydome hotel. And it doesn't matter whether it's \$20,000, \$100,000, it's money that is completely out of the classroom.

You have the Near North school board; again, a board that's in a surplus situation, but where trustees could not care less that the decisions that they were making—they were in a conflict-of-interest situation; it didn't matter. It didn't matter that they were going into the community and sowing dissension, to stop something that they had already approved. It didn't matter to them that their director of education went from a salary of, like, \$185,000 to \$302,000—one of the highest paid directors of education in the province of Ontario, despite having one of the smallest number of schools and one of the lowest per pupil. He makes as much, almost, as the Toronto District School Board's director of education.

There's no accountability within that system. The decisions made by the Dufferin-Peel Catholic board trustees, which put their board to the point of bankruptcy where they could only meet payroll if the province stepped in—that was a decision of trustees. All of this—and the same goes with the Toronto Catholic system as well. All of these decisions that trustees make take money out of the classroom.

We talked about Brant Haldimand Catholic—some people say, you know, “Why are you being so mean to the trustee?” This is the trustee who went on a trip to Italy to buy artwork with his colleagues. “It's only \$12,000,” some people will say. “It's only 12,000 bucks. It's okay.” But no, it's not okay. It's \$12,000 that is not going into the classroom, and the \$12,000 is just him. It's \$200,000 that went into trying to protect these people from a bad decision that they had made. Again, a board that is in a surplus.

If I had the tools right now to take that board over, I would, but I don't. Because what happens when you make decisions like this, parents get angry and, ultimately, teachers are very, very, very frustrated. We expect teachers to deliver a quality of education. What do you say to a teacher when you see a school board trustee taking thousands of dollars to go buy—now, what makes a school trustee capable of buying artwork is beyond me; I don't know. They're not. But as the Minister of Education, how do I turn around to a teacher and say that's acceptable? How do I turn around to these teachers in the Near North school board who are teaching out of a half-demolished high school and say, “Ah, the trustees, God forbid, they just made a little bit of a mistake; they didn't mean to do it”? Well, they did.

That accountability is not just about getting trustees' expenses back on track. It's not just about a governance review, which we're undertaking. It is also about a system

which puts parents in conflict with teachers; a system that focuses a lot on division as opposed to bringing people together—and that has always been the focus of an education system.

A teacher at Peel, this summer, hit it best for me. She was mad, very angry. She took me aside and said, “At what point do you think we stop teaching kids to be good people? At what point do you think we stop teaching them that sharing is a quality or trait that everybody should have, that looking beyond somebody's differences is the way to building a better person?” She said, “When did you think we stopped doing that?” I said, “I don't think you ever stopped doing that.” She said, “Exactly. We never stopped doing it. I don't need somebody mandating or telling me to teach kids to be good people. It's just what we do every single day, but you force me to get in the way of a parent, so stop doing that. Let me teach. Because if you let me teach, I will give you the best child you could ever imagine, and then just give me the tools to accomplish that goal.” I completely, completely agree with her.

It is many, many parts of it. Good-quality, state-of-the-art schools—we're delivering. A better, more focused curriculum with resources for teachers to deliver it—we are delivering on that. Refocusing the system, including our boards of education, on supporting teachers, on supporting our students—we are delivering it.

It's a lot of work, but ultimately, I think it will give parents the confidence that they need and it will give students the opportunity to succeed at a level that they have never been able to before. It's a back-to-basics approach, but it's also about us—when I say “us,” I mean the Ministry of Education—reasserting its responsibility for guiding education across the province of Ontario, so that all kids have access to the highest quality of education. It shouldn't matter where in the province you live, or under which board—Catholic, French, English or not—you should have the best opportunity to succeed.

1810

Sorry—long answer, but I get really very passionate about this, because that has not been the case, but it will be.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): I recognize MPP Wai.

Mrs. Daisy Wai: Ontario Day is an opportunity to celebrate shared heritage, diversity and achievements. It provides students with a chance to reflect on what it means to be part of Ontario's story.

Minister, can you tell the committee how the ministry, through Bill 33, is helping Ontario Day be reflected in schools, and how it will be used to promote civic pride and unity among students?

Hon. Paul Calandra: As you know, Ontario Day was a bill that was brought forward by our colleague Michael Parsa before he was the minister. I think it was unanimously approved by the House, as a matter of fact. I think a lot of us were very surprised that there wasn't already a day to focus our attention on how amazing the province is, and all of the good works from different people to help build this great province.

Again, it was an idea that came through the previous minister, frankly, if I'm being honest: Minister Dunlop. In

her consultations with teachers, when she was out and about, a lot of them said, “Why don’t we celebrate Ontario, and the great things in Ontario?” Some of them—a lot of them—didn’t know that there was such a thing as Ontario Day. She had the idea that we should put in the recognition not only as Ontario Day, but an opportunity to give teachers the ability to educate our kids on all of those people that helped build this province. I think it’s going to be wonderful.

But it just goes to show you that it doesn’t matter where you sit in the House; you can have an impact on all kinds of things in this province. I am sure that Michael Parsa, when he was not a cabinet minister, had not thought that an idea that he brought forward would one day be part of the Education Act. But again, it will be, and it is something I know a lot of our teachers are looking forward to.

But all credit on that goes to Minister Dunlop and the work that she did in advance of that—and also PA Pang; I know that he had a huge role in those consultations as well. He does all the work; I just take all the credit.

Mrs. Daisy Wai: Thank you.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): I recognize MPP Coe.

Mr. Lorne Coe: Chair, could I get a time check?

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): You have 5:17, sir.

Mr. Lorne Coe: Minister, you and I will know that parents and students across Ontario, including my riding of Whitby—I’ve got a north part of that riding, Brooklin, that you’ve been in a lot.

Hon. Paul Calandra: Yes.

Mr. Lorne Coe: Thank you for your support. Parents in Brooklin and other parts of Whitby are grateful for Ministry of Education’s investment, based on your leadership.

But they have also expressed frustration. It’s been recent that some school boards, under the management of trustees, once again, are cancelling cherished school traditions and experiences: everything from proms—they cancelled three proms—and overnight field trips to simple holiday celebrations like Halloween. These moments are an important part of growing up and help students build friendships, confidence and lasting memories.

Minister, can you speak to why it’s so important that children be allowed to be children, and how our government is working to ensure that school boards focus less on restrictive policies and more on creating positive, well-rounded experiences that support student well-being and joy in learning, like my two granddaughters?

Hon. Paul Calandra: I think it all comes back down to the same thing: School boards should focus on what brings people together and not what divides people.

I was speaking to the director of education in Durham and expressed my extreme disappointment that they would cancel prom in those areas. I asked very politely and suggested that they be brought back, so that the kids could celebrate the conclusion—and these are the same kids, let’s not forget, that also had challenges because of COVID and might not have even had a grade 8 graduation. So I’m hopeful that they will change their mind, and I have confidence that that they will.

But you know, on Halloween, we had some school boards where you couldn’t call it Halloween. It was called “pumpkins and plaid” or something like that at a couple of school boards. I don’t know what it was—“pumpkins and plaid.” You couldn’t say the word “Halloween.”

So, I would say this to all our school board friends: It is okay to celebrate Halloween. Next week, we’re going to be recognizing those brave men and women who sacrificed so much. And as I said last week, not to be a tough guy, but if I hear of one school that has not allowed for a recognition of Remembrance Day, then that’ll be the last decision that they make. I’ve heard today that there have been some schools that are refusing to allow veterans in in their uniform, so I will be looking at that and addressing that.

It is okay in a public school system to say, “Merry Christmas.” It’s also good to say, “Happy Diwali” and “Eid Mubarak.” Again: Bring people together; don’t divide them. Don’t put things in front of people that will just lead to conflict in a system. The whole purpose of our education system has always been that we deliver a better student, a better person when we bring people together, not when we divide them. The world didn’t fall apart when we said, “Happy Halloween.”

I don’t know of any instance where the saying of “Happy Halloween” or wearing a costume has caused students and the world to fall apart into chaos. And I think that is the problem: When schools and boards start making decisions that run counter to the student experience, then they have lost their way. That’s immediately what puts a teacher—because it’s the teacher. Don’t forget, when a school board makes this decision that you can’t say, “Happy Halloween,” who do you think bears the brunt of that decision? It’s not the school board trustee; it’s not the director of education. It’s the teacher, and it’s the parent who goes and expresses their disappointment to a teacher—

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): One minute.

Hon. Paul Calandra: —forcing a teacher into a decision or into commenting on something that they probably don’t agree with and they know is wrong.

That is what we are going to do. We are going to bring the system back to what it is meant to be, bring people together and provide a quality education. We’re not going to let anything stand in our way.

Mr. Lorne Coe: Thank you, Minister.

What’s clear here in what we’ve heard today is that Ontario’s education system stands at a pivotal moment. The government’s reforms are reshaping how schools operate, students learn and how boards are accountable.

How will these reforms, Minister, help us to prepare students for success in a rapidly changing world?

Hon. Paul Calandra: In a short period of time, let me just say this: I do think that we have the best education system, bar none, in the world. I think though we can make improvements on it. It’s not just a talking point that we have some of the best teachers on the planet—we do. They just need the ability to teach. They need the resources, better resources, in order to deliver the curriculum that

we're giving them, and that is what we're doing. It's about the Ministry of Education assuming its responsibility.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): Thank you, Minister.

We will now go the official opposition, and I recognize MPP Pasma.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: I want to go back to some areas where the Ministry of Education is not providing funding that covers the actual costs of school boards—costs that aren't controlled by boards and so, therefore, you're forcing them to take millions of dollars out of other parts of our school system.

I'm going to start with CPP and EI, which the rates of the premiums are controlled by the federal government, not by school boards—and you would know this because you were a member of a federal government.

But you have not provided funding to cover recent premium increases—increases that are mandatory. Boards can't not pay them simply because you don't fund them. This is costing boards across the province more than \$100 million a year more than what they're getting from you. So why aren't you funding it?

Hon. Paul Calandra: Again, as part of the collective agreement, we're increasing funding by over \$3 billion to school boards to address increases in the cost of delivering education. Primarily, that is the labour costs.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: Yes, but this is specifically about the costs of covering CPP and EI premium increases, which are not covered by collective agreements. They are set by the federal government, and the Council of Ontario Directors of Education says this is costing school boards across the province \$100 million. I'm sure we can all think of much better ways to be spending \$100 million than to be taking it away from special education and mental health supports and student transportation to cover CPP and EI—which, again, is set by the federal government, not by the school boards. So why aren't you covering it?

Hon. Paul Calandra: The good news is I'm not cutting any of the things that you just mentioned there. I'm increasing funding to student transportation. I've increased funding to special education. I've increased funding to the core education and I'm increasing funding to cover the costs of labour in our system by over \$3 billion.

1820

Ms. Chandra Pasma: We have deficits in all of those areas, so you're making them take funding out of areas where we already have a deficit and aren't providing sufficient supports to our children to cover these mandatory, statutory costs.

The cost to cover sick leave for teachers, education workers and administrators is another thing that school boards don't control. They don't bargain that as coverage—that's done centrally—but then you don't compensate them at the rate they have to pay and you don't compensate them for every position when somebody is sick. Either a board has to choose between going without a custodian, which I don't think we want to see happen, or paying to replace a position that you're not compensating them for. And so, as a result, boards are spending close to

double the amount on sick leave that they're getting from you. In 2024, that amount was \$253 million that they had to pay that you did not cover. There's no fix to that problem this year. Why not?

Hon. Paul Calandra: Again, the fix is an over \$3-billion investment in the cost of labour in the—in fact, it is what you voted on. I know that you voted against the budget, but it is part of the vote that is here. It's an over \$3-billion increase to cover the cost of labour within the education system.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: I will always vote for a budget that cuts funding to education, Minister.

I just want to point out that when you add up the areas that I have listed today, where boards are paying to maintain a level of service or to cover a mandatory cost with money that they are not getting from you, that's \$850 million for special education, \$50 million for student transportation, \$100 million for CPP and EI and \$250 million for sick leave. That's \$1.25 billion that our school boards have to come up with that you're not providing for the most basic things.

Why are you not properly funding our education system so that they can make sure that every kid has an EA if they need one, that they can access a mental health professional when they ask for one, that they are in a class where they can actually have the attention of the teacher when they need it, that they are in a safe, healthy school that is not falling down around their ears and that the school bus shows up on time and takes the correct route to school?

Hon. Paul Calandra: By your numbers, I'm overfunding the system, frankly, because the increase of funding is over \$3 billion just on the labour component. Over 3.2% on the core education funding—you came up with a total of \$1.25 billion, and you suggest I'm underfunding? The good news is that in this vote, it is an over \$3-billion increase in education funding, so, by your logic, we're overfunding by a couple billion dollars. But again, as I said earlier, I don't think parents care one way or another that we're at record levels of funding. What they want to know is that their kids are getting the best quality of education and that teachers have the resources to deliver that education, even when boards fail. That is what I'm going to continue to be focused on.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: Minister, I don't know where you studied math and economics, but perhaps a course with one of your new financial literacy coaches would be in order, because that is not at all what I said. What I said is you are not providing funding to cover these costs which are an essential component of our education system. When you don't do that, you are taking things away from our children. Our children are not receiving the highest quality education that they can. They are not getting the supports that they deserve. We are failing them and that is the result of your funding cuts, Minister.

I want to move on to teaching shortages, because we know that 17% of teachers are leaving within the first five years of teaching, 31% in the French system. That means that unless we make changes, of the 8,000 teachers who were certified last year, more than 1,600 of them won't be

teaching four years from now. You've increased seats in faculties of education, which is good—even better if you reduced it to one year—but we are pouring water into a leaky bucket unless you solve the issue of retention and why so many teachers are leaving. What are you going to do to retain teachers and not just train them?

Hon. Paul Calandra: When it comes to financial literacy, I think I'm pretty good. You may disagree with me. I don't think devolving into personal insults of my abilities with respect to financial literacy does any good for children or teachers across the province of Ontario. When I go into a classroom, do you know what a lot of teachers have told me? They say they have enough resources, "But you're not giving me the tools that I need. The curriculum is too vast. I don't have a tool to deliver that curriculum." That, I am going to provide them. That is the job of the Ministry of Education, and I'm going to provide them.

When you talk about teacher retention—I talked about that earlier with MPP Hazell. One of the things that I'm hearing from our education partners is that prospective teachers aren't spending enough time in front of the classroom before they get certified to teach. So that is something that I am absolutely looking at. How do I get more prospective teacher-students in front of a classroom for a longer period of time?

I don't know what world we live in where an increase in budget of over \$3 billion equates to a cut. It might be a wonderful talking point to continuously repeat something that just simply is not true. But what is true is that parents, teachers, and students have said the same thing: Bring people together, provide us a system that gives us the tools and the resources that we need to give the students the ultimate ability to succeed. Focus it on teachers in the classroom and get out of the way. That is what we are going to do: Provide the tools, provide the curriculum, provide the resources, and let teachers do what they do best—teach—and make sure that boards focus their resources in the classroom. So when there's a trustee that's wasting money—you had the option. You could have voted to fire a trustee who wasted \$200,000 instead—

Ms. Chandra Pasma: I'm going to reclaim my time, Chair, because we are here to discuss—

Hon. Paul Calandra: Of course you want to change the subject, right?

Ms. Chandra Pasma: We are here to discuss your performance, not the performance of trustees, not the performance of the opposition.

Hon. Paul Calandra: Of course you want to change the subject, because when it comes to accountability, it's a different story—

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): Whoa, whoa, whoa. Let's not talk over each other, please.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: We're here to discuss your performance, Minister.

Hon. Paul Calandra: When it comes to protecting the people that are wasting money in the system, you're all for it. When it comes to firing a trustee who wasted \$200,000, taking money out of a classroom, you chose to sit down.

You chose not to do anything about it. I chose to fire that trustee, and that trustee quit.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: We are here—

Hon. Paul Calandra: And that's the system that I'm going to provide for every single student and every single teacher across this—

Ms. Chandra Pasma: We are here to review your job performance, Minister.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): Okay—

Hon. Paul Calandra: Regardless of the vested interests that tell me that everything should remain the same—

Ms. Chandra Pasma: Okay. Chair?

Hon. Paul Calandra: —I will fight against it.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): Okay. All comments have to go through the Chair. Go ahead.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: Through the Chair: We are here to review your job performance, Minister. "The trustee ate my homework" isn't going to cut it here. You are the one who has removed \$6.35 billion from our education system, and that is why we are seeing the ramifications every single day.

What teachers and education workers have been very clear about—you can review all of the submissions on core education funding from the teachers' unions and from CUPE—is that their members want to see increased funding so that they can have smaller class sizes, so that their kids have an EA or a child and youth worker, that they are getting the support that they need to succeed in the classroom, that they're getting mental health supports, that they are in a safe and healthy school. That is what teachers and education workers want, Minister.

Pour le système francophone, le problème est encore pire parce qu'ils ont besoin de 500 enseignants et enseignantes de plus chaque année. Or dans les trois premiers ans du plan de votre gouvernement, on a formé seulement 417 nouveaux enseignants. Donc, un retard de plus de mille enseignants pendant les trois premières années.

Le groupe de travail a offert 37 recommandations avec un coût de 91 millions de dollars. Mais votre prédécesseur a promis seulement 12,5 millions de dollars. Est-ce que vous allez démontrer plus d'urgence, donner l'argent nécessaire et mettre en place toutes les recommandations du groupe de travail?

L'hon. Paul Calandra: Comme vous le savez, nous avons fait beaucoup d'investissements dans le système francophone en Ontario, et ceci inclut des ressources pour de nouveaux enseignants dans le système. C'est un système très important pour nous. Ce n'est pas seulement parce que le système est un système garanti sous la Charte.

Les résultats dans le système francophone, vraiment, sont—je suis très « encouragé par » les résultats dans le système. C'est pourquoi nous avons fait beaucoup d'investissements, oui; nous avons travaillé avec les « school boards »—Didier, you can probably tell me how to say "school boards" in French. Mais c'est un système très important. Nous avons fait beaucoup d'investissements. Nous avons augmenté ces investissements pour le système francophone. Et les résultats sont clairs.

Il y a beaucoup de personnes dans cette province qui ont fait la décision de mettre leurs enfants dans un système francophone, dans un système avec—what's the word; I always forget it. English school doing French?

M^{me} Aislinn Clancy: Immersion.

L'hon. Paul Calandra: Immersion—excuse me, yes. So c'est très clair. C'est un système que nous voulons protéger, oui; nous avons fait des investissements, oui; et nous avons continué d'augmenter ces investissements.

Quand il y a un « school board » anglais et quand il fait la décision « to hold back a school », ce gouvernement et moi comme ministre allons dire à ce « English school board » que ce n'est pas acceptable parce que les étudiants en français ou en anglais sont les mêmes. Les enseignants m'ont dit la même chose : « Donnez-moi les ressources pour donner aux étudiants les meilleures opportunités pour le succès. » Et nous allons donner à nos partenaires dans les écoles françaises ces ressources parce que c'est très important pour le succès de cette province.

1830

M^{me} Chandra Pasma: Pourtant, la pénurie d'enseignants et enseignantes s'empire, sous vous. Elle ne s'améliora pas, Ministre.

Okay, last question: You said earlier the supervisors were being paid for three days a week. Are they being paid for three days a week or are they working three days a week?

Hon. Paul Calandra: They get paid for three days a week, but there's no supervisor I know that is working three days a week; they're working far more than that. But that's the system the way it is. They have all agreed that, regardless of whether they work three days, five days or seven days, that is the compensation that they have. If you look at those decisions—and I encourage you to reach out to some of the directors of education and supervise boards. They will tell you that the system is functioning better, the results are better and that their ability to address challenges within the boards are better. In your own community, parents are praising the actions of the supervisor to bring stability back to a board that was literally a hot mess—

Ms. Chandra Pasma: I'm going to reclaim my time, Chair, because that was not my question.

Hon. Paul Calandra: —filled with people who were fighting and resigning.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: That was not my question, and I'm sure the directors of education would say things are better because they're terrified of being fired and losing their jobs.

I can tell you as a parent, in the OCDSB and from the parents that I've spoken to repeatedly in my community—

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): One minute.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: —including being out at schools sharing information about your government's record, not a single person is happy to have their right to have a say in our children's education taken away. Not a single person is happy with the fact that the supervisor is not attending meetings, is refusing to answer questions from the media, has said he doesn't have to answer questions from parents, has given misleading information about whether or not he

actually held consultations, about whether or not he has actually met with every parent who's asked for a meeting—he has not—and about whether or not he has responded to every email or phone call that a parent has sent—he has not. People in Ottawa are not thrilled with the performance of this supervisor.

I will say, nobody expects him to answer the phone calls and emails of 71,000 families because no one person could do that. That's why we had 12 trustees, Minister.

Hon. Paul Calandra: You didn't have 12 trustees, as a matter of fact, because they were too busy resigning. They were too busy resigning.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: So nobody is excited about you taking away our right to have a say in our children's education and in our local schools.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): Thank you.

We'll now go to the government side for two minutes and 19 seconds. I recognize MPP Pierre.

Ms. Natalie Pierre: Thank you, Chair, and nice to see you, Minister.

I just wanted to talk to you a little bit. You talked about Halloween in schools, and in Halton region, specifically in Burlington, there was an issue with career day. I'll give you an example. A kindergarten teacher had asked a parent who's a police officer to come into the school to participate in bring your parent to work day. The invitation was extended probably three or four weeks before the actual career day. The night before, the parent, who is a constituent in my riding and a police officer with the Halton Regional Police Service, received a phone call from the teacher saying that the police officer was uninvited and was not going to be allowed to attend career day as an officer who served with Halton Regional Police Service. I know in Bill 33, what we're talking about there talks about the school resource officer program in schools. Just to be clear, there were invitations extended to firefighters from Burlington fire and other professionals.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): One minute.

Ms. Natalie Pierre: There were pilots that were asked to come in and participate in career day, but for some reason, the police officers were specifically excluded. They were invited and then specifically uninvited. So the parents, who are both police officers, actually contacted me and were quite upset. The fact that this wasn't even something that they had initiated and that it was the school who reached out—and then it turned out that it was actually the principal who told the teacher the night before. The parents got a call at 10 p.m. saying, "Sorry. You're a police officer. You're not allowed to come into the school."

I'm just wondering if you might talk about that and your thoughts around the school resource officer program—

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): Okay, that concludes the committee's consideration of estimates of the Ministry of Education. I'd like to thank the minister and his staff for coming today and going through a gruelling three hours.

Standing order 69 requires the Chair put, without further amendment or debate, every question necessary to dispose of the estimates.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: A recorded vote for all of them.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): Are members ready to vote?

Shall vote 1001, ministry administration program, carry?

Ayes

Coe, Denault, Jordan, Pang, Pierre, Wai.

Nays

Armstrong, Pasma.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): The motion is carried.

Shall vote 1002, elementary and secondary education program, carry?

Ayes

Coe, Denault, Jordan, Pang, Pierre, Wai.

Nays

Armstrong, Pasma.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): The motion is carried.

Shall vote 1004, child care and early years programs, carry?

Ayes

Coe, Denault, Jordan, Pang, Pierre, Wai.

Nays

Armstrong, Pasma.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): The motion is carried.
Shall the 2025-26 estimates of the Ministry of Education carry?

Ayes

Coe, Denault, Jordan, Pang, Pierre, Wai.

Nays

Armstrong, Pasma.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): The motion is carried.
Shall the Chair report the 2025-26 estimates of the Ministry of Education to the House?

Ayes

Coe, Denault, Jordan, Pang, Pierre, Wai.

Nays

Armstrong, Pasma.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): The motion is carried.
That concludes the committee's business for today.
This committee now stands in adjournment until November 4, 2025.

The committee adjourned at 1837.

STANDING COMMITTEE ON SOCIAL POLICY

Chair / Président

Mr. Brian Riddell (Cambridge PC)

First Vice-Chair / Première Vice-Présidente

M^{me} France Gélinas (Nickel Belt ND)

Second Vice-Chair / Deuxième Vice-Présidente

MPP Andrea Hazell (Scarborough–Guildwood L)

Ms. Aislinn Clancy (Kitchener Centre / Kitchener-Centre G)

Ms. Jess Dixon (Kitchener South–Hespeler / Kitchener-Sud–Hespeler PC)

M^{me} France Gélinas (Nickel Belt ND)

MPP Andrea Hazell (Scarborough–Guildwood L)

Mr. John Jordan (Lanark–Frontenac–Kingston PC)

Mr. Anthony Leardi (Essex PC)

MPP Robin Lennox (Hamilton Centre / Hamilton-Centre ND)

Mr. Billy Pang (Markham–Unionville PC)

Ms. Natalie Pierre (Burlington PC)

Mr. Brian Riddell (Cambridge PC)

Mrs. Daisy Wai (Richmond Hill PC)

Substitutions / Membres remplaçants

Ms. Teresa J. Armstrong (London–Fanshawe ND)

Mr. Lorne Coe (Whitby PC)

MPP Billy Denault (Renfrew–Nipissing–Pembroke PC)

Ms. Chandra Pasma (Ottawa West–Nepean / Ottawa-Ouest–Nepean ND)

Ms. Laura Smith (Thornhill PC)

Also taking part / Autres participants et participantes

M^{me} Lucille Collard (Ottawa–Vanier L)

Clerk / Greffière

Ms. Vanessa Kattar

Staff / Personnel

Ms. Sandra Lopes, research officer,
Research Services